

THE TALK OF DANBURY FAIR MALL; Country Fair Becomes Land of the Lava Lamp

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Published: September 04, 1987

It is country fair season, but it has been almost six years since anyone has seen a Ferris wheel, a 320-pound squash or an ox pull here in this fast-growing western Connecticut city.

That is because the Great Danbury State Fairgrounds is now the Danbury Fair Mall, and the annual autumn array of local produce, livestock displays and carnival games has given way to Macy's, Tape World and Manchu Wok.

"The kids did like going to the fair, but I like the shopping," said Nancy H. Samsel, a Bethel homemaker. "The area needed something."

The mall, one of the largest in New England, opened a year ago on the former fairgrounds at the intersection of Interstate 84 and Route 7 in northern Fairfield County.

Local fair lovers bemoaned the loss of the 130-acre fairgrounds when it was sold in 1981. The sentiment was even more heartfelt when artifacts of the 112-year-old fair - such as a statue of a dancing hippo - were auctioned off.

But the mall's owners, Wilmorite Inc. of Rochester, decided to keep some of the fair's folksy flavor in the shopping center's architecture. On the second floor of the glass-ceilinged mall, for example, the fair's carousel is near the video games.

That seemed to have satisfied most people who were concerned about losing another piece of the area's fading rural character. In fact, most shoppers today appear to carry only the vaguest memories of the fairground's past.

"What's wrong with having a shopping mall here?" said Susan Mora of Brewster, N.Y., a hairdresser who works at the mall. "This is what the people want. Besides, the fair was only once a year."

"We had company come down from Massachusetts, and we took them to the Bronx Zoo earlier this morning and we figured we'd take them here, too," said Mary R. Fillippini of Bristol. "They like this even better."

"I'm all for it," she added. Grapefruit Graffiti

It used to be that a shopping mall was just a good place to bring the children, maybe pick up a sweater for grandpa, maybe price a new VCR. But no more. No sir. Here in the Danbury Fair Mall, one also can watch a nursing student write graffiti on a grapefruit with a laser beam. Try to find that at a country fair.

"Yeah, this really gets the people over here," said Beth C. Gallagher, an assistant for a Danbury medical center that had set up a booth for a weekend health-care show.

The laser beam was part of a wart removal demonstration. Earlier in the day, someone on the center's staff had used it to brand the grapefruit with "Warts Die" and "Sunkist Loves Kathy."

"We've had quite a few people come by," said Johanna M. Moore of Brookfield, a receptionist for the medical center. "They ask if we can do it right here. You know, burn their warts off." Rambo, Move Over

Bored with the laser wart removal? Well, there is a hot new machine at the Time Out video game center called Contra. A player collects points by directing two smiling characters named Lance and Bill on a rampage through the jungle. The more people (presumably Sandinistas) that Lance and Bill kill, the more points.

Caution: the attack appears to signal direct United States military involvement in Nicaragua. Lance and Bill, from their likenesses on the machine, do not seem to be Nicaraguans.

"I wouldn't want my kids playing this," said Richard B. Hays of Bedford Village, N.Y., who brought his three children to the mall. "Look at these guys. One of them looks like Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the other one looks like Sylvester Stallone."

A bit stunned, Mr. Hays walked away from the Contra game in the direction of a less political pinball machine. "I'm looking for one that says Persian Gulf," he said sarcastically. Subspecies 'Mall Rat'

The Time Out, besides being a classroom for sublimating foreign policy, also is headquarters for "mall rats," a subspecies of teen-ager also known as "mallies." You've seen them. Perhaps your son or daughter is one.

"I see the same group of people walking around for two or three hours," said Stefani Williams of Ridgefield, a 17-year-old clerk at Tape World, a music shop that sells no records, just tapes and compact disks. "They never buy anything. They just hang out." "I just saw these two girls," she added. "They were walking around, eating dinner, going to

the arcade. They must be 15 years old. I guess this is the equivalent to the diner in the 50's."

"There are a lot of people who work here full time and spend all their time here after and before work," said Robin Wilkie, 17, of Danbury, a clerk in a shop that sells gadgets like sonic flea collars and lava lamps. "They have no other life."

Bill Olsen and Mike Riordon, a pair of watery-eyed 18-year-olds from Ridgefield, seem to be classic examples of your average disaffected mall rat.

Mr. Olsen is a drummer in a local rock group called Sinister Ace. Mr. Riordon mows lawns. They both giggle a lot, too.

"Uh, it's nothing special," Mr. Olsen said. "If this wasn't here, we'd go to the Bowl-a-Rama."

"The Bowl-a-Rama?" Mr. Riordon said.

"Yeah, the Bowl-a-Rama," Mr. Olsen said. They both start giggling again. "I don't come here that often," Mr. Olsen said.

"Yes, you do," Mr. Riordon said. "You're here all the time." They start giggling again. "What's the next question," Mr. Olsen asked, taking out a cigarette.

Suddenly, another mall rat scoots by. "Burn the mall," he shouts. "Bring back the fair." Ready, Set, Freeze

The livestock exhibits may be long gone, but mallgoers can spend a few hours here watching humans on display.

At several locations, groups of two and three male and female models pose as mannequins. They attract large crowds, too. Fifty or 60 people at once.

Sometimes, when the models get very, very still, the audience becomes so enamored that they seem to freeze - just like the mannequins. When this happens, an entire wing of the mall can look just like a wax museum.

"It's kind of weird," said Kevin P. Haight, 18, of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., a model-mannequin who spends several hours a day staring out at the shoppers staring back at him. "All these people coming here just to go shopping."