



A New Lease on Life for Universal Mall

By David R. Miller, Associate Editor

Photography by Matt Austermann

Strip malls date back to the 1920s, but returning veterans with disposable income fueled a retail building boom in the years after World War II, with the first enclosed mall arriving in the 1950s. A variety of trends have made enclosed malls less economically viable, so they have fallen out of favor in recent years. Tenants tend to abandon these malls, taking the income from their lease agreements – the economic lifeblood of any mall – with them. An innovative renovation is providing new retail opportunities in Warren and a new lease on life for the Universal Mall; several leases, in fact.

The project team led by site engineer and

planner Hubbell Roth & Clark, Bloomfield Hills; construction manager Roncelli, Inc., Sterling Heights; and architect Wah Yee Associates, Farmington Hills, has transformed this 38-year-old mall into a thriving open air lifestyle center with boulevards, storefront parking, landscaped fountains and courts. What makes this project truly unique is the great care that was taken to reuse significant portions of the existing construction, thereby making complete renovation possible, even in a challenging economy. As communities struggle with disused retail spaces that dot the landscape, Universal Mall provides a potential blueprint for successful redevelopment.

UNDERSTANDING THE TREND

Throughout Michigan and the United States, an increasing number of enclosed malls are converting into open air lifestyle centers, while construction of enclosed malls has become quite rare. Like most retail trends, these renovations are being driven largely by economic considerations.

“Big box tenants don’t want to pay what it costs to maintain the inside of a mall,” explained Edward Cicero, senior project manager for Roncelli. “There is a shared cost that is passed along to each tenant.”

This shared cost includes heating, cooling and lighting the space along with the increased security and maintenance