

Still Standing

Michigan's Westland Shopping Center celebrates 50 years

by PAUL VACHON

It's a sweltering summer day in Westland, Mich., but in the air-conditioned comfort of the city's eponymous shopping mall customers move from store to store, seniors enjoy coffee in common spaces and a slow-moving tram resembling an old-fashioned locomotive transports kids to the play area.

Welcome to Westland Shopping Center, a traditional enclosed mall

that has stood the test of time.

Since its 1965 opening, Westland — through a combination of strong, community-centered management and favorable demographics — has successfully ridden the changing waves of retail.

Like virtually all shopping malls, Westland owes its existence to the irresistible post-war tug of America's suburbs. After World War II, Detroit's J.L. Hudson Company — the

city's grande dame of retailing with a mammoth 25-story store downtown — was initially hesitant to open suburban branches. That changed in 1948 when Hudson's executives were approached by architect Victor Gruen, who showed them renderings of his concept for a modern suburban mall. A four-level Hudson's store would be surrounded by a collection of out-buildings each containing a pod of independent specialty stores. These early concepts included open air courtyards and walkways accented with sculptures and colorful landscaping.

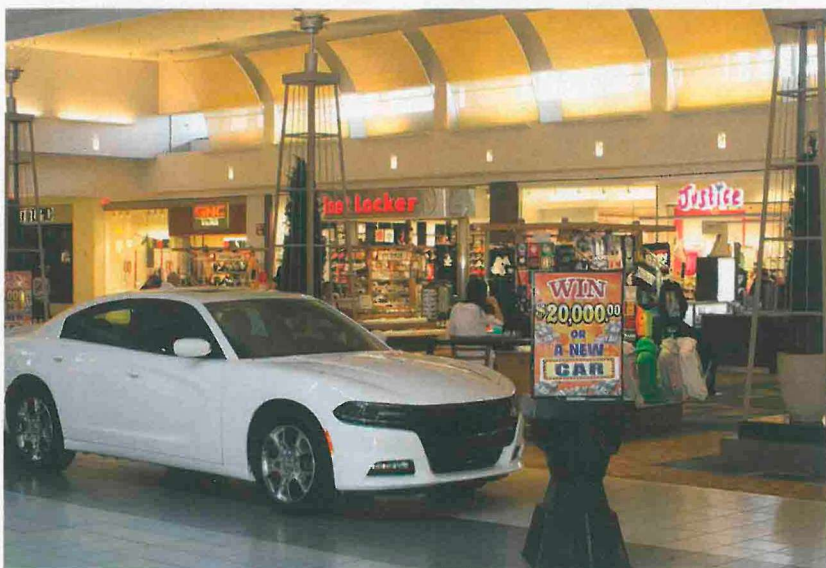
Company president Richard Webber (successor to founder Joseph Lowthian Hudson) listened, examined demographic data showing the outward migration of Detroiters and decided that his company had to capitalize on this new opportunity. Webber envisioned four regional malls, each with directional names — Northland, Eastland, Westland and eventually a Southland.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

Northland, in the northwestern suburb of Southfield, Mich., was the first to be constructed and represented a \$30 million investment. Hudson's (through its real estate subsidiary Shopping Centers Inc.) opened the center in 1954 and it became an instant success: First-year sales totaled \$42 million, far exceeding the company's expectations.

Eastland, in the northeastern community of Harper Woods, followed in 1957 to similar good fortune. In addition to racking up impressive sales numbers, these developments also moved the company into the lucrative commercial real estate business. As sole owner of the properties, Hudson's was landlord to the bevy of specialty tenants.

By the early 1960s semi-rural Nankin Township — a community on the far



western fringe of metro Detroit — was still experiencing the hum of post-war growth in both its population and its local economy. Combined with the company's prior suburban experiences, these trends persuaded Hudson's executives to proceed with Westland.

Company president Joe Hudson (Webber's nephew and a great nephew of the founder) gave the go ahead, much to the appreciation of officials in the unincorporated community abutting the cities of Livonia and Dearborn Heights. For this project, Gruen had modified his original concept, designing an enclosed center offering air conditioning and shelter from the elements.

The dramatic new venue opened in July 1965 to rave reviews, and the move proved fortuitous for all involved. At the time, officials in Livonia were considering annexing Nankin. But construction of the new mall, in precisely the geographic center of the township, provided a substantial addition to the local tax base, and prompted Nankin to petition its voters to incorporate as a city, thus preserving its independence. In April of 1966, the citizens gave their approval.

In recognition of the mall as both an economic asset and a community meeting spot — a post-war suburban version of a town square — the newly incorporated city chose to name itself after its shopping center, and Westland, Mich., was born.

Like its siblings to the north and east, the Westland of the 1960s was different from shopping venues of today — both economically and culturally. Back then, shopping was a leisurely yet formal activity. Women frequently wore dresses and heels, men typically sported coats and ties.

On the original tenant list, sharing space with the 350,000-square-foot Hudson's were numerous boutiques and shoe stores (including many well-known Detroit-area retailers), specialty merchants offering widely varied merchandise, a local bank's branch office and even a full-service Kroger store.

Over the decades, Westland made strenuous efforts to stay current with changing retail trends. As customers' shopping patterns became more segmented, the Kroger store closed and relocated in 1975. The footprint became the site of a new wing hosting a JCPenney; Kohl's and Sears stores were added in 1987 and 1997, respectively. These additions expanded Westland to over 1 million square feet, a size approaching that of other malls in the area.

At the same time, many small chains exclusive to southeast Michigan saw their fortunes decline with the rise of

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ubiquitous national brands. Today, familiar names like Aéropostale, American Eagle Outfitters, Express and Victoria's Secret are plentiful at Westland. Chain restaurants such as A&W and Longhorn Steakhouse offer convenience to customers and encourage longer shopping visits.

Clearly, the mall's intended focus as a "town center" was right on the mark, and the original concept continues to define Westland's core identity. The mall's recent 50th anniversary celebration offered a variety of family-friendly activities including face painting for children, presentations of Motown and big band music, swing dance lessons and an open dance party. The south concourse features oversize exhibit doors, making possible displays of large items such as cars or boats. Today Westland the shopping center endures as the epicenter of Westland the city.

POTENTIAL AND PITFALLS

Despite this success, the constant flux of the industry may make Westland's long-term survival a challenge.

While retail consultant Ed Nakfoor commends the mall's marketing efforts to date as "spot on," he points out some potential pitfalls.

"The area surrounding Westland remains stagnant in terms of population growth," Nakfoor says.

"The customer base that lives close to Westland — like all groups — is becoming more mobile. Customer loyalty only goes so far, and eventually Westland's clientele may migrate to newer, flashier destinations offering trendier stores. Stores like these generate a higher level of foot traffic, which in turn benefits all the outlets in a newer venue."

Put simply, Nakfoor questions whether the ever-transient Millennials will honor the town square concept of shopping.

Chris Brochert, whose company Lomax Stern has developed several retail properties near Westland, points to the area's considerable strengths.

"The community surrounding Westland has a very dense population — there's approximately 365,000 people within a five-mile radius. That translates to a higher level of sales per square feet. Demographics like these are why Westland has survived and even flourished over the years."

Brochert's assessment may prove correct. A June 2014 article in *Scientific American* cited a report from the Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at George Washington University, suggesting that in most of the 30 largest U.S. cities — including Detroit — suburban sprawl has peaked and future development efforts are being directed toward creating dense, walkable urban areas.

Such a trend, if it actually materializes, will have enormous impact on the economic dynamics of greater Detroit, and on venerable shopping destinations such as Westland. **STORES**

Detroit-based Paul Vachon writes for various trade publications, in addition to feature stories for consumer magazines and books on Michigan history and travel.