

From Mall to High-Density Downtown

For nearly four decades, North Hills Mall, one of the South's first fully enclosed shopping malls, was considered as trendy as the upscale neighborhoods it bordered in Raleigh, North Carolina. However, Raleigh's continued suburban expansion and the advent of larger, more contemporary retail complexes gradually took their toll on North Hills' cachet and economic viability. Customers still came to the mall's anchor stores and ancillary commercial developments, but hardly in the numbers or with the buying power expected of such a location.

With the best days of North Hills' original incarnation clearly over, local developer John Kane began to formulate a different vision for the two-level complex, going beyond the typical suburban development surrounded by parking lots. Given North Hills' history and location alongside the state capital's major perimeter expressway, there was an opportunity to augment the site's existing retail components with commercial, residential, and entertainment uses within a high-density environment—in short, to make North Hills a “downtown” for the very suburbs it helped spawn.

The \$200 million redevelopment program for North Hills Mall started three years ago at a small plaza-style shopping center across the street. Renamed the Lassiter, the 15-acre site ultimately will integrate 300 rental condominiums with street-level retail and an eight-story, 65-unit luxury condominium tower around a newly renovated plaza building that already includes an upscale Harris Teeter grocery store, a drugstore, and a dry cleaners. These and other community-oriented businesses will serve both prospective condominium dwellers and existing residents of the adjacent neighborhoods.

Transformation of the 30-acre mall site itself will involve a self-contained village containing more than 725,000 square feet of restaurants and retail shops oriented around a town square and a pair of shopping streets; a 14-screen cinema; a national chain hotel with banquet facilities; and 300,000 square feet of office space.

While it may be possible to provide North Hills with a platform to construct the components of a trendy, energetic downtown, the real challenge is to capture the same look and feel of an urban area since the classic downtown environment is an exercise in evolution, with design styles and uses complementing and influencing each other over time.

“From a planning perspective, that means balancing a diversity of use, maximizing density without sacrificing function or appearance, and ensuring that the distinctiveness of individual components fits within the site's overall context,” explains John Larsen, associate principal at Baltimore-based Carter & Burgess, which provided master planning, architectural design, and full architecture and engineering services. “At the same time, we have to make North Hills serve as a reasonable transition area from the Beltline [Interstate 440] to the existing neighborhoods. It is one of those cases where the dictum of ‘location, location, and location’ fosters possibilities for a more vital confluence of uses and a higher level of energy than found in many suburban environments.”

The solution for these divergent requirements was early adoption of a “new midtown” design philosophy—one that goes beyond that found in conventional lifestyle center and urban retail projects. “We wanted to incorporate things that add to and expand the quality-of-life experience and speak to a more

urban/local community,” says Carter & Burgess project designer Dale Ciapetti. “As such, the design needed to capture nuances of the 1920s midtown rather than contemporary suburban retail facades.”

Rather than rely on bright colors and brickwork common at developments found across the Southeast, North Hills' structural facades will be as varied as those found in a more established downtown development. The color palette features a range of light-to-medium neutral colors, stuccolike materials, cast stone, concrete, and aggregates. “It's the same oversized weave of colors one would see walking down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan,” explains Ciapetti. “Commercial tenants will have the liberty to add the complementary signage and interior colors distinctive to their brand, completing the mosaic in the process.”

To emphasize the walkability of the North Hills village, the project team integrated land and streetscape into the neo-urban environment to foster pedestrian-scaled elements and entry monuments linking the heart of the shopping district to the condominiums on the periphery. A commons area with a storefront pavilion will be surrounded by outdoor seating and will include a freestanding, 24-hour ticket booth for the nearby cinema complex. The commons will have a glass-canopied plaza with landscaped seating areas outside the pavilion's two food tenants, with a separate trellised public area facing the cinema court. The new North Hills Mall is scheduled to open this fall.—Jim Parsons

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