

Boost for the downtown: splendid new Arcade

Chester Smolski

The sign hanging from the center of the building reads "7 Days to Opening." The countdown number changes daily to remind carpenters, electricians, tile setters, merchants, and a whole host of others that construction must be finished, stocks placed, and shops ready for the Grand Opening of America's first indoor shopping mall — the Arcade.

It has been a nine-month gestation period from the closing in January to the soon-to-be-realized reopening on October 9. For the fourth time in its long history, extensive renovation has been made to what was originally considered the "foolhardy dream" of a three-tiered shopping arcade built for \$140,000. This time over \$3 million has been poured into this small but exquisite shopping space, one which is destined to loom large as a downtown attraction and landmark.

To call attention to this major event of which all Rhode Islanders can justly be proud, three days of festivities have been planned. Starting with a parade winding through downtown streets before leading to a formal noontime ribbon-cutting ceremony, opening day will be marked by the appearance of tap dancers, musicians, mimes, and a bevy of entertainers, all of this capped by a full-scale evening concert performed by the Rhode Island Philharmonic. Music, dance, exhibits, and other festive activities will continue throughout the following two days as well. A joyous occasion to welcome the

151 year old "Grand Old Lady" back to life and to a return as a focal point for the city center.

The initial construction of this architectural gem deserves retelling. The six, granite Ionic columns at either entrance were hewn from a quarry in nearby Graniteville, and at the time these 22-foot-high monoliths were the largest in the country. The two groups which owned the building employed separate architects, Russell Warren and James C. Bucklin, both of whom expressed their work differently, with the result that the facades at either end of the structure are not identical. Still, the beauty of this Greek Revival building warrants its distinction as one of the three finest examples of commercial architecture in the land.

Even with some patchwork renovation, over time, the building fell into disrepair to the point that condemnation was being considered last year. It was then that the locally-based Gilbane Company stepped in to announce their plans for the future of the structure. Joined by the Evans Development Company whose experience includes the Faneuil Hall Marketplace, this newly formed Arcade Company now owns the building and has a 58-year lease on the land owned by the Rhode Island Association for the Blind.

There will be few familiar merchant names in the Arcade when it reopens. The change has meant that many of these shopkeepers, often paying rentals as much as \$10 per square foot less than market rates, are not able to pay the higher rents and will not return. Although this is unfortunate, there is a

decided advantage, as it turns out, with the carefully selected tenant mix which will occupy the building. To-date, fully two-thirds of the thirty shops leased have come from outside the city and outside the state. What this means is that approximately twenty new retailers view downtown Providence as a place with an excellent shopping potential.

This positive feeling about the city center is based upon research which indicates that 36,000 people, many of whom are professionals, work within five blocks of the Arcade, which is situated within a 900,000 population metropolitan center. The Arcade will act as a magnet to draw on this market and help bring more shoppers into the downtown. Aware of this potential, the Arcade will be open seven days with late hours on most evenings.

Having a local developer, one which is nationally and internationally recognized, is a major strength for this revitalized retail center. Start-up problems, changing tenants, and time to become established may mean initial losses in the operation until it begins to roll, but this soundly capitalized firm appears to be in a strong position to weather any temporary setbacks. Additionally, this Providence based company is not out to make a fast buck and run. As a resident and neighbor, Gilbane is here to enhance its image as a quality firm; its lovely new home office building in the downtown has already added to its stature. And the names and products of the new tenants indicate that quality shops will prevail in the Arcade.

The tenant mix and the placement of the tenants is interesting. Franchised

stores are discouraged; rather, small, individually owned shops will be common, and, in some cases, merchants will operate from pushcarts. The first floor will focus on palates and olfactories as pastas, candies, cheeses, herbs, and other savory temptations greet the eyes and tempt the nose. The central area of this ground floor has been opened to accommodate 25 tables seating 100 persons who can eat and watch shoppers pass by.

The second level of this beautifully restored building will house boutiques, clothiers, and other smart shops. And the top floor will have a major restaurant in addition to an unusual art gallery and book shop in space generously provided by the Arcade Company. This last named space will be operated by a consortium comprised of the Rhode Island School of Design, Rhode Island Historical Society, and the Providence Preservation Society.

Whether one considers the energy-efficient heat pumps, operating skylights to vent warm air, and glass enclosures at both entrances or the subtle paint colors which capture a bygone era, harmonious storefronts, and carefully restored original features, this is a quality building which appears matched with a quality management. For those critics of Providence who claim that any top quality ventures will not work here because "Providence is a nickel-dime, beer-drinking town," the success of the Arcade will prove these calumniators to be very wrong.

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Chester E. Smolski is director of urban studies, Rhode Island College.