

Gigantic malls bring downtown to suburbia

The recent opening of the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn., has probably received more publicity than any other shopping center in the nation. This behemoth of shopping malls is certainly something to experience, but the real question is whether this \$650 million investment has a future.

Certainly the Teachers Insurance Annuity Association, which has a 55 percent interest in the mall, thinks so. So do its two partners, Melvin Simon and Associates of Indianapolis and Triple Five Star Corp. of Edmonton, Alberta.

This is the same Melvin Simon firm that formerly had an interest in building Providence Place, the capital city's answer to the suburban mall. The Triple Five Star Corp. is the major developer of the West Edmonton Center, Canada's claim to the title of the world's largest shopping mall.

When the 5.2 million-square-foot West Edmonton Center opened in 1981 in Alberta's capital city, there were many questions about such a megamall. After all, eight department stores with dozens of specialty shops surrounding an enclosed entertainment center was a new idea.

The entertainment center contains a lake with four operational submarines, an ice-skating rink, a scale-model Pebble Beach golf course and a 400,000-square-foot amusement park, among others, to attract and hold potential shoppers for an extended period of time.

The fact that the West Edmonton Center is still operational after 10 years and that Triple Star has gone ahead with the Mall of America, says something about its confidence in the future of megamalls. But will it make it in Bloomington, Minn.?

It is difficult to imagine a mall so large that it will have 10,000 employees, a school for some of their children, a police station, a night club district and 46 places to eat—all under one roof. In the center will be the country's largest indoor amusement park, complete with its own roller coaster. Oh yes, there will be about 400

specialty shops connecting the four major department stores.

And if the developers are correct in their projections, this tourist attraction and shopper's paradise will draw more people than Disney World and Disneyland combined.

International tourists, many already booked for tours, will not have far to go, because the site of Mall of America is less than one mile from the southern boundary of the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. But more important is its location less than one mile from Interstate 494, identified as an Edge City by Joel Garreau in his popular book of the same name.

Edge Cities are destination centers that have a mix of jobs, shopping and entertainment in a location that was residential or rural just 30 years ago. These new cities are also usually located on the edge of major urban centers. Garreau's definition of an Edge City includes a minimum of 600,000 square feet of retail space. If there were any question about this around the I-494 site, then the 2.5 million square feet of retail space in the total 4.2 million square feet in the Mall of America would easily satisfy this requirement.

But the question is, after one has visited this megamall, will there still be the interest in shopping and using the amusements there?

Mall of America is located less than 10 miles from downtown Minneapolis in Bloomington, a contiguous suburb, or about the same distance from downtown Providence to the Warwick Mall. But Minneapolis has a population of 368,000, compared to Providence's 161,000. More important, the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area has 2.4 million people, while Providence has 1.1 million.

There are other competing malls in both of these cities, but Mall of America, four times the size of the Warwick Mall, will have to draw its customers from a much wider area in order to survive. Some planners say this trading area

may reach out 400 to 500 miles.

But the question is, after one has visited this megamall, will there still be the interest in shopping and using the amusements there? Are there enough malls for these shoppers already in place? And with shopper habits changing to catalog buying and discount factory outlets, will mall shopping lose its appeal?

Some may see Mall of America as a wave of the future, reflecting a pattern of fewer, larger malls disbursed over a greater area, with more attractions and varied services and their super size challenging the economic strength of every city center and smaller mall nearby.

These instant downtowns, complete with most of the goods and services normally found in our city centers, have the potential to be the nuclei of the scattered, nondescript and featureless settlement patterns that have developed in today's suburbs.

This may sound ludicrous, but by the same token, who could have predicted the growth of suburbia, complete with shopping malls and jobs which have come together to form these new Edge Cities? Remember, it was just a generation ago that the world's first enclosed and climate-controlled shopping mall was built in Edina, Minn., just five miles from Mall of America.

The mall design, as we know it today, got its start in 1956 at the Southdale Shopping Center in Edina, another suburb of Minneapolis located next to Burlington. Here, the enclosed building faced inward and the parking surrounded it. Earlier prototype malls, such as Roland Park in Baltimore in 1907 and the Country Club Plaza of Kansas City in the 1920s, brought buildings together and allowed for off-street parking in front of the buildings.

Other features of malls that followed include the mixed use mall, combining office, retail and hotel, such as the Houston Galleria in 1969; factory outlet centers, such as Vanity Fair in Reading, Pa., in 1970; festival markets, such as Faneuil Hall in Boston in 1976; and power centers, such as Metro 280 in San Francisco in 1985. The pioneer megamall came in 1981 with the West Edmonton Center.

Whether the Mall of America turns out to be the next model in the evolution of these shopping centers or simply a mall dinosaur, it now joins the other 39,000 shopping centers of this country that, according to the Census Bureau, employ 8 percent of this nation's labor force and generate 13 percent of the gross national product.

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