

La Gran Plaza, once the FW Town Center, has new lease on life

BY JENNY EURE

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When José Legaspi's development partnership, Grupo Zócalo, purchased the Fort Worth Town Center at Interstate 35 and Seminary Drive in April 2004, it was spiraling downward – and at an alarming rate. The 1.2-million-square-foot mall was at just 22 percent occupancy, and three of its anchor department stores, Dillard's, J.C. Penney and a Sears – had moved out.

Today, the mall hardly resembles its former self. Renamed La Gran Plaza, it's two years into a \$43 million renovation. Already, occupancy has jumped to 77 percent, and leases are pending for two department stores that will cover more than 100,000 square feet. By Nov. 15, Boot Town/Western Wear will open a 9,000-square-foot store. A seven-story office tower and the third floor of the former Sears, which was remodeled into office space, are at 80 percent occupancy. Plans are also being finalized for a 5,000 seat rodeo arena and concert venue, which will front I-35, Legaspi said.

Legaspi has been leasing out and repositioning retail centers in Hispanic markets for 30 years through his Los Angeles-based real estate firm, The Legaspi Co. The marketing and realty services company has a number of other malls in California and the Southwest in its portfolio. La Gran Plaza is no different.

The former Dillard's space has been converted into the 210-shop, two-story El Mercado, where customers can shop for anything from clothes to fruit to car bumpers. Already, 150 shops have been leased since opening in May. The former Sears Auto Service Center, which fronts I-35, has been remodeled into a Spanish colonial-style retail center, and is filled with tenants such as T-Mobile, Washington Mutual and Sonic. By next summer, when the mall is scheduled for completion, its exterior will resemble a rustic Spanish colonial plaza.

Detail-oriented

As with every project, Legaspi does his homework. Through market studies, Legaspi and Grupo Zócalo, which also oversees the center's leasing and management, found that 83 percent of the Hispanic population surrounding La Gran Plaza was of Mexican descent, and many people have roots in northern and central Mexican states.

And the research shows in every detail of the mall, from its 500 custom-made benches from Mexico, each engraved with a different state seal, to murals of legends like Pancho Villa. In El Mercado, a rotunda with an aqueduct serves as a nostalgic reminder of towns in central Mexico, and 14 100-square-foot family restrooms with adult- and child-size stalls cater to shoppers with children. The mall's eateries, which have expanded to 11 restaurants from just two in 2004, offer food from different regions in Mexico. There's even a mariachi band out every weekend, with a strolling *dueto* on Thursdays and Fridays. The changes are forging La Gran Plaza into a true cultural center.

When it comes to retailing to the Hispanic demographic, Legaspi makes it sound easy.

"Most of Hispanic retailing is really not that different from regular retailing," Legaspi said recently during one of his weekly visits to the mall. "The issue becomes, who is our customer, how do we keep them here, and then a subset of that is who the Hispanic customer is – which means figuring out where the majority of the customers are born, what their language dominance is, etc."

It's much like the United States, where people who hail from the South or those from the North are different, he added. The goal is to make people feel like the retail center is their home away from home.

"We create an environment that resembles their hometown. Our cultural DNA resembles what we remember from childhood," Legaspi said. "We empower people by allowing them to feel at home."

It's something that hasn't been done in Fort Worth, despite the fact that \$1.9 billion in retail sales are currently being



A rendering of La Gran Plaza shows what the retail center will look like when it is completed.

generated in a 10-mile radius of the mall, he said. Fort Worth, he added, however, is 20 years behind what Los Angeles offers.

"Our effort is to bring the mall to the maturity of retailing [in California]," Legaspi said.

This means creating a first-class environment, good presentation and high-quality sales people, he added. Signs of success factor in how many people are in the mall and the store's salespeople, but ultimately, how much tenants are willing to pay for rent – and stay. With a weekend draw of up to 15,000, and events like an Oct. 9 concert, which drew upwards of 30,000 people, La Gran Plaza has the traffic.

As for the future of Hispanic retailing in Fort Worth, Legaspi gestures around him to the mall.

"This is the future. Today, it's a snapshot of the mall." Even now, he said, it's years ahead of other Hispanic retailing in Texas, but when it's finished, it will be right on target with what Los Angeles offers.

According to Travis Alvarado, senior leasing representative with Grupo Zócalo, Legaspi's drive for the project is contagious.

"Mr. Legaspi is absolutely one of the most inspirational people I've ever worked with. His dedication not just to the project but also to his people is second to none. It's infectious, and it spreads within the company very quickly," Alvarado said.

His vision is also well received statewide.

After a packed International Council of Shopping Centers conference presentation in San Antonio in October, Legaspi gave an encore presentation to Fort Worth-area brokers on Nov. 1.

During the presentation, Legaspi reiterated his point that La Gran Plaza is designed to fill the retail and cultural needs of the Hispanic market in Fort Worth.

"This is not just a place to shop, but a place to gather and a place to feel at home," Legaspi said.

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