A day in the life of Crosstown Concourse

Site aims to make tenants, visitors ‘better together’

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We know, the Crosstown Concourse grand opening is not until Saturday, but at least 23 of the 57 announced tenants are already moved in.

We decided to spend a day there to see what it’s like.

Crosstown Concourse is not to be just another mixed-use commercial building, and not just because it’s so big at 1.1 million square feet or such a physical improvement over the vacant, blighted hulk that the Sears distribution center had been.

“Better together” is the redevelopment’s catch phrase. Crosstown Concourse aspires to create a kind of mojo among tenants and visitors.

The idea is to use art, performances, programming and even the design of the building’s public spaces to have tenants and visitors engaging each other, to be in relationship.

They call this 10-story building a “vertical urban village.” So we spent a day looking for the glue that makes a village.

It sounds a bit utopian. But E.M. Forster called for this kind

Healthy-bread bakers Sheri McElvain and Symone Johnson display some of their work inside the Church Health kitchen.

of thing a century ago in his book about human connection, “Howard’s End.”

“Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.”

5:10 a.m.

The “YOURS” sign on the parking garage is illuminated but static. At some point, they’ll have the “Y” turn on and off. A clever way of expressing how inclusive Crosstown Concourse intends to be. This building is both yours and ours.

6:15 a.m.

About 20 people are exercising in the Church Health YMCA, on the third floor off the West Atrium.

The Y’s Tisha Schauer works behind the desk. The place already enjoys a sense of community, she says.

“Just the convenience of coming after work, before work, on your lunch break,” Schauer says of the residents who get a free YM membership and some Crosstown office workers who have corporate memberships.

7:20 a.m.

“It definitely already happens,” French Truck Coffee’s Jess
Crosstown

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Aroc says the “better together” experience among Concours tenants. She’s retail services manager/head barista for the coffee shop in the Central Artrium.

“Both run out of towels all the time, and Farm Burger runs out of towels all the time,” Aroc says of the new restaurant nearby. “So we share our towels.”

9 a.m.

A Grinder-Tuber & Grinder construction crew today is putting finishing touches to the 4,000 square feet Christian Brothers University has leasing on the fourth floor, across the Central Artrium from Crosstown High.

Bright yellow wall panels distinguish two of the main rooms. The “living room” work space and back classroom, where huge north-facing windows let sunlight stream in.

The construction company should turn the space over to CBU by the end of the day, says Paul Haught, academic vice president.

It’s a safe bet CBU will have strong relationships with its neighbors, not only the high school, but with Church Health Center, Southern College of Optometry and others.

“We get interested in this because of partnerships in particular with educational institutions,” Haught says.

10 a.m.

The tony lobby of Focal Point — the eye clinic at Southern College of Optometry provides care and trains its resident and professional interns — could easily mesh with Saddle Creek, Germantown’s upscale retail center.

Highly designed with sleek furniture and display cases, the waiting area and display room offers free coffee from French Truck Coffee.

A few of the patients are sent over from Church Health — which provides health care to the working poor — or are full-pay clients. And that’s just the way Dr. James Venable wants it. He’s vice president for clinical programs at Southern College of Optometry.

The college came to Crosstown Concours because it outgrew its clinical space on Nations Parkway, Venable said because of its partnership with Church Health.

“Is it the most convenient for us up to 13,000 to 14,000 patients a year that will be served by the clinic.”

In turn coming to the Concours lets the college train its interns and residents in an “inter-professional” setting where there are other health care disciplines being practiced, he said.

“We kind of call it a walk-in clinic. You’re not quite sure where Southern College of Optometry begins or ends and Church Health begins or ends, and that’s exactly what we wanted,” Venable said.

11 a.m.

Healthy bread-bakers Sheri McKeil

and Symone Johnson are helping to straighten up the Church Health kitchen, and later will make a supply run to Kroger and Lot, then prepare the bread starter — flour, water and yeast — for the next day’s baking.

They bake from 6:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

They bake mostly whole wheat bread twice a week. “It is healthier,” McKeil says. “The mission of Church Health is to live a healthier life. Instead of eating white flour, you’re eating whole wheat, which is better for you.”

11:30 a.m.

The tour doesn’t take long — the footprint for Temple Israel in Crosstown is just 1,200 square feet — but it’s meaningful.

The rectangular room is a comfortable, sunny, living room-type space with a fireplace, looking south, a TV, tables and chairs, and a smaller, private room for counseling and meetings.

Associate Rabbi Katie Baum of Temple Israel points to the wall with a white-stone veneer near the entrance.

“This wall of Jerusalem stone is a visible and tangible connection to our Temple Israel location in East Memphis,” he says, referring to the main synagogue.

“We have the same wall in our nursery when people walk into Temple Israel,” Baum said. It’s a reminder this is a Jewish space and we’re grounded in our tradition.”

Noon

Seven people from across the Concours filter into the Church Health chapel for an unusual faith experience with senior pastor Byron Fitzpatrick of the new Crosstown Church.

He’s leading a 30-minute Bible study titled “Walking with Paul” before they head outside to talk further about the topic while walking about a mile together.

But before he starts the lesson, Fitzpatrick tells the group that the weekly Bible study is designed for both spiritual and physical health.

He urges them to increase their vegetable consumption by three servings a day and the water they drink by 24 ounces.

12:30 p.m.

Philipp von Holtzendorff-Fehling is outside his organic, vegetarian restaurant, Mama Gaia, sitting at a picnic table and eating a copia pasta with oven-roasted vegetables.

Mama Gaia helps other tenants, and other tenants help Mama Gaia, he says.

For example his restaurant held a fundraiser for Church Health, and Church Health helps him get the word out about the nutritional value of his food. He and Jimmy Lewis, owner of French Truck Coffee, have been talking recently about how they can work together to support both businesses.

“Try to move the two together,” he says. “We’re in this together. It’s very unique. I don’t think if you’re in some small hole that you get too close to people who have a shop next to you, or other tenants. This is really a bigger family in a way.”

1 p.m.

Dr. Scott Morris, founder and head of Church Health, went with young doctors in training this morning to assess the deployment of 6-5 year-olds at Church Health’s Perea Preschool.

Now he has just eaten lunch outside at Mama Gaia with the new rector for Calvary Episcopal, the Rev. J. Scott Walters, and is about to lead the monthly staff meeting that starts at 2 p.m. and will end with all 200 plus staffers signing together.

Crosstown Concours’s “better together” approach stems from the belief that isolated people do not feel closer to God or grow in faith, but through relationships with others, Morris says.

“We also certain that’s true about health. Nobody’s health is made better by being on a stair stepper with headphones. That in and of itself is not enough. I also think now that is true about any type of corporation, any type of organization. You can’t fulfill your mission alone,” Morris says, sitting in his small, third-floor office.

3 p.m.

Scott Taishie, who on Monday opened the I Love Juice Bar in the Concours, already has been trading his branded T-shirts for those of other businesses in the building.

“The idea of bringing all the different businesses like a burger place, juice bar, a healthy restaurant, a grocery store, a dentist office, a gym, and living quarters — all this income — it felt like we were getting an opportunity to be part of something innovative, new, kind of futuristic,” he says. “Sign us up.”

4:15 p.m.

Some jokingly call Bradley Wilford the mayor of Crosstown Concours.

The Commercial Advisor executive works full-time as the building’s property manager. Today, he’s overseeing about 100 people who make the place run from just the headquarters.

They include 50 on the janitorial staff, 25 full-time security guards, a once-a-week landscaping crew, 20 maintenance workers, as well as vendors that provide services.

On Wednesday the staff is in full swing readying for Saturday’s ceremony. Everything from completing security plans to finishing landscaping, and touching up paint to cleaning windows, all while helping more tenants move in before the big ceremony.

“We have a dentist upstairs that’s coming on board, a dermatology clinic that’s trying to get opened up, restaurants that are trying to get opened up, all at the same time,” Wilford says.

“It’s like an aircraft carrier. Our deck is very active.”

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