

Mall Eats Mall



Survival of the fittest: Town and Country Mall turns to dust, while down the road Memorial City thrives. Below, the big cheese stands alone: Only upscale retailer Neiman Marcus will remain on the Town and Country site once demolition is complete.



What suburban malls once did to America's main streets, they are now doing to one another. In the dog-eat-dog world of commercial excess along the I-10 corridor in far west Houston, a newly reinvigorated Memorial City Mall has all but gobbled up its congenitally underperforming cousin, Town and Country Mall, now under deconstruction a few miles down the road.

A mall variant with anomalous beginnings and upscale pretenses, Town and Country never became a big success, despite its high-end Memorial neighborhood. Before the mall there was Memorial Village: a collection of detached shopping blocks floating in a large, landscaped parking tract in the pattern of postwar suburban centers. The development won a 1967 Municipal Arts Commission citation for landscaping. A Joske's department store joined the village milieu in 1969 as one end of a tree-lined axis, with a miniature Sakowitz store at the other.

The Village with its two department stores did well; building on success, plans were launched in 1981 to turn 90,000 square feet of shops and parking space into a new mall. The mall literally grew in two directions from the freestanding Joske's (soon to become Dillard's). Neiman Marcus and Marshall Field's joined as additional, distinguished anchors. The scheme had an awkward (some say hopelessly), narrow, three-story configuration that left many of the tenants sitting with the gods. The most interesting

feature of the design was the roof: a tautly stretched translucent fabric construction that was said to transmit 80 percent of the ambient light while reflecting 80 percent of the heat. It was the first roof of its kind to be installed on a regional mall.

Consensus thinking was that the mall had poor exposure to the freeway and was difficult to get to. It was hemmed in behind a line of large buildings along the freeway and a parking garage that faced the massive, multi-level Sam Houston Tollway stack. Unlike the advantages that accrue to commercial locations on street corners, malls don't do well at freeway intersections (Gulfgate is another example), where cognitive complexity is at its greatest. But clearly, too, this was a case of a rivalry among unequals. Town and Country had the pedigree (Saks, Neiman Marcus, Dillard's), but the more formulaic Memorial City had ambitions.

As Town and Country steadily lost business (Saks and Penny's bolted in 2000 and 2001, respectively), MetroNational, a Houston-based real estate investment, development, and management company, was pumping steroids into the 36-year-old Memorial City Mall it had purchased in the 1990s. Memorial City was only one story, and as ordinary and middlebrow as a mall can be. But MetroNational had big plans to convert it from a mall into a town center. Then they went to work trying to figure out what that meant. They courted an aquarium as a possible attraction. But they ended up with an ice-

skating rink and, more important, their anchor store constellation: Dillard's, Foley's, Lord and Taylor, Sears, Target, and Mervyn's. Several office buildings (including a new, nine-story professional tower built by MetroNational), medical care facilities, and a fringe of detached restaurants and commercial strips also reside on the 200-acre site—a veritable textbook example of Joel Garreau's Edge City.

The fate of Town and Country was more or less sealed when Dillard's, the most dependable of the Town and Country stores, announced its intent to join the mix at Memorial City; in the process they transferred ownership of their Town and Country store and controlling interest in the mall to MetroNational. MetroNational sold the hot potato to Bob Yazdani, who brought the property under unified ownership and sold it to Midway Cos., the company that is presently demolishing the mall.

When the demolition dust clears, only the Neiman Marcus store will remain. Plans are not entirely fixed for the redevelopment of the site, but it's likely that it will resemble the village concept that first occupied the site and operates successfully on the south side of the site hugging Memorial Drive. So in roughly 25 years Town and Country has gone from village to mall and back again to village, trading up from Joske's to Neiman Marcus in the process.

— Bruce C. Webb