

= University Mall (Little Rock , Arkansas) =

University Mall was a shopping center in central Arkansas which operated for approximately 40 years , from 1967 until 2007 . When it closed , University Mall was the oldest enclosed shopping center in the Little Rock metropolitan area . Located in the central part of Little Rock , the site is situated along South University Avenue , north of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and Interstate 630 . The mall was managed by Indianapolis @-@ based Simon Property Group .

The Mall was initially a huge success , but its popularity declined as new retail outlets in Little Rock drew customers away . Then the departure of its anchor stores , beginning with the bankruptcy of Montgomery Ward in 2001 , left more than half the building empty . Throughout the 1990s , the mall steadily declined as retailers and customers left . Due to the waning popularity and litigation involving the deterioration of the building , the mall was sold in 2007 to Strode Property Company , and the remaining few tenants were told to vacate . Demolition began for the primary structure in early 2008 . Prior to this , associated buildings were razed beginning in December 2007 , starting with the former Montgomery Ward auto center , as well as the former JCPenney auto center , which had been used several years as an automotive maintenance facility for the City of Little Rock .

= = History = =

= = = Development = = =

The developer was Melvin Simon & Associates , an Indianapolis @-@ based real estate developer and management company that is now known as the Simon Property Group Inc . This was the company 's first venture in Arkansas ; however , they had already built around 40 other shopping centers in the United States . The landowners were stockholders in a corporation that was listed as Developers Inc . Developers Inc. included " Judge " William J. Smith , a prominent Little Rock Attorney and adviser to Gov. Orval E. Faubus . Smith 's wife , daughter , and Son in Law Mr. and Mrs. William L. Patton , Jr. and John Cella of St. Louis who owned Oaklawn Jockey Club , the thoroughbred racetrack in Hot Springs , Arkansas . Developers Inc. dissolved a few months before the announcement of the mall . According to newspapers from the time stockholders of the former corporation became the owners of the mall property . George Cella and Bill Patton , children of the original corporation owners , were mentioned in the later litigation regarding the property that led to its closure and sale in 2007 .

Smith told a reporter that he got the idea for the mall when he was driving down University Avenue in the 1950s , when it was known as Hayes Street . He felt that it was a good buy and called John Cella and told him it would be a good investment for them . During the next 15 years , the two managed to acquire the surrounding 28 acres (110 @,@ 000 m²) for the mall site . This included a cemetery that was moved during construction . The acreage was leased to the Simon Property Group until 2026 .

Plans for the mall were announced in 1965 . Simon is quoted as saying that the site offered " the best potential he had ever seen " for a city the size of Little Rock . The mall complex comprised 565 @,@ 000 @-@ square @-@ foot (52 @,@ 500 m²) leasable square feet , the rest for parking of 2 @,@ 500 cars , and was a single level structure when it opened . MM Cohn was the first major department store to sign a lease at the new mall . At the time , it was one of the three big locally owned department stores in downtown Little Rock . A few weeks later , Montgomery Ward and J.C. Penney announced that they too would build their own stores on the property as well . Montgomery Ward built a 136 @,@ 000 @-@ square @-@ foot (12 @,@ 600 m²) square foot store on the southeast corner of the mall . It marked a return of the national store to full @-@ scale operation in Little Rock , where it had operated only a catalog store downtown for 11 years . The addition and a 37 @,@ 000 @-@ square @-@ foot (3 @,@ 400 m²) warehouse took up about 40 percent of the mall 's square footage . The J.C. Penney store , at the west end of the mall , contained some 160 @,@ 000 square feet (15 @,@ 000 m²) and a free @-@ standing auto center , marking it the

largest department store in the state .

== 1975 and 1987 renovations ==

In 1975 , the mall underwent some cosmetic renovation and was renamed from simply The Mall to University Mall , probably to diversify it from the new McCain Mall Simon was planning for North Little Rock . The mall 's reopening was held in March of that year . News accounts say that special emphasis was placed on a security program . University Mall drew thousands of shoppers yearly and was known for its holiday displays and programs . It also became a favorite place for many walkers , including retirees and heart patients from St. Vincent Infirmary Medical Center , located just across University Avenue .

In October 1987 , Simon announced a \$ 15 million expansion and renovation of the University Mall structure . The renovation was handled by the Vratsinas Construction Co. of Tulsa and started in 1988 , ending about a year later . The expansion would add 70 @, @ 000 square feet (6 @, @ 500 m²) to existing 565 @, @ 000 square feet (52 @, @ 500 m²) in the mall . Several existing tenants also said they would spend another \$ 3 million on remodeling and expansion . MM Cohn updated their store and added a mall entrance on their second floor . The J.C. Penney store was enlarged . This expansion gave the mall its most distinctive feature , the unusual Teflon @-@ coated tent @-@ like structure over part of the new concourse . It was referred to as the skylight because it let so much light in . The skylight reached nine stories high and a height variance had to be sought for its construction . The concourse was expanded to two levels connected by escalators and an elevator . The new upper level had a cantilevered walkway overlooking the bottom level and a 9 @, @ 000 @-@ square @-@ foot (840 m²) food court . A multi @-@ level parking garage was also built on the north side of the mall .

A grand four @-@ day reopening was held in November 1988 . Corbin Bernsen of the television show L.A. Law was brought in to help celebrate . An oversized electrical switch turned on the lights that officially reopened the renovated mall . The reopening also featured an elaborate carousel as its centerpiece .

By this time , the mall had about 55 stores and was expecting eventually to house 70 . The mall had some 697 @, @ 000 square feet (64 @, @ 800 m²) of leasable space . However , there was other retail activity in the city that would eventually affect University Mall . Herring Marathon Group Inc. of Dallas unveiled plans to convert the then @-@ open @-@ air Park Plaza shopping center into an enclosed mall directly across Markham Street , just north of University Mall . The Park Plaza shopping center was almost 30 years old at the time , and a landmark of the rapidly expanding West Little Rock area . Herring Marathon said that it would completely rebuild and enclose the total area , increasing it to 676 @, @ 569 square feet (62 @, @ 855 @. @ 3 m²) ? including 25 @, @ 000 square feet (2 @, @ 300 m²) of new retail area , plus a new 86 @, @ 000 @-@ square @-@ foot (8 @, @ 000 m²) Dillard 's store anchoring the west end of Park Plaza . Builders estimated that the work would cost about \$ 20 million . Renaissance Properties Ltd. of Little Rock , which had created the Main Street Mall in downtown Little Rock , announced its 22 initial tenants . For the next decade , University Mall still had plenty of business . But when the Main Street Mall succumbed to the effects of Little Rock 's dying downtown , McCain Mall and Park Plaza emerged as the best places to shop .

== Decline ==

The first real problems with University Mall started appearing in the 1980s when tenants voiced concerns about remodeling and marketing efforts . Osco Drug began closing its stores everywhere , three in Little Rock alone in 1997 . In 2001 , Montgomery Ward went bankrupt and closed all of its stores leaving a two @-@ story 140 @, @ 900 @-@ square @-@ foot (13 @, @ 090 m²) vacant building on the University Mall site . Shopping traffic dropped dramatically afterward and a steady stream of tenants began leaving the property . In the beginning of 2001 Simon Property said the occupancy of University Mall was at 95 percent . In April 2001 , after the departure of Montgomery

Ward , a report by the Urban Land Institute of Washington , D.C. , said 40 percent of the mall was vacant . In 2004 the William L. Patton Jr . Family Limited Partnership of Arkansas and southern Real Estate and Financial Co. sued Simon Property Group Inc seeking an injunction forcing Simon to " undertake any and all actions necessary " to restore the mall to good conditions . The land owners said the entire mall was in a state of disrepair and neglect . They claimed that Simon 's neglect to maintain the building had been driving away tenants for decades . A team of inspectors hired by the landowners to document the condition of the mall testified in 2005 that the vacant Montgomery Ward space was full of puddles , moldy ceiling tiles , and dead pigeons .

In December 2006 , Simon presented a proposal to raze the mall and build a 625 @, @ 000 to 675 @, @ 000 @-@ square @-@ foot (62 @, @ 700 m²) mixed use facility with retail , office , medical , and residential space at a news conference at the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce building in Little Rock . The project would have potentially included half a dozen individual structures , including a big @-@ box retailer on the west , two high @-@ rise multifamily residential buildings on the north and a multistory medical office complex on University Avenue . Paschall Strategic Communications , who was assisting with Simon ? s public relations campaign on the project , said that the negotiations were ? going very well ? , however these plans did not apparently come to pass .

In June 2007 , US District Judge Bill Wilson , Jr. ruled that Simon must make more than \$ 7 million in repairs to get the mall into " good and tenable condition " . Pending the sale of the property , the lawsuit was dropped .

= = = Demolition = = =

In October 2007 , the William L. Patton , Jr . Family Limited Partnership and the Southern Real Estate & Financial Co. sold the 27 acres (110 @, @ 000 m²) beneath the mall and another acre with a convenience store on the corner of Markham and McKinley . Dallas @-@ based Strode Property Company , led by Jim Strode , under the name of SPC Park Avenue Limited Partnership took out a loan for \$ 27 @. @ 65 million mortgage from Texas State Bank of Dallas and purchased the mall property for \$ 21 million . The Simon management issued a deadline to the remaining tenants to vacate the mall by midnight on October 27 . Strode reportedly planned to demolish the mall and build an open @-@ air shopping center called " Park Avenue " similar to the Midtowne Little Rock shopping center just to the northeast of the property . Strode said that after knocking down the old mall he planned to build a ? lifestyle center ? with a Main Street feel . The only parts of the old University Mall that would be integrated into Park Avenue were the parking deck , with a possible third level added , and the Montgomery Ward basement .

Saturday , October 27 , 2007 was the last shopping day at the mall , although only two locally owned retailers remained open ? Paul 's Shoes and Nouri Dress Shop . (Both businesses relocated to Shackleford Crossings , on the property which had been slated as the long @-@ disputed potential Summit Mall site .) The entire University Mall property was then surrounded by chain link fence or other barricades following the exit of all tenants . Demolition of buildings in outer parcels began in December 2007 , with demolition of the primary structure starting January 2008 and finishing up in March . Strode projected that its mixed @-@ used Park Avenue development would open on the site in 2010 .

The property where the mall was is now a Target store and parking lot .

= = Anchors = =

M.M. Cohn (27 @, @ 800 square feet) - Opened 1967 / Expanded to 70 @, @ 000 square feet in 1972 / Shuttered in September 2007

Montgomery Ward (136 @, @ 000 square feet) - Opened 1967 / Shuttered March 2001

J.C. Penney (159 @, @ 400 square feet) - Opened 1967 / Shuttered September 2007