

Taking it to the next level at Denver's Pavilions shopping center

New escalators zip shoppers to the Pavilions' second floor, but just a coat of paint makes downtown mall warmer

Ray Mark Rinaldi 303-954-1540 or rrinaldi@denverpost.com

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New escalators with cantilevered canopies are located close to 16th Street and provide a striking invitation to passersby. More than 100,000 people work downtown, and 62,000 residents live within 1.5 miles of Denver's urban core, according to Visit Denver. (THE DENVER POST | CYRUS MCCRIMMON)

If there's one lesson downtown developers can learn from the attractive rehab of the Denver Pavilions shopping center it is this: A little bit of paint can go a long way.

Of all the recent improvements to the much-maligned shopping mall on 16th Street — and there are many new changes that make it a better place to meander, a brighter spot in the city center — the ones that stand out are the upgraded hues of the walls, railings, lighting and more.

The new paint job on the giant back side, in particular, is nothing short of redemptive, turning one of downtown's great, bland barriers into a sophisticated checkerboard of latte-colored browns and beiges. Two long blocks of flat concrete, it remains a Berlin Wall between the 16th Street Mall and all points southwest. But it is warmer now, almost a pleasure to pass by.



To make it easier for pedestrians to cross busy Glenarm Place, the Pavilions added a concrete safety barrier and flashing blue LED lights. The message to drivers: "Stop." (THE DENVER POST | CYRUS MCCRIMMON)

Downtowners can argue until they drop about the wisdom of having a massive, inward-looking shopping mall on a strip that's better-suited to street-front boutiques and locally owned sidewalk cafes. Who needs a commercial goliath on a walkway that ought to be strolled by?

But a mall we have, and it's useless to whine about it today. Planners back in the day faced tough questions about how to maintain the mojo of the top half of 16th Street, and at least they acted boldly. Eleven years after its opening, this mall within a mall is the most active stand of retail within miles, hosting chains like Barnes & Noble, Niketown and Gap, as well as smart local boutiques like Sashe and Cali & Mo.

Credit Gart Properties, the new, profit-minded owner, for acting boldly again in bringing the center back to life visually. It was no small challenge to figure out how to attract more people to the mall's innards, and it didn't come cheaply. Gart bought the 347,000-square-foot center for \$94.5 million last year and says it is sinking \$25 million into a space that is crucial to the spirit of Denver's cultural core.



The back of the Pavilions, two city blocks long, is downtown's Berlin Wall. But a new paint job makes it easier to live with. Total upgrades will cost \$25 million.

Better circulation system

More credit to Semple Brown Design architects for designing not just a new face, but also a better circulation system. And for having the common sense to keep the signature "DENVER" sign, but replace the dull terra cotta exterior color with richer reds and taupes. The colors feel trendy, so much so that they may appear dated in a few years. But the bottom line is that this is a place people go for trendy fashion, films and food. It needs to look like it has its eye on the moment.

For shoppers, the most practical change is probably the slick new escalators with cantilevered canopies that reach out toward 16th Street. The old, bulky escalators were deep inside the mall's cavernous, dark courtyard. They blocked the path of pedestrians, cut off views and made it nearly impossible to canvass the mall without a bit of crisscrossing and doubling back. The reconfigured moving stairs are just seven steps from the sidewalk. Combined with new backlit stairways and better elevators, the mall and its parking lots are easier to navigate.



Light panels create an arch effect around the improved elevators.

There's something thrilling about these exterior escalators. They mess with notions of what building parts belong inside and outside, they trick you into entering. Shoppers who previously skipped the uncomfortable trek to the second level to check out Banana Republic's new goods now have an open invitation.

The other major improvement is a pedestrian crossing along the street separating the Pavilions' two large buildings. It used to be that mall walkers risked it all traversing Glenarm Place making their way from Maggiano's to Pacsun during lunch hour. Now there's a barrier in the middle,

some embedded blue LED warning lights and a noticeable sign ordering drivers to yield. Surprisingly enough, they do.

A few misses

Not all of the new details are as exciting. The lanterns hanging in the courtyard warm things up, but is their leafy motif really in sync with this concrete palace?

More worrisome are the new, oversized LED screens that stick out in front along 16th Street, projecting out-and-out commercial videos onto the historic strip. They are terribly bright and busy at night, a Times Square touch on a street whose many charms are more subdued. But toned down and programmed tastefully, they could add a modern touch. They will be a test for Gart's stewardship of the property.

And still, they don't overshadow the mall's smarter alterations, like the new balconies on the second level created from the salvaged landings of the old escalators. They are clever and useful for folks who want to hang out.

Shopping malls tend to take up a lot of space and give back little to the landscape. Even our more attractive malls — Park Meadows in Lone Tree and FlatIron Crossing in Broomfield — with their handsome interiors, look gangly and confusing outside.

The Pavilions, polished and now user-friendly, is a step above. The place offers that same visceral joy so many of us capitalists get from shopping while making itself a decent neighbor.

It will be interesting to see if shoppers take the bait.

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