

Architectural shift under way as Town Center's main street grows

By Mike Roberts | Mother Lode News | November 21, 2007 15:16

Photo Courtesy of the Mansour Corp. FRENCH QUARTER IN TOWN CENTER – A three-story, 36,000-square-foot retail/office complex that evokes a large French Creole Townhouse, complete with wrought-iron balconies, oversized entryways and a shuttered New Orleans stucco exterior, is scheduled for completion mid- to late spring 2008.

The evolution of El Dorado Hills Town Center continues with two new buildings designed by Louis Mansour that extend the sense of place his father Tony first envisioned when he arrived in 1979. The elder Mansour refined his vision in the 1980s when he threw out county-approved plans for a massive enclosed mall on the site, and again when he refused Wal-Mart's advances in 1994.

With each new building, the younger Mansour is sharpening his design skills and refining his father's original vision for a place that can be clearly identified as a genuine El Dorado Hills downtown.

A new main street building will open north of Target in late December, followed by a New Orleans-style building across the lake from Bistro 33 in the spring.

The pair of newcomers join an architectural lineup that attracted some of the area's best and brightest restaurateurs and retailers in 2007, and went beyond Tony Mansour's oft-repeated promise to make Town Center 'a place where El Dorado Hills gathers,' to becoming a dining, shopping and cinema destination for the entire region.

The opening of Target in October introduced the discount shopper to Town Center, and increased the foot traffic in the area.

Bistro 33's mix of upscale and everyday dining has attracted a nightly crowd that's been spilling over into the nearby boutiques since it opened in September.

With the personality of Town Center established, and the additional volume of shoppers, diners and strollers in place, the Mansours now plan to invite national chains to round out the retail mix. 'The national tenants we want to attract, the ones that will work with what we're doing here, need the volumes [of shoppers] that Target is generating,' he said.

Independent retailers with vision and fortitude are still an important part of the mix, 'but we want operators that are operators, not absentee owners,' said Mansour, citing the recently opened Main Street boutiques Uptown Girl, Shoe Envy, Dolce Lingerie and Lazio Woman's Apparel as retailers that 'have their heart into it.'

Louis Mansour sat down recently to discuss his latest architectural creations. He described what it takes to create architectural age, of cutting stone with the masons and mixing plaster with the stucco men, always striving to get looks that evoke different times and places.

'This stuff doesn't come from architects,' he said. 'I'm pretty good with textures. One of the things I'm really proud of is the way we create age.'

As European villages grew into cities, the large, important buildings were always in the center of town, said Mansour. 'We're trying to create that kind of massing, these large massive things, here around the lake,' he said of the big buildings going up in the middle of Town Center.

'In Europe everything was done in circles,' he said. 'Even today you'll find some of the elite retail districts at the very center of the major cities. Look at Union Square in San Francisco.'

The traditional town center was surrounded by smaller buildings with more diverse architecture. 'When you drive into Town Center there are single-story buildings,' said Mansour. 'They get bigger as you get closer to the center,' he said.

With a bell tower and a prominent dome already fronting the lake from the west, Mansour wanted a strong architectural statement east of the lake, but without another tower.

The result is a three-story, 36,000- square-foot retail/office complex scheduled for completion mid-to late spring that evokes a large French Creole townhouse, complete with wrought-iron balconies, oversized entryways and a shuttered New Orleans stucco exterior.

The Creole townhouses on Bourbon Street are two to four stories tall and adorned with roof dormer windows. The Mansour version is wider, and replaces the dormer windows with an inset 8,000-square-foot third floor surrounded by rooftop patios, complete with water and drainage for trees, arbors and dangling plantings to complete the French Quarter feel. Mansour calls it 'the penthouse,' and plans to put one or two expansive, full service offices up there, but says he would like to see rooftop dining if the right restaurant operator comes along.

Ground level storefronts will open onto the lakeside patio, lending themselves to cafes or galleries that can take advantage of outside seating.

The current plan calls for rollup doors below the first floor patio that evoke old fashioned swinging stable gates opening onto year-round produce stalls. The area could also accommodate an expanded version of the current farmers market.

The eastern side of the lake will consist of terraced benches, plaza areas and grassy knolls similar to the amphitheater area on the west side of the lake. Steps down to the trail around the lake and up to the market area will tie it all together.

Main street grows east

While the lakeside Creole creation is being built, the latest in a series of main street buildings will open in front of the Target Store by year end. Weighing in at two stories and 22,000 square feet, it bridges the gap between Theater Plaza and the original Town Center buildings.

Mansour expects to see a mix of boutiques and upscale national chains on the first floor, with the second floor dedicated to 'retail-office' tenants such as doctors and mortgage companies.

The design is reminiscent of a row of early 20th century family-owned commercial buildings, the type where the owners worked in the first-floor shops by day, and lived upstairs.

With separate, diverse architectural features and no shared roof lines, the 22,000 square feet sell themselves convincingly as five separate buildings, appearing to be constructed in different eras. The building materials and design details of each reflect buildings found on the outskirts of any older American city.

Shaded seating will be scattered around at street level, and a split sidewalk, separated by planters and decorative landscaping that add character to the promenade and provide each merchant with some additional outside merchandising space.

Town Center is now approximately two thirds built-out. The businesses currently employ over 1,600 people and generate substantial sales tax revenue for the county. Moreover, Town Center makes El Dorado Hills much more than a faceless exurb whose residents flee down the freeway to work, play and dine.

Mansour is looking forward to showing off his progress at the annual Christmas tree lighting on Dec. 1.

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