

FASHION / SHOPPING

Memorial City Mall Transformation Is Only Beginning With New Open Air Center — An Inside Look at Memorial Town Square and What Else Is Coming

The Bigger Move From an Enclosed Mall Will Bring Plenty of New Restaurants, Walkable Lands and Even a Potential New Hotel

BY CHRIS BALDWIN // 08.03.22

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$\frac{1}{8}$ *Memorial Town Square brings a different, outdoor feel to the Memorial mall world.*

There are many struggling malls, places that are a shadow of

themselves, still just sitting there as almost dying relics of shopping past. Memorial City Mall is not one of them. It ranks second to the Houston Galleria in sales per square foot. It is still a very successful, profitable hub.

Many business advisors might say leave well enough and just continue to take in the steady revenue. MetroNational president Jason Johnson and the family that's helped shepherd this mall since Johnson's grandfather started building it in the late 1950s knows better.

The future is coming. In many ways, it's already here. And Johnson and MetroNational are determined to be ready for it. Get ready for Memorial Town Square, a new 27 acre mixed-use development that will turn the old Sears section of Memorial City Mall into an outdoor shopping center. This will be a new look for Memorial City, a land of lush landscaping, unique stores, health and wellness centered in some ways, definitely restaurant driven.

With construction set to start late this year, Memorial City's new Town Square (the name is very intentional) could open by late 2025.

"To me this is really an opportunity to make it very intimate, very walkable, very comfortable whenever you're coming in — day or night," Jason Johnson says of what's coming at Barryknoll Lane and Gessner Road.

Johnson gave *PaperCity* an exclusive preview of Memorial Town Square and hints of what else still could be coming in a presentation at MetroNational's headquarters tower. Often moving around a long conference table excitedly, it's clear that this father who still looks like a younger business tycoon is all in on the transformation of Memorial City and its bedrock mall.

And Memorial Town Square is just an important first step in many ways.

“Systematically taking down portions of this mall, this is phase one in a potential couple phase opportunity for us to go from kind of the enclosed mall aspect to the kind of a more mixed-use open air lifestyle type of offering,” Johnson says.

Memorial City is changing because what people want from a shopping center has drastically changed. The days of the enclosed standalone mall being enough are best left for the nostalgia of a show like *Stranger Things*.

“Back in the sixties, put in a common corridor and your entertainment was people watching,” Johnson notes with a chuckle. “People walking back and forth.”

Things are different in 2022. Entertainment, experiences and the chance to be outside now rule in many ways.

“The consumer is demanding something different,” Johnson says. “They want something different.”

Memorial Town Square is part of delivering that. Johnson, chief creative officer David Glover and the rest of the MetroNational team looked to

mixed-use centers like Palisades Village and The Grove in Los Angeles and Highland Park Village in Dallas for inspiration. When it came to Highland Park Village, Johnson and his team looked specifically at the type of landscaping that they feel Memorial Town Square needs.

This will be anything but shopping and dining as usual.

“It’s a heavy emphasis in totally curated seasonal offerings as much as possible,” Johnson tells *PaperCity*. “Health and wellness. I think the restaurants are absolutely imperative.”

“WHAT’S THE POTENTIAL FOR TAKING DOWN HALF OF THE MALL IN THE NEXT 20 YEARS?” —METRONATIONAL PRESIDENT JASON JOHNSON

Memorial Town Square will bring a different type of store to the Memorial area. And more of a health and wellness feel. With a signature space for a showcase restaurant.

One of the restaurants will be a glassed-enclosed garden type space, a truly showcase spot that should lure an ambitious venture. A number of the 10 new restaurants will boast patios, adding to the outdoor feel of Memorial Town Square. There will be full service sit-down restaurants, fast casual spots, and coffee and dessert havens among that mix.

You can also expect things like regular farmers markets, music acts and the like. The idea centers around Memorial Town Square being a bustling place where something is always happening. All in a space with green — including a lawn — and trees, a place where it is easy to get around.

“This one’s going to be so much more walkable,” Johnson says.

Pathways throughout Memorial Town Square — and back to the still enclosed portion of the mall should make this entire section of Memorial City more walkable. There will be a real alternative to driving from parking lot to parking lot, one that could get plenty of use during Houston's good weather months.

The new mixed-use development's entryway will be dominated by a striking wide staircase that provides a real sense of arrival. This is also purposeful.

"There's nothing exciting about elevators," Johnson says.

It's all about doing something different. And setting the stage for the further transformation of Memorial City Mall in the future,

"We've got to learn something on this project that we can apply to the next couple," Johnson tells *PaperCity*.

Memorial Town Square and Kickoff Off a New Shopping Future

Making major changes to one of the most profitable malls in Texas does not come without risk. But to Johnson and the rest of MetroNational leaders, the years of research that went into embracing this transformation makes it more than worth it.

"The exciting part for me is the risk that we are taking," Johnson says. "And the knowledge that we're with the community."

MetroNational hired an outside firm to get feedback from Memorial City residents on what they wanted to see in future projects — and it heavily factored those results in.

“I think it’s probably been the most engaged we’ve been with the community on any project,” Johnson says. “And I think it’s going to show.”

This is a very personal project for Jason Johnson in many ways. His grandfather lived in this community while he essentially built it from the ground up. And Johnson is living in the community as he attempts to reshape it for the much different world of 2022 and beyond.

That means centering on things developers did not think about much back in the days when the standalone indoor malls ruled. Things like making sure that all the street-level walkways are pretty — and connected.

“We spent an inordinate amount of time just talking about the street element,” Johnson admits.

This may be a first step. But it’s not a tentative one. Larger potential plans call for an even more dramatic transformation of Memorial City Mall.

“What’s the potential for taking down half of the mall in the next 20 years?” Johnson says of the thinking. “We have to cater to any audience that’s living here 24 hours a day.”



Memorial Town Square aims to be an inviting place with up to 10 new restaurants, all leading back to the existing mall.

The old days of people just going to a mall to hangout are long over. This is about places where people can work, play and live in a linked environment that actually makes sense. Having the type of land that will help potential office tenants excite their workforce about coming back into office, one that promotes retention in a world of quick job changes, is invaluable.

And it's a major part of this reimagined Memorial City vision. With that in mind, Johnson expects another showcase hotel to join Hotel ZaZa in the not-so-distant future too.

“I think in the masterplan, with the demand we can see in office in the next 20 years, I think there's enough demand for another hotel,” Johnson says.

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Plans also call for more office space to be added almost as soon as MetroNational’s newest office building is fully leased. It’s all about charging into the future — while keeping a firm grasp of place.

“We want to be something that could be in Houston, Texas alone,” Johnson tells *PaperCity*. “We’ve been here long enough that we like to say that have an understanding of what design and architecture can fit here and here alone.”

If Memorial Town Square — and everything that follows — is done right, it will look like something that belongs in Houston. Something that’s a real part of the community.

It comes with risks, but so does stubbornly trying to live in the shopping past. Yes, the bulldozers are coming. But so are all the new restaurants, unique shops and outdoor areas.

“Another thing that’s kind of transformational about this development is we’re tearing down approximately 150,000 square feet of leasable space — common area space inside the mall,” Jason Johnson notes.

Memorial Town Square is a very different type of start. This future is only beginning.