

Lafayette Mercantile, Urban Esthetics Serve Prime Retail Space

By Sophie Braccini



View of the Mercantile weather vane and decorative stars

Photo SZFM design studio

Sudhish Mohindroo's primary focus when conceiving the architecture of the Lafayette Mercantile was how the building would integrate within the framework of public space. Cortese Investment, the owner of the building, hired SZFM Design Studio, the firm owned by Mohindroo and his partner Eric Maltman. Both Mohindroo and Cortese share the same vision of urban design, the creation of a sense of timeless harmony that pleases the eye and encourages high levels of foot traffic.

The new building had to blend in with its surroundings while adding to its dynamic. The Lafayette Mercantile sits on the sidewalks between Lafayette Circle and Mt Diablo Blvd and when looking at it from across the street, one notices that the left side is stronger and more prominent than the right. That was done to produce a continuum with the neighboring structures and create a feel of integration.

The building's harmony is strengthened by the timeless and elegant design selected for the structure. "The ground floor and the upper ones are two different animals," says Mohindroo, "the upper floors, where offices will be located, provides the classical frame that will support the creativity and life brought by the retailers at the street level. They will express their personalities, within the guidelines of the general concept." And Mohindroo's company will be there for those storeowners who need a hand to complete their "boutique" presentation.

By the same token, Mohindroo is involved in the choice of retailers that are going to populate the Mercantile. "We are creating a place where shopping will happen, and where people will have the desire to linger, take a walk, or have a drink by the fountain," explains the architect. Cortese Investment, known for its careful choice of retailers, had already hired SZFM design studio to renovate the very successful "La Fiesta Square" a few blocks East of the Mercantile.

But where La Fiesta Square was a project involving primarily the renovation of existing buildings, the Mercantile had to face the complete transformation of a space: a gas station was in operation at that corner. Cortese Investment needed the help of the city to succeed. In order to secure local support, the developer offered to open for free to the public the entire underground parking space, after 6 pm.

As a result, the Mercantile should quickly become an essential component of Lafayette's day and night life. The building's appearance will play a role in the success of the center in the larger community. Mohindroo explains how it has been enhanced by the attention paid to details. For example, the back of the building, where outside parking will be provided for shoppers, is being decorated with locally hand made ceramic tiles that hold one of the recurrent decorative fixtures of the Mercantile: stars. This timeless and symbolic motif is found as a weather vane on the building's roof, which connects it to the sky, as well as at the bottom of the fountain in the form of starfish, connecting the ensemble with the sea and the earth.

This cosmic and harmonic view of space is part of the long term and sustainable vision for the Mercantile. The main street side of the building faces north: a good natural lighting opportunity, while simultaneously keeping the structure cool. The large windows create a balance between glass and wall that's both esthetically pleasing and energy efficient.

Craig Semmelmeier, Principal of Main Street Property Services which leases the retail space, believes the appeal of the building drives the success it has met with tenants. As of the end of September, he indicated that 90% of the retail space was already allocated, with tenants such as Powell's Sweet Shoppe, Misto Lino, Yankee Pier, Jo S A. Bank and Lavande Nail Spa. Two spaces, of 1300sq and 833sqf, are still available.

Rick Steffens of Grubb & Ellis, the company in charge of renting the office space, says the 2nd floor is almost entirely rented, with 2800sqf left, and 9000 sqf is available on the 3rd floor. That's about a third of the total 32000sqf of the building's office space and Steffens claims there are letters of intent for the remaining openings.

Steffens believes the high interest in the building is due to the quality of the construction, its amenities and convenience, "Lafayette needed a business building to take pride in," says the Senior Vice President, "we are looking forward to the second week in October when the first tenants move in." The building will harbor a mix of Financial and Health Care professional, including the recently incorporated California Bank of Commerce, which will set its headquarters in the Mercantile.

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