

Mall: Buckingham Square Mall

Location: Colorado

Years Active: 1971-2007

Status: Pending Redevelopment

Photos:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/76967529@N00/sets/72157594364548505/>

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Photos courtesy of James Quirk

MallHistory

IT'S ALL IN THE NAME



*The day they knocked down the palais
My sister stood and cried.
The day they knocked down the palais,
A part of my childhood died, just died.
Now I'm grown up and playing in a band
And there's a car park where the palais used to stand.
- "Come Dancing" by Ray Davies*

In his song lamenting the passing of a local dancing hall, Ray Davies of Kinks fame captures how urban renewal has taken away many of the structures which defined the childhood of many generations. A new wave of "suburban renewal" has now started to demolish buildings which defined the shopping and social experiences of a new generation. Among the buildings being lost is the indoor shopping mall known as Buckingham Square Mall in Aurora, Colorado. For over a quarter of a century, this bulky, functional building has served as a community shopping and cultural center for a large portion of Aurora. While the downtown shopping areas which preservationists concern themselves with defined consumerism for the baby boomer generation, "hanging out at the mall" was how teenagers of the 1970s, 80s and early 90s spent much of their free time. In fact, while these individuals who have now grown to adulthood will lament the loss of an amusement park they might have visited once or twice a year, they are slow to recognize the loss of their primary weekend social hub.

The cyclical nature of things has decreed that quasi-downtown shopping must return in the form of new outdoor shopping centers; however, these new areas lack the mix of "mom-and-pop" stores and large chain stores enjoyed by the earlier shopping districts. Unfortunately, this new trend has led to the decline of the regional indoor shopping mall.

The rise of the regional shopping mall can be directly linked to the rise of the suburbs following World War II. In turn, the rise of the suburbs can be linked to the rise of the interstate system promoted by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. As the suburbs expanded and surrounded the traditional downtown areas in the years following World War II, people found they no longer wanted to journey into the city to shop. To accommodate their customers, many of the downtown businesses began opening outlets in suburban shopping centers. The next logical step was to pull these businesses under one roof in the form of a shopping mall. Soon, each suburb had their own mall, which tried to outdo its competitors in terms of store selection and interior design.

Among these regional centers were the North Valley Mall in Thornton which is now used as office space, Villa Italia in Lakewood which has now been demolished and converted to the Belmar outdoor shopping district; Southglenn Mall in Centennial which still stands as does Southwest Plaza. Even the small town of Lakeside, which had a population of twenty people in the 2000 census, has a mall named the Lakeside Center. Probably the most recognizable mall of the Denver area, which served as the benchmark against which all other malls were measured, was Cinderella City in Englewood. Once the largest indoor mall west of the Mississippi River, Cinderella City was divided into four separate malls and comprised 1.35 million square feet. It was demolished to make way for an outdoor shopping center in 1999. The competition between malls led to a sort of new type of boosterism and primarily a struggle to generate more sales tax within each community as they strove to attract newcomers to the area.

Driven by the expansion of military activities at Lowry Air Force Base, the area around Mississippi and Havana in Aurora thrived during the early 1960s. On December 23, 1964, Cervi's Journal, the predecessor of The Denver Business Journal, announced that the Joslins Department Store chain, in conjunction with the Aberdeen Land Company, planned to build a two million dollar store on a fifteen acre site at Mississippi and Havana near the new Village East development. This article marks the first time the name Buckingham Square was used in print for the new 500,000 square foot development. The start date of the mall was to be 1965. In the spirit of creating a true center for the community, Robert Hayutin, the president of the Aberdeen Land Company, announced that the proposed development would include one other major department store as well as fifty-one other retail spaces, an office building, a restaurant, and recreational facilities.

It was not until August, 1970, that a public meeting was held by the Aurora City Council to obtain input from the community on the proposed shopping center (which presumably was almost completed). Fortunately, there was no major public outcry against the mall, which had ballooned to 737,000 square feet and seventy shops since its 1964 introduction. Ironically, plans for another development located at E. Alameda and Exposition Avenues was approved at the same meeting. This new center was the Aurora Mall, now known as the Town Center at Aurora, which became Buckingham Square's major competitor.

Despite the specter of a newer mall, on August 5, 1971, The Rocky Mountain News theorized that the Havana and Mississippi area would eventually displace East Colfax Avenue and become Aurora's new downtown. Buckingham Square promised to be a 24 hour-a-day community where people would shop, eat, live and work. In November, 1970, ground was broken by Aberdeen for the first of two office buildings on land immediately south of the still unfinished mall. This building was expected to cost two million to construct and was to be 70,000 square feet. This first building, named Camelot I was eight stories tall and was Aurora's first high-rise; in fact, it was the largest office building east of Colorado Boulevard. The building's twin, constructed in 1973, was as grand as its predecessor and was slated to have a swimming pool, exercise room,

sauna, whirlpool, and handball court. Eventually, the second building, known as Camelot II, came to serve as the Aurora City Hall, an honor it was to hold until the construction of the new city hall in the early 2000s near the Aurora Mall. Camelot I currently serves as a Wells Fargo Bank office building.

In addition, the residential district, originally proposed to the Aurora City Council in 1963, was supposed to house 5,000 families. It appears as though most of these residential units were in the Village East development which was a planned community built by Aberdeen featuring over 1,200 prestige homes and townhouses along what, at the time, was the south limits of the city. Furthermore, the Aberdeen Land Company also built the Sherwood Apartments northeast of the mall.

Of course, the centerpiece of the development was the mall itself which opened on August 5, 1971, over 8 years after the zoning was approved on May 5, 1963. The building, designed by architects Kenneth Boyle and William Wilson of Overland Park, Kansas had taken over 500,000 man-hours to construct and was expected to provide over 1,500 jobs for the community. The mall had the latest technology and elegances available at its opening including 4,000 parking places, living and artificial plants, fountains and acoustical plaster ceilings accented by walnut inlay. Additionally, the mall was climate controlled, allowing shoppers to browse the stores in seventy-two degree comfort.

Buckingham Square was at 99% occupancy when it opened and to complement the modern styling of the mall itself, the major retailers incorporated the latest innovations into their stores. For example, the Safeway store, which was in the space now occupied by Aaron's Rent to Own, offered "over-the-counter" shopping carts in an effort speed checkout as well as ready-to-eat and gourmet foods and an in-store bakery. Meanwhile, the Lerner store in the mall offered open fixtures to invite self selection, glare-proof lighting, zone controlled air conditioning, and the ability to make an exchange or receive a refund from any Lerner shop nationwide. Montgomery Wards introduced a new three room concept to their store with hard goods, soft goods and home furnishings each having their own section of the store. Remnants of this design could still be seen when the store closed. In addition, the store offered twenty-two bays for auto service and a "buffetaria." Probably the most stunning store was the Fashion Bar designed by Richard Crowther. Crowther, a noted Denver architect, who had redesigned much of Lakeside Amusement Park as well as designing solar houses and many businesses throughout town is responsible for the bright orange "terre grande" tiles still present on the mall facing façade. Crowther's design for the interior of the store must have been quite a sight:

The 16 by 12-foot entrance opens into a spacious modern interior, brightly decorated with bold colors and graphics. Each department is a separate color—some purple, red, orange, shocking pink or yellow. Massive white walls add to the spacious effect of the store. The space-modular ceiling, designed on three levels, house the light wells which give the store an open, sky light atmosphere.

In addition, the store included a separate specialty store with “its own special Havana Street entrance” which featured a selection of clothes for girls between the ages of ten and twelve. While the Joslins store probably did not feature the bright colors seen at Fashion Bar, the 135,000 square foot area was the largest Joslins in the United States. To celebrate the opening, the store brought in a display of priceless Spode china including pieces owned by George IV, the Shah of Persia and Queen Elizabeth.

In addition to retail shopping opportunities, Aberdeen Land Company ensured there were many restaurants and entertainment opportunities in their rapidly expanding planned community. For example, the Lancelot Restaurant was in operation a full four months before the mall opened because Hayutin felt a fine restaurant to serve the residents of Village East should be a priority. The building itself, which stood in the parking lot west of the mall, featured a main dining room with seating for 200 people and a large fire place as well as a separate lounge with leather furnishings and a second fireplace. This building went through several changes through the years including becoming a part of the Broker chain of fine restaurants in the 1980s and a Beau Jo’s pizza in the 1990s. Eventually, the building was razed to make way for a McDonald’s. In addition to Sir Lancelot’s, the mall itself offered many dining opportunities. For example, besides the buffetaria at Montgomery Wards, Woolworth’s and Walgreen’s each had a lunch counter. Additionally, there was a Round the Corner, an establishment called Bronco Burger, and even a place called Beckett’s Pub in the center court area.

In addition to opportunities to satisfy their culinary appetites, the opening of the mall in August, 1971 gave area residents something revolutionary: a multi-screen movie complex. Although common today, American Multi Cinema, Inc. (AMC) opened the first four screen complex in Kansas City in December, 1966; therefore, such a multiplex was still uncommon in the 1970s. AMC president Stanley H. Durwood explained to The Denver Post’s readers that such a complex would allow the simultaneous showing of a children’s movie, a general audience movie and movies for adults.

It was expected that the merchants at Buckingham Square would make twenty-five million dollars in their first year at the mall. Whether or not the mall reached this goal is unknown; however, the mall commemorated its first birthday in style with a celebration entitled “Very, Very British Birthday at Buckingham Square.” Not only did the mall give away a trip for two to London, it also presented shows by The City of Denver Pipe Band, the St, Andrews Scottish Country Dancers, and Irish Music by The Hibernians. In addition, the British Consulate provided its support by providing posters and other assistance in “recognition of British-American accomplishments.” In a step which would influence advertising for the mall for decades to come, the mall also introduced their new mascots, Buck N’ Ham, two palace guards dressed in appropriate uniforms. Finally, The Out House, a theater that was supposed to recall theaters of the 1800s with its round stage, footlights, burlap, and barn siding was slated to show the 1961 movie Tom Jones which had “shocked propriety” when it originally opened. Incidentally, 1972 also saw the opening of Red Baron arcade in the mall. Though the arcade originally offered pinball machines and children’s rides, by the 1980s, this establishment offered the latest video games into which countless teenage boys fed their

weekly allowances. Unfortunately, as home video game systems became more advanced, mall arcades were slowly pushed out of business; one can now catch a bus to the Blackhawk casinos from the old Red Baron arcade site.

In 1973, it was estimated that between 150,000 and 175,000 people visited the mall during an average week. To celebrate its second anniversary, the mall again offered a trip to London in addition to shows and activities similar to the previous year's celebration. Additionally, the Swiss Colony Shop displayed a 2,155 pound cheese wheel to celebrate its second year in the mall. However, the key word around Buckingham Square during 1973 was "expansion." On June 14th, the Aurora Advocate had announced that work had started on a project known as Buckingham II. This addition added 65,000 square feet and between twenty-five and thirty-five tenants to the east side of the mall at a cost of twelve million dollars. In addition, Camelot II, which was still under construction, had its first tenant lined up: Buckingham Square National Bank. Furthermore, the Aberdeen Land Company had started construction of Buckingham Village across Havana (at Havana and Florida). This outdoor shopping center sat upon forty acres and was expected to contain six restaurants, over 100 specialty shops and four movie theaters. The development was supposed to retain a village atmosphere with each shop having a unique image. The first phase of Buckingham Village opened on July 1, 1974.

At some point during the late 1970s or early 1980s, Safeway vacated their space in the mall. During 1984-85, motorists on Havana were puzzled by stacks of green tubing in the parking lot and watched as a waterslide was erected on the roof over the old Safeway store. Upon completion, the waterslide stayed open for less than a year; however, the waterslide sat atop the mall for over two-and-a-half years after the business that ran it pulled out. Apparently, the slide was listed as an asset in the Salt Lake City bankruptcy hearings of the three entrepreneurs who originally built it. Finally, Arapahoe County District Judge Kenneth Stuart ruled that because the slide violated zoning laws, it could be removed despite the bankruptcy proceedings. Unfortunately for the mall, it would have to reimburse the city the estimated \$100,000 it would cost to remove the part of the slide that stuck out of the roof and fix the hole which resulted. In addition, because the slide was still considered an asset in the Salt Lake City proceedings, it would have to be stored until the bankruptcy was settled; furthermore, the inside portion of the slide could not be removed for the same reason. Fortunately, the estates of the three bankrupt partners in Aurora Waterslides agreed to abandon the Buckingham slide later that same year, allowing the removal of the entire structure. Additionally, an area recreation district agreed to dismantle and move the slide at no cost to the city or mall.

Despite the loss of the waterslide, Buckingham Square was and continued to be known as the "fun mall" and a place where memories were made. For example, in 1972, Buckingham Square played host to the 4-H Festival which included bands, dancing, singing, a dog drill team and a leather tooling exhibition. The event was capped by a performance by Fantacia Mexicana on February 23rd. Throughout the years, shoppers at the mall have been treated to memorable events such as classic car shows, dog shows, arm wrestling championships, bridal shows, beautiful baby contests, safety villages for children, and annual public school art shows. In addition, on August 12, 1972, the mall

played host to the Miss Colorado Teen Contest. In February, 1998, the mall hosted a sports card show with more than forty-five exhibitors, not to mention appearances by Pittsburgh Steelers stars “Mean” Joe Green and Jack Ham. Furthermore, the parking lot of the mall has served as the setting for numerous circuses and carnivals through the years including a visit by The Big John Strong Circus in 1973. Of course, the mall has also played host to seasonal displays and celebrations such as haunted houses, Easter egg coloring contests, and early visits by the Easter Bunny and Santa. At one point, the mall hosted a dog costume contest for Halloween and, on another occasion, was invaded by Santa Clauses.

On Saturday, December 13, 2003, the mall was invaded by Santacon which was a group of 40 people in Santa Claus outfits with no agenda other than street theater. After a visit to the art museum, the Santas, many of whom were partaking freely of beer, boarded their sleigh (in this case a yellow school bus sprayed with flocked snow) and headed to Buckingham Square in hopes of getting to see the mall Santa. Usually, security at other malls probably would have asked the group to leave; however, Santacon was allowed to frolic in the children’s play area called the Dickens Village. After playing Twister, riding scooters and jumping rope to the delight of the few visitors to the mall, the performers came face-to-face with the mall Santa. According to the newspaper account, the mall Santa jumped up, stalked over towards the invading Santas and asked to have a picture taken with them. After leaving the mall, Santacon next visited a topless bar. While they did not have as much fun as the drunk Santas would twenty-one years later, employees at the mall’s Montgomery Wards were forced to camp out during the infamous Christmas blizzard of 1982; however, if they still worked at the store on November 16, 1998, these employees were allowed to go home early and watch Monday Night Football featuring the Broncos due to a lengthy power outage. On a different note, in more recent years, the mall has housed a farmer’s market in center court for several years.

Despite its history of providing a home to events and, for all intents and purposes, acting as the center of the community, Buckingham Square entered a period of decline as the 1990s began. Early in that decade, a corporate decision was made to close all Woolworth’s store. Woolworth had been a minor anchor at Buckingham Square since its opening and occupied quite a large space in the mall. Despite rumors around the mall that a Ross Dress for Less store was moving into the space, it remained empty until 2005. Then, an unlikely tenant was found in the form of an archery store. This was the first of many long-term vacancies the mall would see in the future.

With the exception of minor tenants coming and going, the mall continued as usual until Lowry Air Force based in 1998. In addition, the Buckingham Square lost another minor anchor in 1999 when Gart Brothers, which had taken over Dave Cook Sporting Goods in the mid-1980s, decided to focus its business on free-standing superstores in the late 1990s. As a result of this decision, the company’s mall stores were systematically closed. The Buckingham Square branch closed in January, 2000. In addition, many of the mall’s other tenants were in trouble. By 1999, Buckingham Square had the distinction of housing the last Round the Corner restaurant. The chain, which had once had twenty-eight stores in Colorado and surrounding states, had been outpaced by

its fast-food spin off Good Times and could not recover as the stores became outdated and their leases expired. By the early part of the new century, the last piece of the once prosperous chain had been broken. The space it once occupied in Buckingham Square was converted to an “all-you-can-eat” pizza restaurant which did not even last a year before it was raided and closed for tax evasion.

In 2000, the parent company of Montgomery Wards announced it was closing all stores nationwide. On April 21, 2001, the Buckingham Square store closed its doors for the last time after auctioning off the last fixtures and office equipment. Despite the closing of one the mall’s major anchors and an article in The Denver Post which alluded to the mall being condemned and torn down which appeared in mid-2000, spirits were still high at the mall due to the fact that Target had acquired the store. This optimism quickly faded when the old Montgomery Wards store was demolished and the Target store that replaced it only offered a minimal entrance to the mall and, rather than fitting in with the rest of the mall, seemed to stand apart.

In September, 2005 Mervyns’ parent company announced it was closing ten of its eleven Colorado locations. This decision not only equated to 746 more unemployed Coloradans, it also meant the second of Buckingham Square’s three major anchors would be closing. The Buckingham Square store finally closed its doors in January, 2006.

With the loss of two anchors in less than five years, the prospects of survival for the mall seemed dire. There had been talk of the mall being redeveloped for years and now reports of such an outcome increased. In 1998, the 125-year-old Joslins chain of department stores was sold to Dillards Inc. At the time, this sale had little impact on Buckingham Square other than the Joslins sign being replaced by a Dillards sign. However, in August, 2006 Dillards moved from its Buckingham Square location to a new space in the Town Center at Aurora. With this move, Buckingham lost its last anchor and the mall’s younger sibling pounded the last nail in the mall’s coffin. On September 5, 2006, a redeveloper announced plans to raze Buckingham Square and replace it with 350,000 square feet of retail space and 300 apartments. Ed Tauer, Aurora’s mayor, endorsed the plan because he felt it would bring new life to the Havana corridor and, more importantly, increase sales tax revenue. The new shopping center will most likely take the form of a “lifestyle center” with outdoor shopping and exposure to the elements. Hopefully this new development can become the community center Buckingham Square once was.

Buckingham Square was built as part of a grand dream of a planned community in what was southern-most Aurora. The developers took a risky gamble that the people living in their planned neighborhood and working in their high-rise towers would want to shop indoors. For twenty plus years, the community embraced the mall and it became the center of the community. However, over time, the communities’ values changed and the mall’s owners refused to update the mall to keep pace with new trends. This purposeful neglect, coupled with the unfortunate closing of the mall’s anchors, led to the eventual downfall of the establishment. With this collapse, all hope of saving the mall and the memories it contained were dashed.

On a recent trip to Buckingham Square, my daughter found particular joy in running over the bridge at center court. The look of joy on her face is something I will remember for the rest of my life. I am sure many past visitors to the mall each have a special memory of the place, be it of a first job at the movie theater, buying a prom dress at Dillard's, buying baby furniture at Montgomery Wards, getting a new best friend at Pet City, or stealing that first kiss on the bridge at center court. These memories might be lost without a physical reminder; however, it is clear Buckingham will never return to its former glory. If all that is holding up the building is nostalgia and memories, perhaps it is time to let the mall die a quiet and dignified death. However, at some point we may wish we had saved some 1970s era eclectic buildings such as old malls and office buildings.

*They put a parking lot on a piece of land
When the supermarket used to stand.
Before that they put up a bowling alley
On the site that used to be the local palais.
That's where the big bands used to come and play.
My sister went there on a Saturday.
Come dancing,
All her boyfriends used to come and call.
Why not come dancing, it's only natural?*