

SQUARE FEET

Squeezing Big-Box Retailing Into Small City Spaces



Brennan Beer Gorman Architects

A rendering of Gateway Center at Bronx Terminal Market by Brennan Beer Gorman Architects.

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When David Blumenfeld, a developer in Syosset, N.Y., bought a long-dormant wire factory in the East Harlem section of Manhattan in 1994 with the intention of turning it into a vertical shopping center for big-box stores, the notion that quintessentially suburban retailers could adjust to an urban setting had yet to be fully tested.



Oscar Hidalgo for The New York Times

John R. Clifford, left, and Navid Maqami of GreenbergFarrow designed East River Plaza.



Librado Romero/The New York Times

East River Plaza is expected to open in October 2009.

So to design his project, East River Plaza, Mr. Blumenfeld chose GreenbergFarrow, an Atlanta firm that has designed 1,800 stores for Home Depot since 1979.

“They had a very good sense of what the tenants needed to make this thing work,” Mr. Blumenfeld said recently.

After many delays, East River Plaza, which stretches from 116th Street and 119th Street along Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive, is expected to open in October 2009, Mr. Blumenfeld said. It will have 485,000 square feet of retail space on five floors and parking for 1,248 cars — all on only six acres. A suburban project of this size would encompass at least 40 acres, Mr. Blumenfeld said.

These days, urban big-box retailing is no longer a novelty, and East River Plaza will not be the only shopping center of its kind to squeeze into a densely populated New York neighborhood.

It will not even be the only one to bear GreenbergFarrow’s stamp. The firm also worked on two more recently planned projects that are under construction: the Gateway Center at Bronx Terminal Market, at 149th Street in the South Bronx, with one million square feet, and Rego Park Mall II, a 600,000-square-foot addition to a mall on Queens Boulevard and 63rd Road in Queens. Both centers are expected to be completed next year.

GreenbergFarrow’s other projects in the city include River Plaza, a shopping center with 235,000 square feet that opened in 2004 on 225th Street, near the Harlem River, as well as the Ikea store that is scheduled to open in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn next week.

Developers of urban office towers often aspire to make a statement with a strikingly original design by a celebrity architect, but those who hope to lure big-box retailers have more mundane priorities.

GreenbergFarrow specializes in the logistical challenges that retailers do not usually encounter in the suburbs, where stores do not need to be stacked on top of one another. Much of the firm’s focus is on how to get people and merchandise in and out of the stores.

People might visit a shopping district like SoHo or Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village as an enjoyable way to pass a few hours, but they shop in big-box stores purely for practical reasons and are annoyed if they are forced to linger, said John

R. Clifford, a principal of GreenbergFarrow. “One experience is recreational and the other is all about convenience,” he said in an interview at the company’s Manhattan office.

Ease of access is a test for big-box centers, Mr. Clifford said. “We always try to make the user experience intuitive,” he said. “Would my grandmother be able to figure this out?”

From the outset, Mr. Blumenfeld, the principal of the Blumenfeld Development Group, hoped to attract retailers like Home Depot and Costco, whose suburban customers are used to parking in a big lot and wheeling carts and pallets along flat surfaces.

Since a parking lot was out of the question at East River Plaza, GreenbergFarrow tried to make parking in the garage as similar as possible to a suburban experience. The parking surfaces themselves are flat and accessible directly from the stores by bridges, and shoppers enter and exit by means of circular ramps located at two corners of the parking structure.

The garage’s design also addresses the concerns of retailers that carts loaded with heavy material like lumber would pose a danger on sloping ramps, said Navid Maqami, a principal of GreenbergFarrow. But this design added tremendously to the cost. “This is the most inefficient way to build a parking structure,” Mr. Blumenfeld said.

Typically, 180 to 220 square feet are allocated for each car, he said. Because of space taken up by the circular ramps, the East River Plaza garage allocates 550 square feet per space instead, raising the cost of a parking space from \$12,000 to \$50,000, he said.

The \$440 million cost of the project is nearly triple what was estimated when the city approved it in 1999. The facade, which will be wrapped in a steel mesh American flag, was designed by a Pritzker Prize-winning architect, Kevin Roche. Blumenfeld is developing East River Plaza with Forest City Ratner, which was also the partner of The New York Times Company in its headquarters building on Eighth Avenue.

Home Depot has been part of the East River Plaza project for about a decade. Two years ago, the retailer signed a 30-year lease for 110,000 square feet of space. But like many national retailers, Home Depot is trimming its expansion plans as a result of the weak economy, and the company is talking to two warehouse clubs — Costco and BJ's — about subletting its space, Mr. Blumenfeld said. A Home Depot spokeswoman said the company is "re-evaluating" the site.

As it happens, Costco had counted on becoming one of the anchor stores at East River Plaza, but instead the developers cut a deal with Target in 2006, leading Jeffrey H. Brotman, Costco's chairman, to complain publicly about being shunted aside.

Mr. Brotman said the talks with Home Depot are in the early stages. "We are simply exploring if it will work physically," he said in an e-mail message. "If so, then we would need to see if we can reach financial terms."

If Home Depot does sublet its space, customers can shop at another Home Depot store at the nearby Gateway Center at Bronx Terminal Market. GreenbergFarrow designed the master plan for the Gateway Center, which is similar in concept to East River Plaza, except that it has two retail buildings instead of one. Asked about the look-alike design, Mr. Blumenfeld said, "We'll call it flattery for now."

Glenn Goldstein, president of Related Retail, the developer of the Gateway Center, said the design was inspired by the Dadeland Mall in Miami, not East River Plaza. He said he was unconcerned about the proximity of the two shopping centers. "We feel the market is certainly deep enough for both projects to be successful," Mr. Goldstein said.

GreenbergFarrow's first completed New York project was Queens Place in the Elmhurst section of Queens, where a Stern's department store was converted into a home for Target, Best Buy and other large-format retailers, Mr. Maqami said. "Everybody talks in terms of big boxes," he said. "But these are the department stores of today."

Now that big-box developers have shown they are willing to modify their formats, city dwellers across the country should expect to find more such stores in their

midst, said Michael D. Beyard, a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute, an industry research group.

With the housing slowdown, fewer shopping centers are likely to be built outside urban areas. “Retailers have a herd instinct,” he said.

“The changing economy, including the price of gasoline, would favor the continuing development of these projects in the city.”