

Time Well Spent

As de facto community hubs, shopping centers increasingly offer a place for personal connections.

Like most men planning to propose, Brian Kamenetzky felt a growing sense of anxiety as he sought out the perfect ring. His mother in St. Louis had mailed him several photos of potential ring settings, but Kamenetzky decided his best bet was to fly home from Los Angeles to shop with his mom at the family's longtime jeweler. "He was located in a small shopping center in Clayton (Missouri)," Kamenetzky says. "My parents have bought all their fine jewelry from him. They actually went to high school together."

Using a diamond that once belonged to Kamenetzky's grandmother, the mother-son pair pored over settings at the jeweler until they found just the right one.

Stories like Kamenetzky's are not uncommon. Historically, shopping centers have been a touchstone of interpersonal relationships. They're a central meeting place and hub of important social interaction between those from all different ages and backgrounds—something that keeps them as relevant as ever in our digital age.

"Retail spaces are a gathering point for the community to not only shop, but also to spend time with friends," says Michael Brown, partner in A.T. Kearney's consumer and retail practice. Brown and his wife happened to have met at a mall while working in the retail industry at the start of their careers.

A DAILY DESTINATION

Part of the reason shopping centers are so integral to our social fabric is simply

the amount of time we spend at them. There are about 116,000 shopping centers nationwide and 1,200 regional and super-regional malls. Americans visit both types of shopping centers frequently: According to recent ICSC consumer engagement surveys, about 56 percent of U.S. adults report visiting a mall within the previous 30 days, while about 51 percent report visiting an open-air shopping center within the previous seven days. The average time spent in a mall is 135 minutes, ICSC found.

And contrary to what's been reported, recent data suggests that Millennials—people now in their 20s and 30s—are just as drawn to physical retail stores as older generations. A recent ICSC survey found that 76 percent of Millennials made at least one purchase in a physical store on Thanksgiving Day or Black Friday in 2017 and that more than 55 percent of their total spending on merchandise those two days occurred in those establishments.

Survey data also suggests that consumers look to malls and open-air shopping centers for far more than just shopping. About 39 percent of all mall visits, for example, include dining at a restaurant or fast-food establishment and about 16 percent include a personal service purchase, such as a haircut or spa visit, ICSC data shows. It's at these places especially that people are able to make meaningful connections with other members of their communities.

"Shopping centers offer people a chance to connect and spend quality time with each other," says Tom McGee, ICSC's chief executive. "It might be the mother and daughter who go shopping for a prom dress together or friends who meet for lunch or dinner on the weekend. They're places where people come together."

CATERING TO COMMUNITIES

The allure of a shopping center for many people is the ability to be around

other people and make meaningful connections—not just sitting behind a computer at home filling virtual shopping carts or watching online movies.

"Communities benefit tremendously from having vibrant downtowns, vibrant places to shop and vibrant places for people to interact," says Kenneth F. Bernstein, chairman, president and chief executive of Acadia Realty Trust.

While shopping centers have always been the de facto hubs of their community, many centers are evolving to encourage even more social interactions between patrons. Several malls owned by Westfield Corp., for example, have added event spaces and park-like areas in recent years to encourage guests to connect with one another and to appeal to Millennials looking for experiences, says Peter Huddle, the company's executive vice president of development.

Oculus Plaza, part of the Westfield World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan, recently relaunched the World Trade Center Farmers Market—a once-regular event that had been discontinued after September 11, 2001. The plaza, which opened in 2016, also hosts outdoor concerts, a summer-long film series and other events throughout the year.

"Our properties are easy and intuitive to walk through while providing ample areas for sitting and socializing with friends for an enjoyable afternoon or evening outdoors," Huddle says. "By creating social gathering places such as these, Westfield is giving its customers more reasons to visit more often."

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