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Museums and shopping centers: Latest in cool

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From boring to cool, that's the story for savvy museums and regional shopping centers. Both have had to transform to please customers with compelling architecture, interactive events, extended hours, and discounts.

Visitors to either can be entertained with classes, participate in exhibits, attend a movie, sit in a café, or hangout in a well-designed and comfortable public space. In both there are goods to buy, but there is no pressure to shop. They are now open, welcoming, and destinations.

As the economy takes on a more uplifting aura, there will be increased opportunity for lesser retail properties to follow in the same or similar path to change from red to black real estate.

The reason is e-commerce and social media have infused retail excitement to the brick and mortar scene, and many people still want to gather together in a special place to eat, drink, relax, engage, and shop.

Demographics play a role. Major fans of brick and mortar retail are the millennials, the large demographic cohort born between 1980 and 2000. They are followed by first and second generation Hispanic and Asian families, as well as the growing population of empty nesters.

In looking at successful museums and shopping centers, four dominant defining characteristics are noticeable: a new design with aesthetically pleasing interior and outdoor space, updated pedestrian and vehicular access, local events and promotions, and entertainment.

Shopping centers require one other key ingredient: innovative, buzz worthy tenants whose goods are tailored to the specific location.

Tenant mix is the quintessential element of the shopping experience. In the US today there are 46+ square feet of retail space per person.

This means that to attract shoppers, centers must introduce a unique experience with food, fun, and target-market driven and local stores. Think innovation: chef-owned restaurants, new on-line/physical tenants such as Warby Parker Eye Wear, Bonobos and Revolve Clothing, and novel pop-up stores.

Forget formula. Embrace: Touch, Feel, See, and Sense. Build it right; they will come!

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