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Sustainable Retail: Thornes at a Glance - by Carol Todreas

October 29, 2021 - Front Section



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As we grapple with the times retailers, landlords and developers work to conceive new formulas to find a stable new normal for stores and development. New concepts continue to be explored for underperforming malls, vacant chain stores, and even ground floors of mixed –use buildings. Some work; others do not. Flexible leases are now a standard as are temporary stores as well as smaller-sized stores. Retail was never for the faint-hearted and now it is even less so.

Enter Thornes on Main St., Northampton, Mass., a mixed-use, mainly retail-centric building. For decades Thornes has managed to be a retail destination remaining true to its concept of local retail.

Originally Thornes was a typical 19th century department store on Main St., and operated with minor changes to its design and function until the late 1960's when the malls disrupted Main St. retail. Shortly after in the 1970's the Thorne brothers and their wives purchased the historic property and with minor adjustments created a mixed-use retail/cultural/art center christened The SUPERmarket.

The retail component (basement, first and second floors) was anchored by Paul and Elizabeth's vegan/Japanese inspired restaurant, still open and loved, and tenanted with other local businesses geared to attract the hippie market of that era. The upper floors were devoted to community events with art galleries, yoga, cultural events, and offices.

By the 1980's The SUPERmarket felt dated. It needed a new image but one that kept the historic design and character of the original building

An updated retail plan was developed to highlight local retailers by turning the first floor into a shopping street with small spaces on either side of a central corridor; thus, The SUPERmarket was reborn as Thornes Marketplace. Not of minor significance was the addition in the back of a connecting walkway to a new city parking garage.

Through the years, Thornes has barely changed, except for the occasional new tenant and some refurbishing to decorative building elements. The Thornes shopper experience is basically the same as before, and shoppers and the community seem to want to keep it that way. Sales at Thornes remain consistent between \$400 and \$1,000 per s/f, reflecting its popularity with locals and tourists alike. The big question is: Why and how with 55,000 s/f of retail in Northampton, with no real anchor nor national chain, can such a retail-centric, mixed-use center succeed over the years?

Probably because of good consistent management of the property by local caring owners who see it as a jewel and work to maintain its design and historic character, rework its tenant mix carefully, and regularly promote its tenants. Thornes is located in a pedestrian-oriented Main St. downtown, near Smith College, and within a short distance to UMass and other schools. Of note, though, it is not far from a regional mall with national chains and restaurants—nor from boutiques in the Berkshires. Thornes is sustainable defying worn out platitudes about retail... created before we talked about climate change, bike lanes, walkability, 20 minute neighborhoods, local businesses, and community. The rest of us need to catch up. (Todreas Hanley has been a retail and leasing consultant for

Thornes .)

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