

Kansas City's Crown Center: A Model Mixed-Use Community

Crown Center, a redevelopment project at the southern edge of downtown Kansas City, Mo., is many things to many people.

To 5 million fun-seekers each year, Crown Center is an entertainment attraction, with specialty shopping, concerts, theaters and other entertainment venues.

To urban-dwellers, Crown Center is home, with an apartment complex and condominium tower offering quality living accommodations.

To Kansas City business leaders, Crown Center is a thriving office community, with more than 2.2 million square feet of office space existing and 2 million more planned on future building sites.

To thousands of out-of-town travelers, Crown Center is a comfortable place to spend the night. With world-class Westin and Sheraton hotels, Crown Center is a key player in Kansas City's meeting and tourism industry.

To city planners, Crown Center is a mixed-use redevelopment, one of the earliest in the nation, on an 85-acre site adjacent to the international headquarters of Hallmark Cards, Inc. It has been a catalyst for change in the city's urban core, replacing blight with quality working, living and entertainment facilities to breathe life back into the city.

And to those who look to Kansas City's future, Crown Center is a success story whose final chapters have yet to be written – and are filled with promise.

The Hall family's commitment

Whatever else Crown Center is, it is the result of the vision of the late Joyce C. Hall, Hallmark Cards, Inc. founder, and his son, longtime Hallmark chairman Donald J. Hall. In the early 1960s, the Halls looked out over the area surrounding their company's Kansas City headquarters and did not like what they saw: rutted parking lots, abandoned warehouses, the sorry remains of failed or failing

businesses, and a limestone hill cluttered with signs and tarpaper shacks. They believed the industry leader in personal expression deserved a better setting for its home – and that the city which had given much to them deserved better than the blighted landscape stretched before them. They had two choices: follow the stream of businesses fleeing the city for the suburbs; or stay and make the city environment better. They chose to stay.

Crown Center Redevelopment Corporation, a Hallmark subsidiary, was formed to make the Halls' vision a reality. The Hall family sought the counsel of nationally known designers, urban planners and visionaries such as Walt Disney and James Rouse. They invested millions of dollars, and then were patient waiting for that investment to pay off, understanding that the returns on a project such as Crown Center would be realized only over the long term.

Today's Crown Center is the happy result.

Victor Gruen & Associates of Los Angeles developed the project's original master plan, which was then modified and implemented by Edward Larrabee Barnes of New York. Crown Center was announced to the public in January 1967, and ground broke on September 16, 1968, for the first phase of the project – an underground parking facility, five-building office complex and landscaped central square.

Crown Center is privately financed. It enjoys tax benefits from Chapter 353 of Missouri's redevelopment law, and it is often cited as a prime example of what the law is intended to accomplish in bringing economic health to formerly blighted areas.

A "city within a city"

Crown Center – named for the crown in the Hallmark logo – is a mixed-use community in the truest sense of the term, combining hotel, office, retail, residential and entertainment land uses within its boundaries.

Office community. A prestigious address, stable ownership, responsive service, and exceptional amenities make Crown Center the premier office community in the Midwest. Five interconnected, seven-story buildings comprise the initial 660,000-square-foot office complex completed in 1971. The addition of

2405 Grand Boulevard, a 245,000-square-foot, 14-story building came in 1987. It is home to such tenants as Marsh Inc. insurance, Fleishman-Hillard public relations and Children's Mercy Kansas City. A 279,000-square-foot tower, designed by Henry Cobb of the acclaimed New York architectural firm of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, was completed in 1991 and is located at 2600 Grand.

In November 1997, Crown Center broke ground on 2301 McGee, an eight-story office building. The building, which opened in January 2000, features the spacious 52,000-square-foot Crown Center Exhibit Hall, which is designed to accommodate mid-sized convention groups with the need for hotel rooms and exhibition space. The mixed-use facility offers indoor access to Crown Center's two hotels.

2555 Grand Boulevard, a 682,000-square-foot, 24-story office tower, was completed in 2003 and is now independently owned. Kansas City's largest law firm, Shook, Hardy & Bacon, is the sole tenant in the building.

Also independently owned and located within the original redevelopment is the 2345 Grand Boulevard office complex. It consists of a 27-story office tower and four-story satellite building, completed in 1977, and an adjacent 11-story tower opened in 1986. These facilities house the Midwest operations of Assurant, Inc., the consolidated Kansas City operations of International Business Machines Corp. (IBM), and a number of other outside firms.

Crown Center Shops. The shopping center, which opened in 1973, consists of three levels of shops, restaurants, and theaters covering nearly 300,000-square-feet of leasable space. National names operate shops in the center, as do specialty merchants and local chains. In 2014, the center's evolution continued with the addition of a new 60,000-square-foot Halls store.

The Crown Center complex also features a wide variety of restaurants, ranging from fast food and snack outlets to the utmost in fine dining, showcasing some of the best local and national restaurants in the industry. Among the highlights are the world's only Crayola® Café and the train-themed Fritz's Railroad Restaurant.

Entertainment facilities. In addition to shopping and dining, Crown Center's entertainment choices include The Coterie, a family and young audience theater experience; Musical Theater Heritage at Crown Center, a professional theatre company whose intimate settings bring alive the American Musical as never before; and the Crown Center Ice Terrace, Kansas City's only public outdoor ice skating rink, operating November through February.

Two Hallmark-sponsored facilities also are popular Crown Center attractions: Kaleidoscope, a free creative art experience for children ages 5 to 12; and the Hallmark Visitors Center, offering a glimpse into the history, products and processes of the world's leading personal expression company.

SEA LIFE Kansas City, a two-story aquarium, houses more than 30 spectacular displays of marine life—from shrimp and starfish to seahorses, sharks and rays. LEGOLAND Discovery Center offers a fun, highly interactive and educational two to three hour experience ideal for children 3-10 years old. Both attractions are owned and operated by Merlin Entertainments, the world's second largest visitor attraction operator.

Special events, many of them surrounding the Crown Center fountain on the outdoor square, round out the Crown Center entertainment calendar. A 100-foot-tall Christmas tree, one of the nation's tallest, is the centerpiece for a host of holiday activities. The Hospital Hill Run, which has become the region's premier running event, is held each June. Weekend performances by professional musicians and a variety of exhibits and promotions, ranging from a fairy tale village to dinosaur displays, entertain visitors to the Crown Center Shops throughout the year.

Hotels. Two world-class hotels highlight Crown Center's reputation as a Midwest convention and tourist destination. The Westin Kansas City offers 724 guest rooms, a ballroom, health club, meeting facilities and The Brasserie, featuring casual dining from pasta to prime rib. The Westin's spectacular 60-foot lobby waterfall and garden is carved from the natural limestone hill into which the hotel is built and is one of the most-photographed spots in Kansas City. The Westin, operated by Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc., opened in May 1973 and most recently enjoyed a renovation in 2013.

The Sheraton Kansas City, completed in 1980, is located on the northeastern edge of the complex. It offers 733 rooms in a 40-story guest tower, a 60-foot-high lobby, meeting and health club facilities, a 17,400-square-foot ballroom (Kansas City's largest hotel ballroom), and a restaurant, Spectators Gastro-Pub. The hotel most recently saw a spectacular renovation in 2013 and is operated by the Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc.

Joining the two hotels is The Link, a \$5 million glass-enclosed, elevated pedestrian walkway. The 880-foot glass corridor offers weather-protected access not only between the hotels and shops, but also to Crown Center's office community.

Residential community. Crown Center's six-acre urban residential neighborhood includes more than 230 condominium units. Also featured are a social clubhouse, swimming pool and landscaped garden areas.

Condominiums are housed in the 30-story San Francisco Tower, south of the Crown Center Shops. An adjacent seven-story building, Santa Fe Place, features more than 100 condos. The residential community was opened in 1976 and designed by Architects Collaborative of Cambridge, Mass., under the direction of Norman Fletcher, FAIA. A 450-space parking garage serves Crown Center residents.

Parking. Crown Center provides a total of around 6,000 parking spaces on the complex, with additional parking planned for all new facilities. With ample parking in covered, secured garages, Crown Center visitors can generally move from their cars to their destinations without having to venture outside.

The next 20 years

Crown Center is currently revising its plan for future development. While the plan will be driven by market conditions, and is therefore subject to further modification, the next 20 years should see the addition of nearly 2 million square feet of office space in as many as four new office buildings. A two-acre park, designed by acclaimed landscape designer Daniel Urban Kiley, is located south of 2600 Grand and will be the focal point around which new buildings cluster.

Innovative retail to serve the expanded office community, additional residential units, structured parking to support all new construction, and linkage to all areas of the complex by pedestrian passageways are planned for future development.

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