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# Galleria Mall, recently sold, harks back to a neighbourly era: Keenan

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In the middle of the central court at Galleria Mall, men gather to chat the morning away. (RICK MADONIK / TORONTO STAR)

Walking into Galleria Mall feels a bit like stepping into a time capsule that was filled but not quite sealed in the 1970s.

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There's the pebbled finish on the exterior, of the type you don't really see anymore, the polished floor that's a shade of beige you might have seen on a Howard Cosell Wide World of Sports blazer, the arched stucco ceilings, the letters above the computer store written in that old-fashioned font that was used for futuristic tech stuff at the dawn of the personal computer era (the one that looks like the numbers printed on the bottom of cheques).

The building, at Dufferin and Dupont Sts., doesn't appear to have seen many updates since it was opened on Aug. 15, 1972, but it's still going, for now, and has some eccentric charms.

In the middle of the large, empty central court, old Portuguese men gather on four haphazardly placed benches to chat the morning away. In lieu of a food court, people get coffee and corned beef subs from the El Amigo Restaurant stand. At the Pagers & Cellular Plus kiosk, in addition to picking up a cordless phone and wiring money by Western Union, you could buy a "fully detailed hand crafted" model of the Titanic.

The big display window labelled "Galleria Smokers Choice" sits empty save for a purple cellophane backdrop. Once, presumably, it contained a display of tobacco products. Now it seems emblematic of its place — a reminder of a different time when people still smoked, urban malls were still trendy, and independently owned stores outnumbered the chains. Something not quite gone, not quite forgotten, but no longer being maintained or updated.

In the parking lot out front, the advertising pillar on the corner is missing several panels. The mall's retail space is pockmarked by vacancies.

## VOTE

Would you miss the Galleria Mall?

- ☐ I might miss it and I might not
- ☐ I certainly would; it means something to the neighbourhood
- ☐ I've never been there/don't care

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And soon, it may be gone — or changed radically enough it will seem gone.

Last week, the mall was sold by its longtime owners to a numbered company said to be associated by Freed Developments, who boast of "re-imagining the city with design-based

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the area (such as the Fuse condominiums, under construction at Lansdowne and Dupont), it is hard to imagine anyone buying the mall to preserve it as it has been.

“I think in 10 years’ time, we’re not even going to recognize this place, this whole area,” says Cristina Jackson, sitting in the Galleria Mall management office, where she’s worked since 1979. She confirmed the mall had been sold, but directed any further inquiries about its future to the new owners. She was happy, however, to talk a bit about its past.

“When the mall first opened, it was a very, very, very busy place, because it was a novelty. It was one of the first covered malls in Toronto.”

At first, most shop owners and their customers were Italian, in keeping with the ethnic makeup of the neighbourhood. “We used to hire police to direct traffic in the parking lot on weekends, and even the police were Italian.”

Over the years, the neighbourhood changed, and so did the mall — recently many more customers have Portuguese backgrounds or speak Spanish, Jackson says, while store owners and employees represent the diversity of the city.

“Everybody I meet has a personal connection to Galleria Mall,” Jackson says. “People always tell me, ‘I used to come here with my Grandma.’ I always say, ‘This is where friends meet. It’s not a regional mall, it’s a community mall, and it serves that purpose for the community, as a family place. ... It’s more personal, everybody knows everybody, it becomes a family.’”

As it turns out, I have a personal family connection to the mall. When I was young, my father was an assistant manager at the Towers department store that was then an anchor tenant. I remember sitting in the old Villager Restaurant waiting for his shift to end. I remember thinking my Dad was a big-shot celebrity when he took a community partner shift behind the counter at McDonald’s there, on the annual charitable McHappy Day. I remember walking the runway here during mall fashion shows, modeling the latest in fleece children’s wear.

Jackson remembers those fashion shows, too, and plenty of other events: old Italian Day and Portugal Day celebrations, visited by politicians and diplomats, the 25th Anniversary Celebration where Tie Domi made an appearance, the Easter events hosted by the real estate tenant to give away 40 to 50 bicycles a year to local children.

Jackson recalls how Towers gave way to Zellers, which finally closed, its space only recently taken over by a Planet Fitness that has seemed to give the mall a small injection of youthful energy.

“It’s been a lifetime,” she says. “I tell some people I’ve been here since 1979, and they tell me

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One thing you can say about the Galleria Mall's throwback environment is that if you are feeling nostalgic, a visit to the place offers much that's familiar to jog your memory. Although probably not for much longer.

"Neighbourhoods change, demographics change, the world of retail has changed. Things change," Jackson says. "And they're supposed to change. It's good that they change. That's how cities work."

I thank Jackson her for her time. "The only thing I ask," she says. "Present the Galleria in a good light. Show the good side of the mall. Like I say, it's been a lifetime. I spent my whole life here."

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