

Saving (the other) City Center

How do you restore a historic shopping plaza like **Commercial Center** in hard times? Clean it up — without scrubbing away its soul

By Andrew Kiraly * Photography By Christopher Smith

Seagulls. Seagulls everywhere. Perched on the light poles, lined up on the rim of the trash bin. Pecking fussily at garbage on the asphalt. All in the Commercial Center parking lot.

To anyone else familiar with the strangeness of urban life, the birds might evoke a shrug. But to business owner Paula Sadler, the seagulls on that summer day in 2006 were nothing less than a revelation — a totem of glorious urban renaissance.

“According to the Native Americans, if an animal shows up in your life in an unusual way, there may be a message for you,” she says. “When I looked up seagulls, it said they represent ecological cleanup. They’re naturally shore-cleaning birds, and they literally eat trash! So I did a little prayer and meditation, and I decided it was time. It was time to start cleaning up the shopping center.”

Oh, sure. You’ll be forgiven for not

imagining Commercial Center as a worthy recipient of such a mystical blessing. This? This faded, low-slung cluster of strip malls that sits on Sahara Avenue near Maryland Parkway? But to the tireless Sadler and her small army of true-believers and do-gooders, the seagulls reflect their own efforts to turn around one of the valley’s oldest shopping centers that’s been in decline for decades.

“The first few years were quite a struggle,” says Sadler, owner of A Harmony Nail Spa. “When I was hiring people, they’d say, ‘Where are you located?’ I’d say, ‘Commercial Center,’ and they’d say, ‘Oh ... Commercial Center. No thanks.’ After hearing that for two and a half years, I got fed up. I decided I’m not going to hear one more person say that ever again.”

Since moving her salon here in 2004, Sadler, president of the Commercial Center Business Association, has led the charge to clean up the plaza and polish its image. A likably daft busybody who never met a new age concept she didn’t like, Sadler also happens to get things done. She’s painted over graffiti and shooed off panhandlers. She’s weedwhacked overgrowth on the crumbling



Left: Artist Howard Freeman has brightened up Commercial Center with colorful murals. **above:** Paula Sadler has led the charge to polish the plaza's image after years of neglect.

parking medians and commissioned splashy murals for walls and power boxes. She's hired security guards and petitioned the police for extra help on weekends when, ahem, lively nightclub patrons spill out onto the parking lot.

"God bless her," says Judy Del Rossi, owner of Tiffany Couture Cleaners, a Commercial Center mainstay since 1970. "People used to park their mobile homes here, and we'd arrive at five, six in the morning to find a bunch of them just camping out in the parking lot. Paula's the one who got them moved."

"She's done an excellent job at improving the center," says Valerie Hodson, office manager at Golfjoy, a golf supply store wedged between a mariachi nightclub and a men's gym. "It's a lot cleaner, nicer, and you really don't see the homeless anymore."

Some property owners are just as dedicated to cleaning up the center after decades of neglect.

"You've got to be hands-on here," says Ron McMenemy, who purchased the New Orleans Square at Commercial Center's south end in 2007. "This is fourth-generation office and retail space. Some days I'm here in a three-piece suit, other days you'll find me in jeans, carrying 'For Lease' signs across the parking lot. You've got to do whatever it takes."

In a city obsessed with the sparkling new District this, Town Square that or CityCenter something-or-other, it's easy to forget that Commercial Center is one of the valley's original walkable urban retail spaces, and one with a vital and startling jumble of culture, commerce and cuisine. There's an Asian supermarket next to a church next to a blue-collar bar next to a wedding boutique next to a transgender-friendly watering hole. There are comic books at the cave-like Sci Fi Center, some of the best pool sharks in town at the Cue Club, and cutting-edge theater at Insurgio. There's a crucial wedge of the gay

community support system at The Center. There's pad Thai and dahl and goat tacos. There's karaoke and Vampire Weekend on the jukebox and brassy, blaring *nortena*. And, if it's your thing, there's more fetishwear than you can shake a cat-o'-nine tails at.

"It's the only place you can sin and be saved on the same day — and then get your nails done," Sadler is fond of saying.

But you can milk quirky and quaint only so much. The question is whether a spirited crew of DIY-minded merchants and property owners is enough to spark a Commercial Center rebirth. However, one thing's certain: They've got nobody but themselves to rely on. When the economy tanked, the old shopping plaza missed out on a massive overhaul effort pitched by Clark County. In December, county officials mothballed the redevelopment agency that had put Commercial Center's proposed facelift at the top of its to-do list.

Nonetheless, longtime merchants say now is the perfect time for Commercial Center to rise again. The trick isn't for Commercial Center to reinvent itself. That's so Vegas. Instead, the trick is to stay the same.

"People in Las Vegas are starting to crave a sense of history," says Mara Lieberman, owner of Violin Outlet, in business at Commercial Center for 25 years. "That's what I want to provide. I want to be that one shop that's always there, where a kid can come back 20



years later to the same place where he bought his first violin. There needs to be a place you can always go back to that doesn't change."

She might be on to something.

Stir-fry, lingerie and rock 'n' roll

Developed from 1962 to 1964, Commercial Center was trumpeted as "Southern Nevada's most distinguished new shopping complex" and the hub of the "new downtown" when it opened. Developers Paradise Homes — that would be Merv Adelson, Irwin Molasky and Harry Lehr — had set out to create a retail center to serve the homes and apartments their firm was building in the area. At Commercial Center's three-day "Fun-Fiesta" opening bash that ran from April 23 to 25, 1964, a lucky raffle winner walked away with a 1964 Admiral color TV set, and the Las Vegas High School Rhythmettes were slated to perform. Stores included the Tate Beauty Academy, Pat's Chinese Kitchen, Madeline's Lingerie, Town Pump Liquor & Cocktail Lounge and the Cue Club, today's lone holdout.

But it was more than a place to pick up some wine and nosh on Chinese food. After opening in July 1967, the Las Vegas Ice Palace ice-skating rink — christened with a performance by Jimmy Durante and Nevada's U.S. Sen. Howard Cannon riffing on clarinet — hosted everyone from James Brown to Buffalo Springfield to Led Zeppelin. The Doors even performed at the Ice Palace in late 1969, though it didn't spark the rock 'n' roll mayhem you might expect. Police and security guards were out in force to make sure Doors frontman Jim Morrison didn't try to pull any of the purported lewd behavior that had gotten him cuffed at a previous concert in Miami. According to press reports, Morrison was a good little rock 'n' roller at the Ice Palace gig, barely moving as he sang lest he incur the wrath of the cops.

Local businesswoman and noted Nevada feminist Dana McKay owned a book store in the center. Renowned choreographer



Left: The Violin Outlet has been selling students stringed instruments for decades. **above:** Komol's herbal salad — just a taste of the global cuisine at Commercial Center. **next page:** One vision for turning Commercial Center into the SOSA District proposed a mixed-use urban mall not unlike The District at Green Valley.

Henry Le Tang ran a dance studio there, manning an upright piano even at age 82 as students practiced their shuffles and cramprolls. Countless deals were clenched with a handshake at lunch spots such as the Commercial Deli and Piero's. For years, Liberace entrusted his dry cleaning to Tiffany Couture Cleaners. (Today, it's still the place where the Strip takes its dirty laundry. Tiffany Couture Cleaners ensures that Cirque du Soleil acrobats, the Jersey Boys and the Phantom of the Opera have clean costumes.)

Making blight of the situation

But Commercial Center's glory days would fizzle fast, as competing malls, from the Boulevard to the Fashion Show, began to lure away both customers and businesses. A fire ripped through the center in November 1978, destroying several stores and causing more than a million dollars in damage. In 1981, one of the celebrated anchor tenants, department store Vegas Village, went bankrupt and was later demolished.

"In some ways, it's a standard story," says Dennis McBride, curator of history at the Nevada State Museum. "As Vegas started growing outward, malls opened in other parts of town and the neighborhood around Commercial Center began to decline."

In 1996, an urban planning firm hired by Clark County deemed Commercial Center a blighted area, and encouraged the county to

bootstrap what was clearly a plaza in disrepair. "Blighted appearances, declining uses, marginal maintenance, vacant storefronts all exist, and relocation of businesses to other areas has occurred," the report said.

Then-County Commissioner Myrna Williams used less diplomatic terms when addressing the troubled shopping center. "I think it does need to be leveled, and it would be impossible to do that without a redevelopment agency," she told the *Review-Journal* in 1999. Cops had reported receiving nearly 400 complaints in a six-month period stemming from the property, complaints about drag-racing, gunfire, burglaries and prostitution.

The place where you could power lunch and take your daughter for tap-dance lessons could also now give you food poisoning or worse. An October 2000 joint raid by cops and county inspectors revealed a rash of unsanitary restaurants and safety hazards. The surprise crackdown shut down five businesses and cited five others — and that raid had targeted a mere sliver of Commercial Center shops.

Destroy, erase, improve

When the county created a redevelopment agency in 2003, Commercial Center topped the list as problem child No. 1. During huddles over what to do with the plaza, the county demurred on using eminent domain to revive the center, but its proposed plan was radical in other ways.



What came out of discussions emerged in November 2008 in a 116-page report: a vision of a sleek urban village bustling with boutiques and sidewalk cafes, gleaming midrises and mesquite-shaded avenues perfect for strolling. The vision recast Commercial Center as the SOSA (South of Sahara Avenue) District. It called for turning the area bounded by Joe Brown Drive, Maryland Parkway, Sahara Avenue and Karen Avenue into a pedestrian-friendly shopping and nightlife destination. It looked as though a clone of The District at Green Valley had been snapped into central Las Vegas like a game cartridge.

But the bad economy put SOSA on ice. With more dire budget needs calling, the county dissolved the redevelopment agency in December and, along with it, mothballed the SOSA District plan — at least temporarily. Some say that ambitious redevelopment plan might have been Commercial Center's last best chance.

"What Commercial Center needs is better owners — and a willingness to consider a joint venture with the redevelopment agency," says property owner McMenemy.

But others are breathing a sigh of relief at a close call.

"I wouldn't want to see the place demolished," says Del Rossi of Tiffany Couture Cleaners. "Maybe some refacing, some remodeling, some newer stores, but I'm not for leveling Commercial Center. Las Vegas is such a destructible town, I think people want to see something in Vegas actually stay."

"If the county had it their way, they would have torn everything down, put a road in the middle and put in new corporate chain stores with midrise condos and apartments on top," says Sadler. "That's great, but what about us? Where do we go?" Beyond the county paying businesses for moving expenses and an extra \$10,000 for their trouble, there'd be

no guarantee that displaced shops would get dibs on storefronts in shiny new SOSA.

But is a merchant-based, paint-bucket brigade enough to save the center? County Commissioner Chris Giunchigliani, whose district includes Commercial Center, favors some form of redevelopment.

"Commercial Center is such a hidden gem, but one of the issues is it's such a hodgepodge of owners," she says. That makes agreeing on design standards and improving common areas nearly impossible. Commercial Center property owners, sometimes a crotchety bunch, have balked several times before at letting the county levy fees to repaint curbs and plant trees.

"Unless we get the owners to come together, we're limited in what we can do," Giunchigliani says. "There's not a lot of camaraderie there." (Exhibit A: For all her enthusiasm, Sadler's business association boasts a mere eight members.) But Giunchigliani says the redevelopment agency was able to broker some buyouts in the last three years, reducing the Balkanized Commercial Center's number of property owners from 56 to 21. Fewer owners means a better likelihood of striking agreements.

act locally, rebrand globally

If you can't be SOSA, what can you be? How about The District at Commercial Center? That was Sadler's first foray at a rebranding effort she kicked off in March 2007. She ordered banners, bought bus stop ads and launched a new website. Sadler even hired a muralist to paint international flags on the trash bins (a well-meaning move that miffed a few business owners, who saw their national standard glorifying ... garbage).

"We didn't want to use 'Commercial Center' alone by itself, because of past problems. We wanted something new, something more, something new and edgy," Sadler says.

The District at Commercial Center. Simple. Sophisticated. Yeah. Kind of reminds you of The District at Green Valley.

Which was the problem. Sadler's rogue rebranding campaign ran afoul of American Nevada, owners of The District at Green Valley. American Nevada sued Sadler in October 2008 for trademark infringement and cybersquatting. The two settled about a year later. Sadler agreed to stop using The District at Commercial Center and handed over the domain name, www.thedistrictatcc.com.

"I still feel we won that battle," Sadler says. "It's like Madonna. She's constantly reinventing herself. I used it as an opportunity to reinvent ourselves yet again — and to shine."

Sadler's latest moniker that plays up the plaza's cultural salad is a mouthful.

"The Commercial Center District World Village," the undaunted Sadler declares. "We're renewed yet again!"

Some like the ring of it.

"We're as clean and nice as any other shopping center in town. I think our success will depend on turning ourselves into an international village that welcomes all types of people to attract foreign guests," says Elaine Fish, president of John Fish Jewelers, which has been here since 1976. "We've done a lot of work cleaning it up. Now we just need other businesses to come fill these empty places."

Not everyone is on board with Sadler's rebranding campaign. Some consider her a bit of a meddling Pollyanna with more good intentions than solid know-how.

"You can't own a little nail salon as a tenant and form a group to rename the property. Come on," says property owner McMenemy. "Listen. I definitely applaud her grassroots efforts. But you don't let amateurs oversee tens of millions of dollars in real estate. You've got to have the building owners be responsible for the property." Like himself, for instance. "I'm one of the good guys. I keep my building full and happy."

Maybe the lawsuit was another sign from above, like the seagulls. Maybe Commercial Center doesn't need to change its image. Crazy idea: Maybe maturing Las Vegas can stand to change a little bit and take a breather from its fascination with the shiny and new to rediscover some history in its midst. Amid all the chatter about redevelopment and rebranding, heartfelt endorsements from longtime merchants such as Violin Outlet's Mara Lieberman resonate the most.

"I feel alive here," says Lieberman. "I'm going to stay if I'm the last person here. This is what the city needs. This is what we need. We need continuity."

How fitting that she deals in violins, an instrument that can last generations — if you take proper care of it. **DC**