

GRAND DESIGN

Can Milwaukee's Grand Avenue mall survive as a retail center? **BY KAY NOLAN**

Milwaukee's Downtown mall, the Shops of Grand Avenue, describes itself as a historical landmark. But unlike other highly visible city landmarks – the Calatrava-designed Milwaukee Art Museum or the steel-domed Miller Park – the little-advertised mall seems in danger of becoming more of an urban legend than a destination.

Adding insult to injury are the various proposals to tear down Boston Store, or the entire mall, to make room for a sports and entertainment arena.

Once heralded as the key to reviving Downtown, the 32-year-old mall struggles, despite an overhaul that added offices, apartments and a YMCA.

All downtown malls aren't dying, according to Carl Landis of CBL & Associates Properties, which owns malls across the country, including Brookfield Square. "It depends on the city," he says.

In Chicago; Dallas; Austin, Texas; Minneapolis; San Antonio, Texas and other cities, downtown malls are thriving, says national retail consultant Jim Dion, of Chicago-based Dionco. But those downtowns have more residents and tourists, he says.

Grand Avenue management says the mall's unconventional design of three blocks of buildings is challenging. "Milwaukee has very little residential base Downtown," hence the mall's move toward mixed-use, says C. Michelle Panovich of Mid-America Asset Management.

City officials estimate more than 45,000 people live in Milwaukee's "greater Downtown," stretching west to Marquette University, north to North Avenue and south to Walker's Point. Since 2000, the Downtown population has risen by 25.5 percent.

But David Price, a Realtor who specializes in Downtown condos, says affluent residents tend to live closer to Lake Michigan or the Milwaukee River than Grand Avenue.

"There are only three condos in that whole area, and one of those is the Moderne, with only 14 condos in the whole building," says Price. Housing nearer to Grand Avenue caters to students and lower-income renters, he says.

Can Grand Avenue be revived? We asked the experts. ■

Bring the mall out of hiding

"Out of sight, out of mind," says Cliff Mayer of Mayer Helminiak Architects, who wishes glimpses of the stunning interior would be more visible. "I think part of the problem is that the general public who drives down Michigan Avenue or Wisconsin Avenue has no idea of what's in that building," says Mayer. "How do you draw people to come to your shop? What they really need to do is maybe allow pedestrian and vehicular traffic to either go through [the mall] or perhaps change its face."



Attract Downtown dwellers with one-of-a-kind luxuries and suburbanites with experiential shops

To entice shoppers from miles away, you need "experiential retailing," such as a Lego store, says Dion. **WATER TOWER PLACE** draws suburbanites to Downtown Chicago because it's the only game in town that has American Girl Place.

Alternately, well-heeled Downtown dwellers want uncommon products, says Dion. "You want a little gourmet butcher shop ... a really different clothing store. That customer likes specialty-specialty retail. They don't like chains."



Clean up the Plankinton Avenue entrance

"It's forlorn and dark," says Marsha Sehler, who works Downtown for Uihlein Wilson Architects. "Often the elevator isn't working. There's a display case that's empty and it's all disheveled. There's nothing compelling to make you want to go into that building."



Give retailers more visibility

STONE CREEK COFFEE in the skywalk has signs visible from the street, so it draws business professionals seeking a meeting spot. But AJ von Tauffkirchen, who ran the recently closed vintage jewelry store Embellishments on the second floor, calls street-facing window space scarce and inconvenient. "If a customer inquired about an item in the window, I had to contact a third party that had the keys," she says. "If they were unavailable, I lost the customer and you know what unhappy customers do – they spread the word."