CROSSTOWN CONCOURSE

PHOTO BY BARTON GOLDBERG, USA TODAY NETWORK - TENNESSEE

Helen Putnam, 94, waves as she is introduced during the grand opening celebration of the Crosstown Concourse building in Memphis. Putnam worked in the building beginning in 1943 as the first female advertising artist in the retail department of Sears.

'BIG BUILDING, BIG PARTY'

Crosstown Concourse celebrates official grand opening

JENNIFER PIGNOLET USA TODAY NETWORK - TENNESSEE

Six years ago, in a 400-square-foot space rented for $700 a month, a small group of Memphians hatched a plan to turn the abandoned 1.5-million-square-foot warehouse next door into a "vertical urban village.

"We gave ourselves about a 5 percent chance of success," Todd Richardson, a University of Memphis associate professor and lead urban village visionary, said.

On Saturday, amid admisions of "I can't believe it actually happened," Crosstown Concourse held its official grand opening ceremony. The celebration was nearly 90 years to the day of the building's first opening in August, 1927.

Saturday's festivities were a welcoming party for the city, a chance for any and all to finally peak inside the legendary structure that is again the focal point of the Crosstown neighborhood.

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Divisions escalate between states, cities

JOEL EMBERT USA TODAY NETWORK

When Verónica Zavaleta fled an abusive partner in Mexico City in 2001, she felt a sense of security in her new Nashville home.

Today, Zavaleta, 43, said the town that embraced her years ago feels less welcoming, in part because state officials helped block a pro-immigrant measure by city leaders that would limit cooperation with federal immigration authorities.

"I feel like I should be able to reach my local authorities," said Zavaleta, who moved to Tennessee from Mexico City in 2001.

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ServiceMaster executive Marvin O. Davis returns to Memphis.

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Tensions in Boston

Thousands of anti-racist demonstrators march amid scattered clashes.

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FAITH IN AMERICA

Church rebukes white supremacy

But it still can't ignore white privilege reality

VIEWPOINT EDITOR
DAVID WATERS

White supremacists, white nationalists, White neo-Nazis. The hooded, all-white.

They wore different uniforms, carried different weapons and displayed different violent and hateful philosophies when they stormed through Charlottesville, Va. But they all had one thing in common.

White Christian leaders, who once justified slavery, defended segregation, condoned lynching and ignored legal discrimination, no longer have their back.

"The so-called alt-right white supremacist ideologies are antithetical to what we believe in," said Danny W. Davis, the Southern Baptist Convention's first African American president.

"White supremacists and neo-Nazis are patriarchal and entirely inconsistent with the Christian faith," said Dr. Wallace T. Adragna, president of the United Methodist Church, which once split over slavery.

"Church members who promote or pursue a 'white culture' or white supremacy agendas are not in harmony with the teachings of the Church," said the Rev. Dr. Seth A. Green, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which once banned black members from its priesthood and sacraments.

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Jerry Douglas pushes musical boundaries.
"Big building, big party," Richardson said to the several thousand people who came to taste the food, tour the facilities and hear from those who made their dream for Memphis a reality.

A total of 41 tenants, plus more than 200 residents, fill the building, which now has an occupancy rate of 96 percent, Richardson said.

The $200 million renovation turned the vacant Sears Crosstown Building into a nearly self-contained metropolis. A high school will open in the building next year. Church Health was one of the first tenants to sign on to the project, which includes organizations focused on education, health and the arts.

The 10-story building features a performing arts theater, a 25,000-square-foot YMCA, several restaurants, an art-making lab, small grocery, coffee shop, bakery, pharmacy, barbershop, an 8,000-square-foot rooftop deck and a rooftop greenhouse.

In other words, slightly different from the last time Hernando resident Sherry Mayfield stepped foot inside in the 1960s.

Starting at 18 years old, Mayfield worked at the Sears building—on roller skates.

She grabbed orders, skated to the other end of the building and dropped them down a chute.

"My husband said, 'you ought to take your skates,'" to the grand opening, Mayfield said.

She declined, but a few things in the building were still familiar, she said. The first thing she noticed was the exposed brick that was left intact.

"I'm excited to death," Mayfield said.

"I think it's so neat."

She explored the building with another former Sears employee, Diane Deming, of Memphis.

Deming said it was sad to see the building abandoned for so many years. Walking in Saturday, she said, it was bigger than she remembered.

"I'm real impressed they didn't tear it down," she said.

Teresa Cline, who has been involved with the project through Remmons Wilson Companies, said she's seen the inside of the building about four times a year since 2014. Every time, it looks different, she said, but Saturday was still a sight to behold.

"From the very first time to now it's just unbelievable," she said.

At the end of the hour-long ceremony, featuring speeches by Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland and Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell, banners fell from the top floor in the atrium that spell Cross-town Concourse vertically.

Memphian Lisa Williams was even impressed with the brochure, a fold-out map of the building and its tenants.

Williams, who came with her mother to the opening, said she remembered shopping there as a child and going to the candy store. She, too, was glad to see the building revitalized.

"I guess they saw it and saw it was something worth saving," she said.

To her, it represented a chance for people of all backgrounds to come together in their city.

"I'm proud of Memphis for doing it," Williams said.

Local pride was evident from the speeches to those who brought several generations to the event.

Ricardo Hebron, of East Memphis, brought his grandson, 8-year-old DeCari, "just to let him see the community," Hebron said.

"There's a lot more to Memphis than just this neighborhood," Hebron said.

Quincy Jones looked into living at Crosstown, but prices pushed him to another location in the neighborhood. He was impressed with the near-finished product nonetheless.

"It's a great example of mixed-use development," he said. "Probably one of the best ones we've seen in Memphis."

Strickland, who called the day historical, said Crosstown's tenants have created more than 700 new, permanent jobs.

"Memphis has momentum," he said.

Reach Jennifer Pignolet at jennifer.pignolet@commercialappeal.com or on Twitter @JenPignolet.