

Location, Location, Location – Orinda's Theater Square a Mixed Bag

By Sophie Braccini



Shan Kenner- Spanish, Flamenco Guitar Photo by Andy Scheck

On the evening of August 16, Shan Kenner played Spanish and Flamenco guitar music outside one of the vacant business spaces in the interior of Theater Square. There was not much of an audience on this evening; a few diners enjoying the evening air at Shelby's, the occasional passers-by.

The summer-through-fall concerts at Theater Square are part of the revitalization strategy developed by owner GLL Partners, who hope to increase foot traffic in the back of the Square and bring those businesses to the attention of consumers. Business owners say the lack of foot traffic has been problematic since the Square opened in October of 1991.

Pati MacDonald of Curves, a women's fitness center, and Sherry Sadighpour of Hediye, a gift boutique featuring little treasures brought by Sadighpour from all over the world, would like to see better external signage, and an attractive directory visible from the street to inform and entice visitors to the interior shops. MacDonald, who also owns a Curves in San Diego, compares the Orinda location with the Curves in Lafayette and Moraga and

is pessimistic about opportunities for the growth of her business.

In contrast, many of the Square's businesses are highly successful. Sweet Dreams store manager Connie King, who has enjoyed seeing Orinda's kids pass through the store for ten years, says "We get a lot of foot traffic from the theater here, and having Starbucks next door has been good for our business, as well."

Nearby "b.b. gear" has sold women's apparel in the Square for more than 10 years. Storeowner Hayfa Sulyman attributes her success to consistency in her business practice and a keen knowledge of her customers' needs. "When you open a store you can't expect to make any money for the first two years," comments Sulyman, "and you need to do your market research before you start. Orindans have very discriminating taste, they can pay for good service but they won't come back if you offer nothing special," she adds.

For Catherine Macfee, Interior Designer, the Center has been a very good location as well. She has doubled her floor space and has now opened a retail gifts and decoration store across from her first location. But according to Store Manager Kaylee Adams, 90% of Macfee's customers come from referrals; only 10% of their new customers come through foot traffic.

Nino's Bay Restaurant, which just celebrated its grand opening, has high hopes for success and expects their creative cooking to attract customers. Entourage, the beauty salon, is thriving in the back of the Center. Shelby's and the Lava Pit are also doing well. However, clearly noticeable are the empty spaces, some of which have been unoccupied for two years.

GLL Partner's Chris Quiett has been engaged in active negotiation with the town of Orinda to get some specific signage for the Square approved. He has been very happy with the open-mindedness of city officials and believes a final agreement will be reached in the next few months. Quiett also faces a zoning challenge: only traditional retailers are admitted in the Square and businesses such as real estate and financial services are not. He believes that a more diverse mix would be beneficial to the revitalization of the back of the Square. But Quiett expects that, "Once the word gets out about the concerts and the new merchants, people will come to the Square and will appreciate its fun atmosphere."

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