

SPOTLIGHT ON LYNWOOD

Shopping Center May Find Distinction as Tourist Stop

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LYNWOOD as a tourist destination? That's what a local developer is aiming for as an existing mall in one of the county's poorest cities is being transformed into the newly dubbed Plaza Mexico.

M&D Properties Inc. is putting \$55 million into renovating the existing site, called Market Place, into a "Little Mexico"-like destination. The 36-acre project is also benefiting from receiving redevelopment status by the city of Lynwood.

It aims to imitate a Mexican pueblo, with fountains, statues and a large plaza slated for completion in about 18 months.

With 450,000 square feet of retail space, Plaza Mexico will tie

together the shopping center with other nearby buildings purchased by M&D over the past 15 years, including a **Food 4 Less** and a **Rite Aid**.

It's meant for more than shopping — Saturday night strolls, art exhibitions, even outdoor concerts. The Mexican city of San Miguel de Allende will have an informational kiosk at the plaza. After scouring Mexico for inspiration, Plaza Mexico architect David Hidalgo modeled numerous design elements on that city's layout.

"It's one thing to develop a shopping center. If you can have a shopping center with some

historical and cultural significance, then you have a story to tell," said Luis Valenzuela, the project's leasing agent.

There's optimism about the project, but also apprehension among some current shop owners. "The bigger it gets, and the more they expand, what's enough to go around?" said Ali Saleh, owner of two clothing stores inside the existing mall, a former Montgomery Ward that was carved more than a decade ago into a marketplace where vendors sell their wares.



Bank part of project

A new façade and a 24-foot extension of the perimeter of Market Place is nearly complete. Across a parking lot, a branch of Puerto Rico-based **Banco Popular** opened in December in what used to be a Montgomery Ward's Tire Center.

The branch, which moved from a nearby location, contains a check-cashing arm next door to attract bank customers. It took in nearly \$2 million in new deposits in the first quarter, said branch manager Pauline Burbridge.

Last week, an outpost of the Huntington Park-based **El Gallo Giro** chain of Mexican delis was preparing to open next door. Burbridge has added one new-accounts employee in anticipation of additional traffic. "With the restaurant opening, we're going to be swamped," she said.



TODD FRANKEL/ARJ

Market Place: The current mall fills up what was once a Montgomery Ward.

Inside, each store is only separated by metal dividers. Most of the shoppers are Hispanic and African American. The merchants are a mix of mostly Asians and Hispanics.

Stores sell everything from clothing and electronic equipment to beauty supplies. There's also a *carniceria* (meat market), a *panaderia* (bakery) selling wedding cakes and a seafood market.

At **Buffalo Boots**, Veronica Gonzalez sells shoes of ostrich, alligator and frog hides, hand-made by her husband, Hector, in Long Beach. Hector made boots for **Tony Lama** before striking out on his own, she said.

Notice in Mexico

Plaza Mexico is also drawing attention in Mexico. Last week, Valenzuela traveled there to talk to potential tenants, who he said included furniture and department store chains. He said he expects the mall, which already has garnered front-page coverage from *Cambio*, Mexico's version of *Newsweek*, to draw a significant number of tourists from there and throughout the United States.

If tourists don't materialize, the development will have to rely on nearby shoppers, who aren't wealthy. At \$29,473, Lynwood has the eighth lowest household income among 88 Los Angeles County cities, according to the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp.

While optimistic, a number of merchants said they would take a wait-and-see attitude toward the promised tourist traffic.

"The business is going to build up, I think," said Kay Hwang, owner of **Lynwood Auto**, a store selling accessories such as bumpers, steering wheels and seats.

Saleh, the clothing salesman, said he's willing to accept a bit more risk. While unsure whether the upgrade will deliver all it's promised, he doesn't want to be left behind. He's rented 2,000 square feet for a new store on the outside perimeter at a higher rate than he's now paying inside Market Place. There, he will open **Hip Hop Zone**, a clothing store catering to younger buyers.

"If you don't go in with a strong heart and a strong mind, I don't think anyone could be successful that way."