Novel Marks New Chapter for Book Lovers

That beloved Memphis institution closed in 2011 after more than 23 years in operation. The store was soon renamed the Booksellers at Laurelwood, but while it had the same location and the same employees, it wasn't quite the same as its predecessor. Then, after barely six years in business, that store also closed down in February, leaving a gaping hole in the city for readers who still liked to visit bookstores. Now, a group of Memphians has, in many ways, resurrected what was once the city's biggest independent bookstore. Housed in the same location where its predecessors stood for many years...

CONCOURSE DEBUT

Crosstown Concourse holds its grand opening Saturday after eight years of planning and construction to transform the massive Sears Crosstown building into a "vertical urban village."

Aug. 19 opening day begins test of larger goals

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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A relatively recent urban legend, as urban legends go, is that the large elevated tract of land along Bellevue Boulevard by the interstate wall is some kind of Indian mound.

It's not. It is an area elevated in anticipation of the route federal officials in the 1960s had planned for Interstate 40 to take through Crosstown and then through Midtown. Those plans were stopped in a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case.

The legend speaks to the redisclosure of Crosstown by a generation with no firsthand memories of the original Carb Market, Tech High School, the Crosstown movie theater or Sears Crosstown.

The Sears Crosstown building, a 1.5 million-square-foot horizon-defining monolith whose first segment was built in 1937 as a Sears, Roebuck

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& Co. store and distribution center, formally opens as Crosstown Concourse Saturday, Aug. 19.

The opening, which features a full slate of arts performances and installations in the concourse building and the plaza on its southern side, comes with a much different business plan than retail sales and catalog-order fulfillment.

Sears shut down its Crosstown retail operation in 1983; the distribution center closed 10 years after that, leaving the building completely vacant.

After $200 million of physical work, Crosstown Concourse is what the project's stakeholders - including Crosstown Arts co-founders Todd Richardson and Chris Miner - frequently have described as a "vertical urban village": a mixed-use development with apartments, offices, schools, retail shops, medical and health facilities, and space for the arts.

The founding partners, in addition to Crosstown Arts, include Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare; St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and its fundraising arm, ALSCAC; Memphis Teacher Residency; Rhodes College; Christian Brothers University; and Church Health - the tip of the spear in a group of 20 partners overall.

That's not counting the 30 different sources of a financing puzzle that was just as crucial as the physical overhaul of the building.

"Let's be honest, even among the believers there were still a few who thought the idea was a little crazy," said Richardson, a University of Memphis art history professor who began the idea as a "what if" conversation with video artist Miner in a seriously sidetracked discussion about an arts residency program in Mississippi.

"I didn't know what I didn't know," Richardson said earlier this month during one of countless tours he's given of the concourse in various stages during the eight-year effort. "That comes with a lot of risk. But I don't know that there was a day that I thought it couldn't happen.

That doesn't mean Richardson thought it would happen easily - the perils of taking in the physical dimensions of a building that is composed of 7 million bricks with 60 percent of its exterior being windows.

Historic preservation tax credits were involved in the financing, and qualifying for the tax credits required meticulous preservation or reconstruction of the early 20th-century window types in the former distribution center area of the building.

An early plan called for renovating the separate parking garage added in the 1960s, with the Autumn Street side of the garage being a green wall of vegetation. The creative plan was nixed by the standards of the tax credits.

The loading dock area on the north side is a patio now for the retail row behind the barn-like doors once necessary for the freight that came in and out. Some are renovated originals. Others are replicas.

Inside is Mama Gain, a vegan restaurant and food retailer whose founder, Philipp von Holtzendorff-Fehling, is part business-man/part food evangelist.

"It's all fresh. It's all organic. Yet it's fast," he explains. "So we try to do it in stages, really, and we try to educate people as we can, and we have to get better at it."

"You can only say so many things at one time," he explains. "So we try to do it in stages, really, and we try to educate people as we can, and we have to get better at it."

That means Holtzendorff-Fehling can tell you about everything served or bought in his place of business in as much detail as you want. But he often lets the food speak first and then explains what ingredients are or aren't in the items a customer likes.

He also tells customers trying the food that they will feel better.

"The people that eat us, they get it - they get it immediately," he said. "That's something that hasn't been here before."

Richardson likes the food evangelism and seeing the concourse's tenants patronizing each other. And since the beginning, he has said the goal of the building, which is 94 percent leased this month, is to carry that momentum beyond the property lines into the surrounding area.

"Success is 10 years from now the Crosstown neighborhood is revitalized and the building is still active and vibrant," he said.