

Legacy Place endures for a decade by driving a new retail model

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Midday on a hot Monday in July shouldn't be a particularly busy time for a shopping center. But Legacy Place in Dedham was plenty busy late last month during a tour by WS Development, the property's developer and owner.

Cars clustered closely together in the parking lot, bright and shining in the summer sun.

The coffee shop Caffé Nero buzzed with activity, full of chatter from customers lounging in comfortable furniture or waiting in line to grab something to drink. There was even a group of bowlers knocking over pins at King's Dining & Entertainment, one of the shopping center's earliest tenants.

Legacy Place opened 10 years ago this summer, amid the largest economic downturn in decades and just as the retail industry was undergoing changes that have since proven cataclysmic for some retail businesses. But through the turmoil, Legacy Place has endured. Retail analysts and executives at WS say the reason for the center's continued success is that it has aimed to be much more than another shopping center. Rather, since the beginning, it has been positioned as an all-in-one shopping-and-leisure destination, and it's a retail-development strategy that



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has become more and more widespread as retailers and landlords hunt for ways to remain relevant in the Digital Age.

“In many ways, our product is community,” WS Senior Vice President of Leasing [Brian Sciera](#) said in an email. “It’s offering a setting for someone to get to that group-fitness class, meet friends at a mid-point, watch a movie on the big screen or find that special thing they didn’t realize they needed. ... We are competing for hearts and minds.”

See the above slideshow for photos of Legacy Place today, and from its construction more than a decade ago.

Main Street 2.0

WS officials are quick to point out that Legacy Place isn’t an outdoor mall. While Sciera said WS doesn’t like to put labels on its properties, Legacy Place is more akin to a “lifestyle center” — an industry term used to refer to smaller outdoor shopping centers that emphasizes a mixture of high-end and specialty stores, dining options, and entertainment venues. Unlike malls, lifestyle centers are often anchored by a grocery store rather than a large department store.

Nationwide, as the number of large-scale malls has contracted, the lifestyle center concept has become more widespread. A [2013 report](#) by data firm Nielsen found that between 2008 and 2013, regional malls went from making up 18 percent of the total number of shopping centers in the country to just 11 percent. Likewise, the share of super-regional malls — shopping centers that have more than 800,000 square feet available to tenants to lease — dropped from 10 percent to 6 percent. But in that same period, the share of lifestyle centers grew from 9 percent of shopping centers in the country to 15 percent.

“The consumer wants an ‘experience,’ “ the report reads. “Lifestyle Centers mix traditional retail tenants with upscale leisure uses, giving shoppers more than just a place to buy — it gives them an experience and a place to gather.”

Legacy Place certainly fits that description, although it’s bigger than a typical lifestyle center. A Showcase Cinema de Lux looms over the shops and eateries

beneath or behind it, while big-name stores such as L.L. Bean and Whole Foods Market — the largest location in New England — shore up the center's rear.

Other notable tenants include specialty retailers like Williams-Sonoma, where customers can stop in to grab luxuries like a \$100 steak knife set, and the first Amazon Books in Massachusetts, which opened back in 2017. There are also a decent number of restaurants, cafes, and eateries, including Il Massimo, which originally hails from Providence, Rhode Island, and South End-born French bistro Aquitaine.

According to General Manager Christa Seychew, the mixture of essentials like a grocery store and a bank alongside luxury options are meant to encourage constant and consistent levels of foot traffic.

"We figured out not just how to increase the general reasons why people would want to come back here, but the times in which they come back," she said during the tour.

Retailers Association of Massachusetts President Jon Hurst suggested the model underlying Legacy Place was similar to a classic "Main Street" concept, in that the center is called a "destination" that tries to draw in customers interested in a wide variety of leisure activities.

"You're trying to generate traffic for a multitude of reasons ... it's convenience, it's entertainment, it's a variety of services," he said. Hurst noted Legacy Place's unique mixture of entertainment and shopping options likely kept it vital when it opened in 2009, shortly after the economic downturn that kicked off in 2008.

One way WS encourages customer engagement is by activating the space with activities like retail pop-ups and exercise classes. The idea is to provide enough variety that customers never get bored. But of equal importance to WS is making sure that the shopping experience for customers can be quick and convenient.

"(This format) allows your everyday shopper who is really just looking for one thing or really just looking for a meal or really just looking to come to a workout class to pull in, park right in front of the shop, pop in, and do whatever they like," Seychew said. "But it's also a property that's so comfortable that people can park and spend

the entire day here, on into the evening, with the level of entertainment and dining events (we offer).”

The changing face of retail

Legacy Place isn't the only shopping center looking to revive the retail model. WS Development has a number of similar properties in Massachusetts, including [MarketStreet](#) in Lynnfield and Derby Street Shops in Hingham.

According to the industry group [International Council of Shopping Centers](#), there are 545 lifestyle centers in the United States of this year — about 100 more than there were in 2009. ICSC credits changing consumer habits with the shift.

But perhaps the biggest change to retail hasn't been in the composition of brick-and-mortar stores, but in the increased popularity of online shopping. As of the first quarter of 2019, e-commerce accounted for 10.2 percent of total retail sales in the U.S.— up from 9.4 percent of total retail sales from the same time last year, according to the [Census Bureau](#). In the first quarter of 2009, the year Legacy Place opened, e-commerce accounted for 3.8 percent of retail sales.

In the same period, a number of high-profile retailers have severely cut back on their physical presence, shut down, or gone bankrupt outright. [The New York Times](#) reported that by April of this year, retailers had announced more store closings than they had for all of 2018. That number [sits at 7,567 for the entire year as of July](#), compared to 5,864 for all of last year, according to Coresight Research.

Adam Cummings, a senior vice president with real estate firm [CBRE](#), said that successful retailers have kept an eye on e-commerce and adjusted their approach to match.

“What we're seeing is that these retailers that are being successful currently have a combination of healthy brick and mortar, strong (e-commerce), and the two play off each other,” Cummings said. “The landlords are acknowledging that e-commerce isn't going anywhere.”

One way Legacy Place has tapped into that growth is by bringing online retailers and brands in to run pop-up stores, including workout clothing brand [Booty by Brabants](#) and women's fashion line [A Ruby Seychew](#), the property's general

manager, called those sorts of activations essential to keeping Legacy Place relevant and engaging for customers.

“You need to find ways to bring that customer who already loves you back over and over and over again,” she said.

Seychew also disputed the idea that retail is in danger of going extinct.

“I think that what we’re seeing is not an apocalypse, we’re seeing sea change,” she said. “And I think that WS gets that and has adapted to it long before it became a level where people were calling it apocalypse.”