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Spectacle in West Hartford: The Road to Blue Back Square

Introduction

Blue Back Square is a themed lifestyle center in West Hartford, Connecticut. The International Council of Shopping Centers provides the following definition of a lifestyle center, a term registered by Memphis, Tennessee-based developer Poag & McEwen Co¹. as a service mark:

Most often located near affluent residential neighborhoods, this center type caters to the retail needs and “lifestyle” pursuits of consumers in its trading area. It has an open-air configuration and typically includes at least 50,000 square feet of retail space occupied by upscale national chain specialty stores. Other elements differentiate the lifestyle center in its role as a multi-purpose leisure-time destination, including restaurants, entertainment, and design ambience and amenities such as fountains and street furniture that are conducive to casual browsing. These centers may be anchored by one or more conventional or fashion specialty department stores (ICSC).

The West Hartford trading area is filled with affluent residential neighborhoods². The median household income in 2008 was \$77, 367, well above the United States’ median of \$50,233. In this open-air market there are a number of upscale stores, including [Crate and Barrel](#), one of the

¹ Poag & McEwen Co. developed lifestyle center The Shops at Evergreen Walk in South Windsor, Connecticut. A nearby mall, the Shoppes at Buckland Hills, filed lawsuits against that proposal.

² The fact that school board member Tom Fiorentino worried about the development being dubbed “Blue Blood Square” (Courant March 19, 2003) is indicative of the demographics of West Hartford.

anchors. Restaurants, concerts, a summertime fountain and patio furniture, all combine to make Blue Back Square a true lifestyle center.

The name for this shopping center came from the [blue-backed speller](#) written by West Hartford native and favorite son, Noah Webster. The speller taught generations of children to write and spell. Now, Webster's legacy provides a history lesson to those visiting the center of West Hartford.

Combining a history lesson with shopping is what John Hannigan has referred to as “‘edutainment’ -- the joining together of educational and cultural activities with the commerce and technology of the entertainment world” (98). Edutainment, along with eatertainment, helps to create shoptertainment. Shoptertainment abounds at Blue Back Square. As defined by Hannigan, shoptertainment is the convergence of shopping and entertainment (91). Eatertainment occurs when “the boundaries between eating and play are collapsed and recast into something new” (93). Together, eatertainment, edutainment, and shoptertainment combine to give Blue Back Square a theme park-like environment.

Blue Back Square is the Disneyland of posh West Hartford. It is a nostalgic theme park, one that

[tugs] at memories we think we have: a mom and pop living upstairs from their store, the corner butcher and a downtown theater. But at Blue Back Square, the mom and pop who can afford a \$300,000 or \$400,000 condo didn't make their money running the store downstairs; the grocery store is a natural foods chain..., and the movies have French subtitles. (Swift and Altimari 3)

It is a true spectacle, “a specially prepared or arranged display of a more or less public nature...forming an impressive or interesting show or entertainment for those viewing it” (OED).