



Looking west down the mall at street level.

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Reborn to Shop

RIVERCENTER IN SAN ANTONIO

Richard Ingersoll

Neither the automobile nor the freeway killed the American downtown. The real assassin was the suburban shopping mall.

Once the commercial hegemony of this alien, automobile-pandering phenomenon was established, the only surviving downtown retail outlets were thrift stores, porno theaters, and that most curious harbinger of economic decline, the wig shop. Even a charming provincial city like San Antonio, blessed with a fine collection of historic buildings and equipped with a major tourist-generating feature, the River Walk, has suffered from the retail exodus to the freeway malls. Last year, however, this suburban sack of the center was countermanded with the opening of a major shopping mall, Rivercenter, in the heart of downtown San Antonio. While Rivercenter is not a unique instance of a new downtown mall, it represents a uniquely successful resuscitation of a truly urban retail environment and is thus worthy of note, both as a design solution and for the political process that brought it into being.

Other recently built downtown shopping centers, such as Watertower Place in Chicago, the Beverly Center in West Hollywood, or, to take more local examples, Plaza of the Americas in Dallas, The Park in Houston Center, or even San

Antonio's own Fiesta Plaza, are all as antiurban and inwardly oriented as their suburban prototypes. Not only are these huge retail shells filled with the identical collection of franchise shops one finds everywhere, but also they offer no architectural clues to indicate that one is in a particular city, or even in a city at all. This body-snatching syndrome can be attributed to the inert wisdom of marketing formulas derived from the suburbs and applied to the cities. One obvious exception to the progress of placelessness was the Jerde Partnership's Horton Plaza (1984), in which a two-block parcel in the heart of San Diego was sliced by an exposed diagonal street. "Tarted up" does not do justice to the riotous collage of historical motifs and gaudy color combinations of this adrenalin-fed overreaction to the disappearance of urban variety. The exploitation of historic downtown cityscapes has been the key to the festival markets, such as San Francisco's Cannery, Boston's Quincy Market, or Baltimore's Harbor Place, which are likewise cases of retail-based urban revival. But because they cater primarily to tourists there is a high degree of sociological inverisimilitude as to what makes an urban context real.

Rivercenter might at first be mistaken for a tourist festival market, as it willingly plugs into a perfect tourist trap. Its three-tiered U shape wraps around a newly extended branch of the River Walk, located between the sacrosanct Alamo that all tourists are obliged to remember (in Ektachrome) and the

Convention Center, which captures an estimated ten million conventioners annually. Fortunately, the mall is more than just a way station for accidental tourists. In the tradition of the airy shopping arcades of the late 19th century, it is a well-designed connecting armature and thus a pleasant addition to the pedestrian's path through the city. Departing from the conventions of

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suburban mall design, it is split open, relying on a single-loaded circulation system. The three levels are exposed by glass curtain walls that allow views from almost any location of the outdoor activity and give the interior luminosity and loftiness. In addition, the majority of stores above the tourist realm of the River Walk are meant to compete with those of the suburban malls: Foley's (replacing Lord & Taylor) and Dillard's are the major anchor stores, and a third anchor, rumored to be Neiman Marcus, is soon to be announced. The commodious parking garages, which offer two hours of free parking, add the kind of incentive to locals to come shopping that initially made the freeway malls so successful. Rivercenter is thus a convincing lesson in how to revive a vanishing retail base while restoring the social functions of the downtown street.

The success of Rivercenter, which after only eight months was 93 percent leased and visibly brims with activity, is due as much to the cooperative policies of the city government as it is to the abilities of its designers and developers. *Civitas*, the traditional sense of civic responsibility, cannot develop without citizens, and San Antonio has proven on several occasions, from the initial implementation of the River Walk in 1939 to its restoration and

expansion in the 1960s, to be a city that can involve its citizens in a public vision of urbanity. The four-block, 13.1-acre site included the historic Menger Hotel (1859), the original Joske's department store (begun in the 1890s and expanded many times), and a small stone church, St. Joseph's (known locally as St. Joske's because it is lodged in the midst of the expanded store). A fourth historic structure, the Fairmount Hotel (1906), was moved to a site six blocks away, where it was restored and renovated. The rest of the site was mostly empty lots. The first step was taken in 1977 by the Rouse Company, the leading developers of festival markets, and Allied Stores, owner of the ailing Joske's, which presented a proposal to the city that would have cost the public \$44 million. This prompted the city manager's office to fund its own study in 1979 with the participation of the Edward J. DeBartolo Corporation of Youngstown, Ohio, the country's largest developer of shopping malls (not known for its daring in design). DeBartolo formed a partnership with Allied Stores, and in 1981 the city, working closely with DeBartolo, obtained a \$15.75 million Urban Development Action Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for site preparation, one of the largest UDAG grants awarded during the program's history. The city committed itself to \$1.1 million for street and utilities improvements and \$2 million for the expansion of the River Walk. A firm experienced in mixed-use development, Williams Realty of Tulsa, was engaged soon after as managing general partner. In 1983 Williams in turn retained the project's architects, the Urban Design Group, also of Tulsa, with whom they were finishing the Tabor Center in downtown Denver (1985), a project that shares many of Rivercenter's design characteristics, in particular the use of a single-loaded circulation plan that exposes the center's interior to the street. After seeing the advantages of the Rouse-developed Tabor Center, Edward

DeBartolo approved the unconventional design. The entire Rivercenter project – which includes the mall and garages, the remodeling of Joske's (now Dillard's) into two smaller stores, an IMAX theater, and Foley's – along with a 42-story Marriott hotel, the expansion and interior renovation of the Menger, and the turning basin extension of the River Walk cost approximately \$370 million. Without the city's initiative and the federal seed money, together only a fraction of the total cost, the project would never have come to fruition.

The involvement of city manager Lou Fox and special projects coordinator David Garcia was decisive. Unlike most large Texas cities, San Antonio mandates extensive review of building projects. Various phases of the project were subject to the scrutiny of 23 city agencies and numerous citizen review boards, including the River Walk Commission, the Historic Review Board, and the Fine Arts Commission, as well as the San Antonio Conservation Society. Fox and other city officials called for enabling legislation that would streamline the approval process for such a complex project, and a special ordinance was passed; the city thus was able to retain its high standards for smaller-scale projects without scaring away the Rivercenter developers. The continued participation of the city manager in the project's development kept the issues of historic preservation, public access, parking, and urban conservation central without allowing them to become sticks in the wheels of commercial development.

Rivercenter's essential feature is the 500-foot extension of the San Antonio River, which terminates in a turning basin where a powerful pump that keeps the filmy water from stagnating serves as a rushing fountain for the "food courts" of the mall. This new snatch of River Walk guarantees a healthy mix of public life and private enterprise, and its importance is evident in both the project's title and its slogan: "Just add water." Yet if it had not been for the city's involvement, this public amenity, without which Rivercenter is now unimaginable, might well have been excluded. There is an underlying legal reason for its location: the city, which was responsible for assembling the site parcels for the project, was forced to exercise its powers of eminent domain to expropriate the area of the turning basin. Land reclaimed through public authority, however, cannot be used for speculative or commercial purposes, and thus the city's continued involvement with the site was mandated. The city's special projects office hired its own architect, the local firm of Ford, Powell & Carson, which had been involved in earlier proposals for Rivercenter and has helped shape the character of the River Walk since O'Neil Ford's first San Antonio work at La Villita (1939) through the firm's recent design of the Paseo del Alamo water concourse between Alamo Plaza and the lower level of the Hyatt Regency. The automobile bridge over the river at Commerce Street and four pedestrian bridges were designed by principal Boone Powell with lacy steel trusses, studded with light bulbs, and painted teal blue to blend with the color scheme of the mall.

The mall includes one further double-decker bridge, connecting to the River Walk on its lower level and lined on its upper, enclosed level with ten-by-ten-foot



Looking south toward the turning basin.

market stalls in imitation of Florence's Ponte Vecchio. The bridge partially screens the turning basin and gives it a comfortable sense of enclosure, creating a space that approximates the outdoor rooms so much admired by Camillo Sitte at the turn of the century but not attempted since the age of the Baroque. In the center is a two-tiered performance platform reached by its own bridge and bifurcated stairs. Although the management of the mall employs entertainers to keep the stage active, it can be and is used by whoever reserves it through the city's Parks and Recreation Department. Stairs step down from open loggias on the two long sides of the turning basin to form an informal amphitheater. The paths of the River Walk are lined with undulating retaining walls and planted with a rich collection of elms, cedars, and bald cypresses in addition to hundreds of terra-cotta pots filled with seasonal flowers. When the doors to the shopping center close at 9 p.m., this landscaped urban theater, perhaps the most successful example of urban design in the United States since Rockefeller Center, remains in use as a permanent public setting. San Antonians could use this forum, owned and maintained by the city, for political purposes, as the mall owners have no authority to prevent the exercise of First Amendment rights.

The design of the mall is straightforward and airy – a modern-day stoa made from a scaffold of three-story steel pillars and capped with a pitched metal shed roof. Each successive level is stepped back to allow views down to the lower levels. Unlike Jerde's extravaganza in San Diego, the individual parts, such as decorative ephemera or store façades, do not subvert the clarity and nobility of the frame. As in most malls, conventional shops are fitted into the grid of the structure, but pushcarts and stands that appear to be improvised are allowed in the ample circulation space of the single-loaded corridors, greatly increasing the variety and scale of retail. The outer metal members are painted teal blue, various shades of blue, turquoise, and purple are used throughout for details, and green-tinted glass is used for the vast expanses of glazing, all combining to give the interior an aquatic feeling that contrasts sympathetically to the generally tan color of this southwestern city. John Novack, principal of the Urban Design Group, broke away from C. F. Murphy Associates of Chicago in 1975. While his firm's clever restructuring of dense urban fabric at Rivercenter has a post-modern agenda, the dignity of the structure and the expertly rendered truss and fenestration details are in the best Chicago Modernist tradition. The decorative equipment, including tensile awnings and festoons and fan shapes made of folded aluminum, are the work of Henry Beer of Communication Arts in Boulder, Colorado. They were meant to give graphic identity to the mall but can be dismantled or changed at will. Of the permanent details, great care was given to the surfaces that come into contact with the human body, from the splendid marble pavers to the multicolor ceramic highlights used to decorate pathway intersections and special signage areas. The gently bulging railings are particularly graceful. The indoor townscape elements, such as the huge hanging terra-cotta flowerpots and the heavy, Mexican-style carved benches (an excellent alternative to the Britannic-issue teak benches that have become so universal),



Rivercenter looking west from the Marriott Hotel.

add a sense of continuity with the River Walk. Because its regionalist elements are mostly ephemeral, Rivercenter achieves local color without resorting to nostalgic architectural forms.

Novack's office also was responsible for additions and renovations to the Menger Hotel and for the design of Lord & Taylor (now Foley's). Three overgrown classical aediculae organize the façade of the store, more in line with the client's stodgy taste than the spirit of the mall. The 42-story Marriott Hotel, the tallest building in San Antonio, was designed by RTKL of Baltimore and plugs into the three levels of the mall. The poverty of detail both inside and out make "tallest" the only superlative that could ever be used to describe this thousand-room dorm. Still, the building could have been worse, and its stepped-up profile is an attempt, albeit clunky, to recapture the dynamic thrill of the Waldorf-Astoria, on which it is crudely modeled. The important aspect of the Marriott is that this awkward giant has been tamed at its lower levels and kept from overwhelming the pedestrian scale of the project.

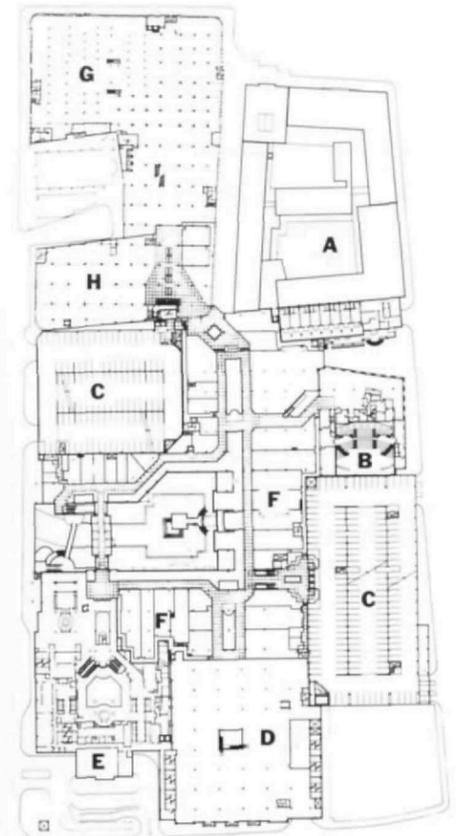
Aside from the major public space around the turning basin, Rivercenter has spawned two new minor public spaces. Blum Street, once a service alley, has been transformed as part of the Alamo Plaza renewal into a planted pedestrian walk lined with shops and outdoor seating for the famous Menger bar; it will also house the entry to a multiscreen movie theater, scheduled to open late this year. On the north side, near the Lady Bird Johnson Fountain, is a small, funnel-shaped plaza leading to the IMAX theater and the mall. The two parking structures, one on Commerce Street, the other on Crockett, are placed mid-block. With their discreet precast-panel façades of alternating soft pink and tan, they help to flesh out the contours of the block.

Despite the pleasant shock of discovering that a shopping center can satisfy aesthetically and urbanistically, one criticism must be reserved for Rivercenter and for most so-called mixed-use projects, especially those with government funding. Real mixed use cannot be achieved without housing, and while it



Riverwalk court.

Site plan.



is true that people live in hotels, transients do not contribute greatly to the continuous local life of a place. Public money has been used cleverly at Rivercenter to create an exceptionally fine public environment, but it has also served to boost retailers' profits. Should not at least a portion of this investment have gone toward remedying the single greatest problem of all big cities, affordable housing? Housing, affordable or not, would not only be in the public's interest but would enrich the daily life at Rivercenter around the clock, as well as provide a permanent clientele for the retailers. It is simply no longer true that all Americans want to live in Usonian houses in the suburbs; perhaps the elderly, singles, yuppies, and others who for various reasons want to live downtown should adopt their own slogan – "Just add housing." Rivercenter is a perfectible lesson in reurbanization of the center city. While it may be free of wig shops, it is nevertheless missing an essential component that could make it still more satisfactory as an urban place. ■

- A Menger Hotel
- B IMAX theater
- C Parking
- D Foley's
- E Marriott Hotel
- F Shops
- G Dillards
- H Future anchor