

Shopping enters time warp

Source: Elkhart Truth

MISHAWAKA -- To go there is to be transported to a different time and place, and that's what the developers of Mishawaka's newest lifestyle shopping centers want people to feel when they come to Heritage Square and Toscana Park.

Located 1 mile east of University Park Mall and north of S.R. 23, the two centers are neighbors, but with differing architectural styles.

Toscana Park has its origins in the Italian roots of its local developer, Geraldo "Jerry" Macri, whose family returned often to shop in their favorite northern Italian region of Tuscany.

"My mom's maiden name was Toscano," said Macri, who has been working on the Toscana Park project since 2001. "Because more women shop than men, and because Toscana (the feminine form of Toscano) is also a region of Italy -- their Midwest -- I called this place Toscana Park, in memory of my sister and my parents.

"I wanted Toscana Park to be a destination. I decided instead of doing the standard buildings I'd do something beautiful -- something that would last a long time.

"It's also more of a community like back in the days when you supported your downtown because your homes surrounded it. You went to nearby shops and got what you needed. That's what our goal is -- to re-create that," said Macri.

He added that "we have somebody who is moving back here from California that bought both a retail store and they're building a villa (in our next-door residential development) so now they will have a business that they can walk to from their home."

Drive in at Toscana Park's main entrance and the first thing one sees is the imposing Villa Macri, under construction and scheduled to open in late March or early April. Villa Macri will provide a fine restaurant, deli and banquet facilities as well as a courtyard with an elegant Italian marble fountain.

"We have spaces for outdoor weddings," said Macri. "We will have a farmers market, art fairs, winter fests and summer fests."

Ray Hartline of Niles, Mich., said, "They're pulling people away from that mall atmosphere and that's all good. Fresh air. It's better than being all cooped up in the mall."

Over in nearby Heritage Square, Sherry Weaver of Elkhart, who used to get Coldwater Creek's catalog, is delighted she now can visit the retailer's new store in person.

"You can come here in your cruddy clothes and they don't treat you any less for it," said Weaver. "I've gotten a lot of personal attention that you don't get in the big stores.

"I also love being able to see and try on the product. If they don't have the size I wear, they'll order it and ship it to my home free of charge."

This friendly, personal service is part of the tradition of the Midwest -- and that's what Heritage Square is designed to re-create, according to Richard Economakis, the architect for Heritage Square.

"We were not so much attempting to evoke any particular historical period but to build something that looks more like a typical Midwestern, small-town main street," said Economakis. "The U.S. is a melting pot with

architectural influences from various immigrant business communities so we allowed for a range of traditions -- for example, Dutch gables, an Italianate cornice, a tiled-roof effect."

"A lot of retail centers have names that are generic," said Doug Hunt, managing partner for Heritage Square. "There are a number of Heritage retail centers around the country but we chose to have our Heritage mean something.

"There is a 35-foot tall monumental column with a bronze statue of a heron. To reflect our natural heritage, we chose to have a sculpture of a heron and not a dead general," said Hunt.

He added that "our Three Sisters mosaics (which you can see in three commercial buildings around the downtown traffic circle) are symbolic not only of our Native American heritage but of well-being," said Hunt. "The Native American system of planting corn, beans and squash together is a nutritious, balanced diet. We want this place to represent various aspects of personal well being and that also ties in with our having the Martin's grocery store here, too.

"Then there is our Midwest architectural heritage -- the prairie style, the Main street and the village center," said Hunt. "We hope to make this area a gathering place for the community by our creating a new public space in which we can host events."