

Shoppers find sanctuary in Market Mall garden

BY MARIO TONEGUZZI, NEIGHBOURS APRIL 22, 2010



Neighbours scribe Mario Toneguzzi enjoys the shrubs and flowers situated all over Market Mall.

Photograph by: Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald, Neighbours

In the past, I was never a fan of malls.

I found them to be such sterile environments. Not very comfortable. Just masses of people in their own little world with shopping on their minds.

But over the years, malls have changed.

And I have liked what I have seen in the transformation.

They are more inviting. It's almost like mall owners have set up an experience where they have invited guests into their homes. So besides the retail shopping experience, there is also an experience of wanting to be there to just hang out. To socialize. Or to just simply wander about at your leisure.

I thought of that recently when I spent some time one morning at the popular Market Mall in northwest Calgary.

I was early for an appointment there so I sat down in one of the comfortable soft chairs that exist throughout the mall and decided to just feel what it's like to be there without shopping at the top of my to-do list.

Sun was streaming in from many windows creating lots of light.

Shrubs and flowers were situated all over the mall.

Soft, light music was being piped over a speaker system.

It was just before 9 a.m. and already many people were there just walking around. The stores were closed but people took the opportunity to get in a little exercise.

Shopping centres, like Market Mall, have become social gathering places.

For a people-watcher like myself, a place like Market Mall is right up there with Stephen Avenue to watch the world go by.

And from up-dated food courts to better lighting to better seating, malls have done their best to create an inviting atmosphere for their customers.

The latest venture is Market Mall's Avant Garden which runs until May 24.

The second-annual, award-winning Avant Garden is an imaginative collaboration of fine art, fashion, giving and garden splendour.

Avant Garden is both an actual place within the mall and a concept.

"Avant Garden is a magical place where spring comes to life in the most unexpected ways," says the mall in a promotional item for the event. "It's where vibrant colors and whimsical artwork foster escapism and play. It's the joy of fresh flowers and where the season's latest fashions grow row upon row. It's where world-renowned artist, Stina Persson, has captured the playfulness of the season and whose illustrations are splashed throughout Market Mall."

The garden itself is a beautiful little sanctuary with lots of color, benches, plants and flowers, the soft sounds of nature such as birds and flowing water, and even the scent of spring.

"We're tapping into all the senses so people are seeing things, hearing things and smelling things," says Debra Manastryski, Market Mall's senior marketing director.

"The sounds, colours, textures and spectacle that Avant Garden brings is truly unique and engineered for the pure enjoyment of our guests and their families."

There is also a huge, colourful and creative Wishing Well, at the mall's south entrance, with donations going to support the Calgary Children's Cottage.

As Manastryski gave me a personal tour recently of Avant Garden, I couldn't help but think how the times have changed for malls these days.

They've become places not just to shop but also to visit and spend some leisure time there.

mtoneguzzi@theherald.canwest.com

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