

Architects re-imagine the retail landscape with bold designs

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Brian Bandell

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The vast majority of retail centers in South Florida are sprawling enclosed malls surrounded by lakes of asphalt, or strip centers set back far from the street. But many of the region's new shopping projects have bold architecture that aims to energize people at the street level.

Retail designs such as open-air malls, urban mixed use and simulated main streets are popping up across the nation, but the trend is more prevalent in South Florida because there's a boom of mega shopping center development.

Nearly 1.7 million square feet of retail was under construction in South Florida in the first quarter, according to CBRE, and that's not counting a handful of large projects in the planning stages or preparing to break ground later this year.



Bernardo Fort-Brescia, founding principal of Miami-based Arquitectonica, said the advent of the enclosed suburban mall sucked retail business away from main streets and

urban centers across the county. Fort-Brescia, who helped design Sawgrass Mills in Sunrise, said these massive malls were designed for drivers, with little

regard for walk-up visitors. There was a clear divide between a structure's inside and outside – something that won't be so apparent at Brickell City Centre, one of Arquitectonica's latest designs.

With 500,000 square feet of retail in addition to residential, hotels and office space, Brickell City Centre is not a shopping center in the traditional sense, Fort-Brescia said.

“It's porous. You go from the city into the shopping center with no doors,” Fort-Brescia said. “It has pedestrian bridges near restaurants. The stores face the street. There is no tall, solid wall.”

Fort-Brescia said the younger generations don't want to go to a contained mall. They want to visit an urban environment. So the idea is to recreate a city feel as if it organically evolved, even though it's a new project.

“Make it see itself as part of the neighborhood, instead of some alien thing that drops from the outside and you have to break into it to go shopping,” Fort-Brescia said.

Arquitectonica has a similar idea with a major difference in environment and design with CityPlace Doral. It'll have 250,000 square feet of retail plus residential and office in a suburban city that's also known as a corporate hub. Fort-Brescia said it was like re-creating Coconut Grove in Doral with a town center and ground-level retail and other uses on the upper floors. The parking garages are hidden behind the retail, so the onlooker sees the stores and restaurants from the street, he said.

[Bernard Zyscovich](#), founder and CEO of Miami-based Zyscovich Architects, was hired to renovate and expand two of Miami-Dade County's most prominent open-air centers, Bal Harbour Shops and Bayside Marketplace. He said Bal Harbour Shops' design was well ahead of its time when it opened in the 1960s, and that contributed to its successes as a luxury destination, with among the highest sales per square foot in the nation.

“Instead of going for an enclosed mall, the air-conditioned internal environment, they would try to create something that felt more unique, that felt more tropical,” Zyscovich said.

For its more than 200,000-square-foot expansion, Bal Harbour Shops will spill out toward the street and connect with the urban environment, Zyscovich said.

His plan for Bayside, in downtown Miami, has a similar concept, with 18,000 square feet along Biscayne Boulevard. With all the residential development downtown, more people are walking the streets, but the retail spaces must appear inviting to attract them, he said.

“Although it has the best view in town on the waterfront, in the beginning, downtown was perceived to be dangerous and not welcoming, so the property was designed to be away from the street,” Zyscovich said. “Now, Bayside is looking to be part of the community. The sidewalk, just like the tradition of great cities, is where you put your retail and food and beverage because everyone is passing by.”

Fort Lauderdale’s Galleria mall has a different challenge. It’s a traditional enclosed mall with a large parking lot. The proposed expansion, designed by TBG Partners, would feature towers with residential, office and a hotel connected by a linear park, landscaping and water features with 51,345 square feet of retail and 13,200 square feet of restaurants on the first floor and along the walking paths. It would occupy what’s currently a surface parking lot. The new parking garages would have occupied uses wrapped around them so they aren’t visible from the street, said Paul Weinberg, managing principal of TBG Partners’ Fort Lauderdale office.

“There is a heavy focus on the public realm and the amenities of the exterior spaces and to raise the bar of the user experience,” Weinberg said. “Instead of walking on pavement, you are walking along neighborhood retail or a linear

park that wraps all around, with wide sidewalks, large landscaping features, oversized planters, art features, and areas for seating and shade.”

Instead of looking down on the cars atop a parking garage, the people in the towers would view the amenity decks on the garages. They would have pools, greenery and water features. Weinberg said that injecting life into the retail zones would separate the Galleria from the competition.

One of the new projects aiming to shake up the retail competition in Broward County is Metropica, at the edge of Sawgrass Mills. It would have 485,000 square feet of retail in addition to residential, offices and hotels. John Larsen, president of CI Design, said the idea behind the design for Metropica was to create an urban city center where one doesn’t exist. He called it urban from scratch.

CI Design, the architect for the retail portion of Metropica, designed it so retailers can individually brand the façades of their buildings. Most of the retail would be ground level with other uses above it, but some spaces would be two stories, such as the iPic Theaters, he said. It’s designed like an urban street with plazas.

“It’s a millennial thing,” Larsen said. “The population is starved for more of an urban project, and a more mixed-use development goes with the lifestyle change.”

By contrast, some urban retail projects are stacking the shopping high. River Landing would have five stories of retail totaling 426,000 square feet, plus apartments, along the Miami River.

The project’s architect, Jon Cardello, senior principal of ADD Inc, now with Stantec, said the high density was necessary because there’s great demand for retail in the urban core and not enough large sites. Stacking the retail requires less land and is more efficient from a heating and cooling perspective, he said. The challenge is to give it an appealing design.

River Landing is modeled after stacked gift boxes shifting back and forth, Cardello said. It aims to activate the riverfront with a walkway, dining and shopping, he said. The project dedicated 2.5 of its 9 acres to open space so the waterway can be enjoyed.

“We refer to the term ‘life centers’ a lot,” Cardello said. “You don’t just go to shop. You are with your family, and your family may look to do other things and do other things in that center.”

What’s next in retail architecture

The architects named some other retail design trends that are spreading through the country and could arrive in South Florida soon:

- **De-malling the malls.** Zyscovich said many traditional enclosed malls and big-box retail centers have asked for rezoning to allow mixed uses, including residential and more of a town center design. Sears proposed building an open-air, mixed-use project to replace its Aventura Mall store.
- **Adaptive reuse.** Fort-Brescia said older buildings in urban areas are being renovated into stores and other creative uses. Long a trend in New York City, adaptive reuse has transformed industrial buildings in Miami’s Wynwood and in Delray Beach.
- **Health and shopping.** Cardello said health and medical uses are being incorporated into shopping districts, so one person can hit the stores while another gets their teeth cleaned. The proposed ParkSquare Aventura has a similar theme.

New major retail projects in South Florida

- **Dania Pointe, Dania Beach:** 1 million square feet in an open-air mall with residential, hotel, office.

- **Miami Design District:** 900,000 square feet of luxury retail in an urban environment.
- **Miami Worldcenter:** 765,000 square feet in an enclosed mall and street-level shops with residential and hotel.
- **Brickell City Centre, Miami:** 500,000 square feet of urban shopping with residential, hotel and office.
- **SoLe Mia, North Miami:** 500,000 square feet of open-air mall with residential.
- **Metropica, Sunrise:** 485,000 square feet of urban shopping and street-level retail with residential and office.
- **River Landing, Miami:** 426,000 square feet of stacked big-box retail with residential.
- **CityPlace Doral:** 250,000 square feet of town center retail with residential and office.
- **Downtown Doral:** 180,000 square feet of town center retail with residential, office and civic uses.
- **American Dream Miami, northwestern Miami-Dade County:** billed as the largest mall in North America, plus a theme park, specifics to be determined.

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