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Milestone in the Midwest

The iconic Easton Town Center, in Columbus, Ohio, turns 10 this year

By Katherine Field Boccaccio

In Fall 2011, Steiner + Associates and Georgetown Co. completed the second phase of mixed-use trendsetter Easton Town Center, Columbus, Ohio—and a decade later, the 1.7-million-sq.-ft. development stands as testament that the right project in the right location with the right uses can survive even the most trying economic conditions. *Chain Store Age* talked with Yaromir Steiner, CEO of Columbus-based Steiner + Associates, about Easton's staying power during a recession, and its continued evolution as it strives to remain relevant.

The much-heralded Easton Town Center turns 10 this year, clearly standing the test of time despite difficult conditions over the last few years. To what do you attribute the center's resilience? In the case of most strong projects, the success is driven largely by owners who are willing to continue investing capital toward maintaining and strengthening the asset. We have kept Easton in tune with the market, and current in terms of merchandising, amenities and tenants. We are continually investing and upgrading, bringing in relevant tenants.

Also, we have made sure the product and the experience are responsive to the aspirations of the customers. Shopping used to be solely about consumption, but now it has transcended that to being more about experience. In other words, it's not just about purchasing the blouse, but about the environment in which you purchased the blouse. Had we just concentrated on the delivery of merchandise at Easton, we wouldn't have been nearly as successful.

Third, and it may be a piece of the second point, is the strength of the leisure component. Easton features more than 200,000 sq. ft. of leisure uses; half of that is the AMC Theatres cinema, which is the largest in the state, and the rest are the restaurant and bar uses. The leisure use complements the other retail in the project. We aren't talking about outlots, but about uses that are integrated into the fabric of the center.



Yaromir Steiner, CEO
Columbus-based
Steiner + Associates

There have to have been lessons learned since the center's beginnings. What are a few of the more significant? We've learned many, many lessons. I wish we had done more integrated residential and office in the project. That would have been very, very successful. Also, large projects like this function in districts—and Easton might have three or four districts depending on how you carve them—and we have learned that no district can live on the strength of the other. Each district needs to be compelling in its own right.

And third we have learned that the place-making is the true anchor of a project like Easton. The environment you create is what anchors the project.

How is the center being positioned for future success, in terms of leasing and merchandising as well as consumer relevance? While we can't be specific about the tenant announcements, I can tell you that we are trying to strengthen the upper-end offerings. We also plan to complete missing or weaker categories of merchandise, and we are focusing on the surrounding environment for development, perhaps with residential and more retail, to strengthen the core project. Expect announcements in the coming months to support these objectives.

You've said that the best is yet to come for Easton; how so? It's going to be the consequences of all of the above. When you have a strong regional retail environment, you need to make sure that the core can be exploited to create a community around it to make it an even bigger force. That's what we're doing at Easton—creating a community. ■