



Posted on Mon, Nov. 24, 2003

REAL ESTATE

More people calling the mall home

Condos at malls and supermarkets are selling well as home buyers embrace the convenience of living where they shop.

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Like many Americans, Sharon Zupnik has spent plenty of time at the mall, and way too much time *driving* to and from the mall.

So it wasn't such a leap to consider just moving in, and forgetting the *schlep*.

On a recent morning, Zupnik joined hundreds of people jostling to get inside a tent to snag one of 500 condos to be built at Loehmann's Fashion Island, a struggling Aventura mall.

The mall's operators, with a push from city officials, have concluded that the cure for the retail blues lies in adding housing and converting the mall, and its acres of asphalt, into a walkable town center for the young north Miami-Dade municipality.

To judge from the response in Aventura, it's an idea whose time has definitely come. By the end of the day, all 500 units were gone.

It's the apotheosis of American consumerism: You can now *live* at the mall. Not an enclosed suburban shopping center, but a place that mimics the look and feel of town and city living.

"This is like being on Madison Avenue," said Zupnik, who wanted a condo for her son, soon to graduate from college and looking to live somewhere with a little urban buzz. "You live above and go down to shop. Only in gorgeous weather, 365 days a year."

And not just at Aventura, but in Coral Gables and, soon, in Miami.

Now open: 159 apartments atop a new Publix store on Douglas Road. Almost ready: 120 high-rent apartments at the haute-snazzy Village of Merrick Park shopping center off Le Jeune Road in the Gables. Also planned: A 360-unit high-rise above another Publix in the nascent Brickell Village district, and a mix of condos, town houses, shops and big-box retail at the site of the old Buena Vista rail yards in Miami.

Marrying apartments to malls is the latest evolution of American shopping, a twist on the very old idea of living above the store -- but at a bigger, amenity-packed, brand-larded scale. We're talking fitness centers, pool decks and private parking here.

At Loehmann's, the options now include the discount fashion retailer that gives the mall its name, a Barnes & Noble bookstore and café, Einstein's Bagels and a fine-dining restaurant, Chef Allen's. At Merrick Park, it's rooms with a view of Gucci and Neiman Marcus, and breakfast at kissing distance from Tiffany's.

The prototype may be novel in South Florida, but it's a familiar one for natives of the Northeast and immigrants or part-time residents from Europe or Latin America.

"It's like Buenos Aires, where you live above the little shops, except here it's a modern, 41,000-square-foot grocery with

all the conveniences," said Elena Bullrich, manager of the Gables' Douglas Grand, where 80 percent of the apartments over the Publix have been rented.

LAWS ACCOMMODATE

For years local zoning laws discouraged or explicitly barred such combinations, instead strictly separating residential from commercial uses. Now many planners blame these rules for encouraging urban sprawl and forcing people into cars for the smallest of errands.

The new live-above-the-shop trend has been driven in part by municipalities like Aventura, Miami and Coral Gables. Eager to get residents out of their cars and give their cities a lively, pedestrian-friendly environment, they are rewriting zoning codes and asking developers to include housing in commercial developments.

The reduction in auto use can be real, said University of Miami dean of architecture Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, a proponent of dense, walkable neighborhoods as an alternative to auto-dependent sprawl.

Each household in South Florida generates 11 auto trips per day, she said. Living within walking distance of shopping and other amenities can reduce that by two or three trips a day.

Stacking different uses in this way can increase property-tax revenues and property values, and make efficient use of scarce urban land. It also makes good business sense, say planners and developers, by capitalizing on a pent-up market of young professionals and empty-nesters looking to get out of the suburbs.

REVIVING OLD MALLS

It is, also, an opportune trend for mall operators. America is over-malled, and many older shopping centers are in trouble, spurring a growing number of such conversions across the country.

"It may not be the right solution everywhere," said Lee Sobel, author of a book on mall conversions, *Greyfields into Goldfields*. `` But in certain communities that want to achieve an identity and may not have one, these properties can make that happen and serve as a catalyst for redevelopment."

The granddaddy of the trend is Mizner Park in Boca Raton. It replaced a failing, 29-acre enclosed mall with Mediterranean-style offices and apartments above ground-floor shops, all connected by arcades and flanking a large public plaza.

Mizner Park instantly became a popular attraction, spurring revitalization of the surrounding blocks and, perhaps more significantly, demonstrating a public appetite for development with an urban imprint -- open to the air, with sidewalks and streets running through it.

Miami-Dade's first try was relatively modest: 40 studio and one-bedroom apartments on the third and fourth floors of the Shops of Sunset Place along South Miami's main street. But it, too, was a hit. Since opening five years ago, the apartments have been fully occupied, pulling in top rents of as much as \$1,400 a month.

"When units open up, they usually don't last one day," said rental agent Frank Mazzotti.

Coral Gables soon followed suit. It required the Rouse Co., developer of Merrick Park, to include housing in the project, on the site of the old city maintenance yard. The twin apartment buildings, which are to open by late December, are connected to the shopping center and overlook a grassy public plaza at its center. Ground floors will have cleaners and other services for tenants.

Gables planners hope the project will help transform the surrounding district of offices and body shops into an urban, pedestrian-friendly neighborhood.

Aventura planners also seized on the idea when they drew up the master plan for the new city, which was stitched out of a collection of condo towers and a string of malls along upper Biscayne Boulevard. Loehmann's owners were persuaded to convert the mall into a downtown and hired famed Miami firm Arquitectonica to develop the plan, which calls for demolishing sections of the mall and phasing in redevelopment over about five years.

When complete, the conversion of Loehmann's into Aventura Town Center will have as many as 655 condos, a 10-story office tower, and shops and restaurants set around a circular plaza and along pedestrian arcades. Shops and restaurants would also line Biscayne Boulevard on what is now blacktop, said Aventura planning director Joanne Carr.

The town center will connect along Northeast 188th Street to the new city recreation center, a new charter school and the new Founder's Park, all within easy walking distance.

Certainly, prices for the Venture condos at Loehmann's -- which, like the Residences at Merrick Park, will be developed by the Related Group -- had much to do with the buying frenzy: From \$139,900 to \$279,900, a bargain for ritzy Aventura.

But buyers, many in those sought-after demographics of young professionals, baby boomers looking to downsize and affluent retirees, were also drawn by its urban allure.

"I think it will be a hot location, to go out at night and walk around, to go to the restaurants," said Richard Paz, 24, a soon-to-graduate FIU engineering student looking for his first home. "I think it will be similar to South Beach."

Or take Antonio Blanca, at 44 a young empty-nester. He and his wife, Barbara, sold their big house and rented over the Publix at Douglas Grand, formerly the site of a failed Service Merchandise store, when their son married and moved out.

"If it rains we don't even have to get wet to get to Publix," Antonio Blanca said. "It's very convenient. The way my wife and I see it, it's like living in a hotel."

RETAILERS ONBOARD

As suburban expansion in South Florida slows, such projects are increasingly attractive to retailers like Publix, always on the lookout for new markets. The chain has developed smaller stores to fit urban footprints, like the Douglas Grand store -- 20,000 square feet smaller than the 61,000-square-foot suburban prototype.

To be sure, there are skeptics who say the "urban" feel of projects like these is no better than a facsimile, little more than the latest marketing gimmick from developers.

But planned and designed correctly, supporters say, they can create street life where there is nothing but asphalt now.

"The trick is to make it beautiful," UM's Plater-Zyberk said. "The beauty of place is important to keeping people on their feet and make walking a fun thing to do. Otherwise, you might wind up with a series of unrelated tall buildings, a place that doesn't grow into New York or San Francisco, and always looks unfinished."

Or like just another mall.