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Shoppers swarm remodeled Santa Monica Place mall

What was once an enclosed, fortress-like structure opens to the public after a two-year facelift. Thousands flock to visit the now-airy, upscale center with views of the Pacific.

Andrea Chang, Los Angeles Times | August 6, 2010 | 10:17 a.m.

Two years and \$265 million later, Santa Monica Place reopened Friday morning, with several thousand shoppers pouring in to get a first look at the newly remodeled shopping center.

"Finally, finally they've done something to improve," said Cyndi Walters, 30, a nurse from Santa Monica. "It was just so run down and boring. This is a big, huge difference."

By the time Walters arrived at 8 a.m., hordes of shoppers were already lined up in a scene reminiscent of Black Friday crowds. All 500 mall gift cards that had been allotted for the opening, valued from \$10 to \$500, had been given out to first-comers, many of whom had camped out overnight. A deejay spun tunes and told people to "shop to your heart's content." A red carpet unfurled at the entrance, as cellphone cameras snapped away and female employees gave away cans of Coke Zero.

Retail industry experts are calling it the most ambitious shopping center opening this year and have lauded the modern, airy design of the new 550,000-square-foot mall, which features floor-to-ceiling glass walls in some sections, an upscale tenant lineup that includes anchors Bloomingdale's and Nordstrom and a third floor dedicated to food.

Previously an enclosed, fortress-like structure designed more than three decades ago by architect Frank Gehry, Santa Monica Place has been converted to a three-story, open-air shopping center with views of the Pacific Ocean, Santa Monica Mountains and Santa Monica Pier.

"We call it our loft at the beach," Bloomingdale's spokeswoman Anne Keating said. "The way it's been built and the way it's been designed, it gives people the rare opportunity to have a shopping experience and still feel like they're in a real urban downtown environment. It's really quite extraordinary."

About 75% of the mall's leased retail spaces opened their doors on Friday, with most retailers celebrating by offering freebies and hosting special guests.

Nina Withrington, 37, a physical therapist from West Los Angeles, waited in a line 200 people long that stretched half a block. She and her mother, Anita, 66, a school nurse from West Los Angeles, weren't looking for any products in particular. The appeal was in the hullabaloo.



"This is, like, a classic American experience; the great mall opening," said Nina, who had arrived at 8:40 a.m. "It's so American, it's ridiculous. I love it."

Mall owner Macerich had once hoped to demolish Santa Monica Place and replace it with a 10-acre complex of high-rise condominiums, shops and offices over underground parking. The company scrapped the plans in 2006 after being hit with a wave of opposition from local critics who said it would overwhelm the city's downtown.

Instead, Macerich decided to revamp the tired mall and moved it in a decidedly upscale direction. Besides its high-end anchors, Santa Monica Place will also be home to Tiffany & Co., Louis Vuitton and Burberry stores.

Adjacent to the Third Street Promenade, the mall is also distinctive for its array of food choices. In addition to six chef-driven restaurants, Santa Monica Place also features 10 fast-casual concepts and a gourmet marketplace similar to the Ferry Building in San Francisco.

But the shopping center's highbrow slant could be a turnoff for consumers who continue to scrimp on discretionary purchases.

A few days before Santa Monica Place's reopening, Tom Roberts, 29, walked by as workers put the finishing touches on the mall. The high school English teacher said that in better times, he would have been more interested in the shopping center but these days, "I'm shopping thrift stores."

"It looks like it's going to be really fancy and not the kind of stores I'd go to," he said.

Despite the sluggish economic picture, Macerich Chief Executive Art Coppola said he was confident that shoppers would flock to the center. In particular, he's counting on big business from international tourists and upper-income residents "from Malibu to Manhattan Beach."

"Trust me, those people still have a lot of disposable income," he said.