Work on Horton Plaza called for a massive scaffolding job.

Horton Plaza: San Diego’s New Showcase

This remarkable new downtown shopping/entertainment complex meant stiff challenges for both architect and builder.

Like an abrupt, brilliant slash of lightning illuminating a dark Pacific sky, the new Horton Plaza slices strategically through San Diego’s downtown — proving that a single master construction stroke can indeed reestablish a city’s soul.

Destined, no doubt, to become the darling of urban architecture and entertainment, the massive shopping center envisioned by internationally renowned builder and developer, Ernest Hahn, has become something more than a mere construction addition.

The massive 11.5 acre undertaking carries with it such enormous impact as to re-assign San Diego’s commitment to its center city, to reorient the entire city by functioning as a “heart transplant” to the city’s wholesale, retail, entertainment, theatre and restaurant complex.

Hahn, a lifelong resident of San Diego and the major author of San Diego’s inspiring center city rebirth, has long enjoyed his reputation for daring, vibrant and imaginative development. But the Horton Plaza concept, drawing its own inspiration and design theme from San Diego’s Balboa Park — the site of the 1915 World’s Fair—represents his ultimate statement, the piece d’ressence of a developer’s imagination.

Slicing diagonally through San Diego’s heretofore dilapidated South of Broadway section, an area once populated by broken buildings, single
males, surface parking lots, vagrants and cheap hotels, Horton Plaza simply has revitalized the entire area.

The $174-million, multilevel development opened only a few months ago and is already viewed as the trend setter for future downtown developments both in the U.S. and abroad. Like a glistening diamond perched on black velvet, the sweeping dominance of the design statement gives Horton Plaza precisely what its designers and supporters sought: the ability to dictate future, complementary development in the area as well as the strength to serve as the focal point for San Diego’s entire downtown.

“A lot of cities have given up their soul . . . lost their commitment to the inner city,” explained Sonny Stearns, marketing director for E.W. Hahn Inc., “but San Diego has succeeded in reclaiming itself.

“Like most cities, over the last 40 years San Diego’s downtown had moved from being the ‘heart’ of the development area to being spiritually abandoned by its citizens. A reversal was needed.

“Horton Plaza isn’t construction in its strictest definition: it’s an attitude expressed with steel and wood and plaster . . . a personal signature . . . a visually stimulating symbol of a city whose citizens are in the process of returning,” Stearns explains.

**Unique Concept . . .**

What makes Horton Plaza so unique aside from its size is the careful concept of design, intended to be daring and innovative but also to spring from historical precedence. The entire Horton area is a showcase of the massive fiberglass techniques used to capture and transfer the facades of buildings from famed Balboa Park to new downtown locations.

At the same time, the architect, Jon Jerdes, introduced a novel design idea with the elimination of the so-called “bowling alley” effect so common in shopping centers. Horton Plaza has been likened to a pinball machine with its diversity of blends, finishes, curves, nooks, crannies, and stores, restaurants, fountains, trees and artworks.

Today, downtown shoppers in San Diego have the pleasure of a “people walking environment” unlike any other shopping center anywhere in the

San Diego’s Ron Brady is justifiably proud of his firm’s contributions to Horton Plaza.

Seen from above, massive Horton Plaza in downtown San Diego is even more imposing.
“Because of the design discipline, all of the elements, rather than appearing separately, provide an aesthetic cohesiveness. After all, to bring downtown San Diego back to life requires more than a single shopping opportunity.”

Horton Plaza—and the rejuvenation of the whole downtown area — is a dream rapidly approaching total fulfillment now, but like most dreams its half-life was neither easy nor short.

While spiritual abandonment, like the wrong end of an electric magnet, repelled commercial and residential interests away from the area south of Broadway all the way to the waterfront, the other end of the magnet—the suburbs—were attracting. In the 60s and 70s, the movement was on full force.

Hahn himself was in the thick of the suburban migration, building shopping centers all over the country. The small general contracting company that he’d formed in 1946 had quickly become a bigtime building force.

Still, though, despite the fact that he’d helped develop the suburban complexes that were draining power from San Diego’s own downtown, Hahn remained committed to the city’s inner core. When the power drain to the suburbs started slackening and eyes turned again toward the city, the South Broadway area attracted quick attention.

Potentially the richest area, it was ready for the developers dream-and that Hahn possessed. He didn’t receive much support in the beginning especially when he tried to convince people it made sense to build retail in an area that more than 50 retailers had just evacuated.

As the idea and scope expanded, it became obvious that success would come only if customary shopping center thinking was dispensed with and something totally new was introduced, something that properly stitched together the “urban fabric” elements of the city.

Consequently, Jerdes’ design had to evolve from the original small development into a gorgeous 900,000 square feet plaza. Thus, what started in the first place as an enclosure of two department stores and an ice skating rink eventually emerged as a twisting, artistically exploding architectural tour de force that featured ten separate districts—each with its own distinct community design criteria — highlighted by four major department stores, some 185 stores and restaurants, an art center, repertory theater, a multi-screen theater and an Omni-International Hotel, with full parking facilities underneath.

Design challenges were stiff, but not insurmountable. With a 30-foot ground elevation differential, the Plaza—with all retail stores at street level—is three stories high at one end and five stories high at the other.

World Class Design...

As a multi-level city within a city, Horton Plaza attracts few challenges to its role as a world class design. Character and quality radiate from each integral element.

The wall and ceiling construction is a case in point. Ron Brady’s Bradco International Ltd., of San Diego, an
AWCI member of long standing, was the major drywall and plastering contractor on the job. The work involved a whole series of cementitious finishes on both interiors and exteriors all rich with vibrant colors.

The mix of the finishes and colors, the sweeping statements of broad expanses forged with deliberate visual interruptions led architect Jerdes to describe Horton Plaza as “the four-hour experience.” Admirers say the description should be four hours a week for a few months: the visual excitement is that pervasive and extensive.

When one walks the alleys and expanses, the view of San Diego remains powerful. Yet the attraction remains within the Plaza itself where the districts, the gallerias and the artworks serve as a steady stimulant.

For example, the northeast side entrance behind Robinson’s store is suddenly interrupted with a huge, gaping hole which opens up to the plaza leading down to a wide-open theater space.

Nearby, one of the three principal sculptures commissioned for the Plaza —gives the impression of fireworks jetting up. Then from behind the buildings abruptly angle in narrowly to a stairway that offers a sort of squeezed fjord experience.

All the while, stairways sweep up, around, down sideways, with ballustrades, oddly shaped walls and windows, staircases, walkways, and resting places adding punctuation points.

Because of the design discipline, all of the elements, rather than appearing separate, provide an aesthetic cohesiveness. After all, to bring downtown San Diego back to life requires more than a single shopping opportunity. Horton Plaza is intended to represent a place to shop, to meet and socialize, to play and be inspired and entertained, and to offer the adventure of exploring new stores, restaurants, theaters.

“It’s hard not to feel an enormous pride in taking part in this kind of a breakthrough,” explained Ron Brady, chief executive officer of Bradco. “The designers, with good justification, call it ‘the four hour experience,’ but I don’t think you could absorb everything in Horton Plaza if you devoted eight hours a day for a solid week.”

Brady’s summation is uniquely correct. The entire plaza—even before its completion—could provoke a quiet smile. Landmarks and sweeping views contest with extraordinary sculpture, to remarkable innovations in store designs (the stores agreed to conform to the design discipline yet apply their own design skills to contribute to the overall impact).

The finishes along with tile work, and splendid color combinations work to provide a constant visual stimulation. Yet, nowhere is there a sense of design frenzy.

San Diego’s downtown area needed something inspirational to get people again interested in the heart of the area. Horton Plaza is that masterful stroke, and a famous city is well on its way to attracting international attention for doing it right.