

## An Anti-Decade Later

The Lab in Costa Mesa continues to foster a unique retail concept.



Retail visionary  
Shaheen Sadeghi

PHOTOS BY DAVID KAWASHIMA

of proffering their wares in a traditional retail setting.

### A generation misunderstood

While his target market had considerable spending power, having plunked down \$89 billion in malls in 1993, retailers misunderstood them, Sadeghi maintained. Seeing the closing of such major department stores as Buffums and Bullocks as proof that merchants were losing touch with society's young counter-culture, he aimed to reconnect with a generation that eschewed canned solutions in favor of underground music, retro-furniture and hip fashion.

"In the early 1990s, retailers saw adolescents as bubble-gum-chewing teeny-boppers," recalls the 50-year-old who began his career as an assistant to fashion designers Charles

James, John Anthony and Mary McFadden and went on to design sportswear for Jantzen. Recognizing teens as sophisticated creatures who were concerned about environmental and social issues, and keyed into an emerging alternative music scene and coffee culture, Sadeghi pictured a retail village with an "organic" feel and innovative offerings not available in traditional malls.

His scheme called for a departure from the ubiquitous Mediterranean-style, red-tile-roofed structures strewn throughout Orange County. "I didn't want to build something that tries to be all things to all people," he explains. "That doesn't have the life or energy to attract a generation of CNN- and MTV-watchers."

What he created was a magnet for the "grunge set," the first mall in the nation to be conceived for a generation, according to the International

Once upon a time, a little more than a decade ago, one of today's most visionary developers – a graduate of New York's Pratt Institute and a former executive of surfwear giants Gotcha Sportswear and Quiksilver – decided to inject some fun, romance and urban grit into Orange County's homogenized retail scene. Teaming up with New York-based designer Ron Pompei of Pompei A.D., Shaheen Sadeghi selected two dilapidated, factory buildings once used to make military goggles for his bold, urban experiment.

This "anti-mall" sits in the shadow of South Coast Plaza, barely a mile down Bristol from the swanky retail jewel that was, and still is, the antithesis of Sadeghi's project. He set out to create an un-sterile alternative in strip-mall-infested Orange County for the 18- to

29-year-old Generation Xers who were too cool to hang out in food courts and not quite urbane enough to be easily lured to Macy's or Ann Taylor. With a miniscule budget of \$1 million, Sadeghi asked Pompei – known for the deconstructive interiors of Urban Outfitters stores – to create a retail community for a new generation of mall rats, filled with tenants who wouldn't dream



Standard Issue, a contemporary newsstand at The LAB

# RETAIL

Council of Shopping Centers. From its inception, Gen X was drawn to a complex with attitude that resembles a post-apocalyptic warehouse district, with acid-etched, broken concrete slab, rusted iron beams and protruding rebar. Dubbed The LAB, an acronym for Little American Businesses, the urban village features a collage of distinctive architectural elements, a post-industrial aesthetic and drought-tolerant desert landscaping that reflects environmental awareness, all anchored by fashion retailer Urban Outfitters.

Rather than toss factory leftovers, Pompei recycled them, blasting apart factory walls to create entrances and stacking such remnants as metal oil drums for an artistic waterfall. Making the scene all the more fun are designs of broken tile and such kitsch décor as a smashed car body Sadeghi found by the roadside and mounted on one of the buildings.

## Unconventional from inception

From start-up, the visionary approach embraced the unconventional in more than ambiance and lack of “category killer” tenants. Committed to involving the community, Sadeghi sold seeds, invited LAB shoppers to plant corn, strawberries and sunflowers, and donated proceeds to charities. These days, he sponsors scholarships through Orange Coast College’s art department and provides a place for young entrepreneurs to display their artistic wares.

Currently home to 15 tenants unlikely to be found in glitzier settings, the mellow enclave still surrounds an open-air “living room” with casually arranged, vintage furniture and area rugs where consumers hang out and stay hip at art, music and fashion events. On the first Wednesday of most months, unfold a lawn chair in this laid-back setting for a poetry night hosted by ISM Magazine, featuring readings and acoustic sets.

While it has shifted course slightly since opening in December 1993, Sadeghi’s three-acre center still is essentially what it set out to be: a rough-hewn “anti-mall” that’s more a cultural community than a retail

PHOTOS BY DAVID KAWASHIMA



ARTH hat shop at The LAB

center, with an alternative vibe that’s as palpable as ritzier centers’ posh ambiance. Ask Crew Salon hairstylist Megan Flaherty, an East Coast transplant, what The LAB epitomizes and she’s likely to wax nostalgic about SoHo back home. “There’s a feeling of community here that’s never stagnant,” says the former stylist at New York’s upscale Tony & Guy.

What has changed is a subtle tweaking of tenants, to accommodate Gen Xers who’ve matured, and their parents who appreciate the ‘60s vibe. With the exodus of punk clubwear boutique Electric Chair, high-end clothing emporium Habit has expanded. Relatively new are Carve, featuring European leather goods, and Blends, a high-end sneaker shop with super-cool kicks displayed behind brightly-lit freezer doors,

“served” to shoppers on a waiter’s tray. Celebrating its two-year anniversary is Black & Blue, offering high-end denim lines retailing for \$80 to \$250.

Standard Issue, a contemporary newsstand with an eclectic array of publications devoted to art, design, surf, skate and snow enthusiasts, recently opened, as did Arth, a Japanese-based source for hats. Also new is Zipangu Sushi Lounge, which joins the funky Gypsy Den and Habana, serving authentic Cuban fare, as dining options at The LAB. While only four original tenants remain, there’s been nary an unprofitable year, and retailers continue to rack up annual sales per square foot of \$250 to \$1,100, according to Sadeghi.

## Boomers camp out

Beyond the evolution of his innovative concept, Sadeghi’s life has changed in more meaningful ways since The LAB’s opening. With Linda, his wife of 30 years, he now shares parenting of three sons, all under age nine, a passage that may have inspired the expansion of his vision at The Camp, a four-acre, \$12 million compound opened in 2002. The interactive retail environment targets active families with an interest –

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Native Foods at The Camp specializes in vegan cuisine

and a budget – for what Sadeghi calls “human-powered sports.”

Visit the soulful grounds directly across from The LAB on Bristol Street and you may initially think you’re at the beach, what with the sound of waves crashing against the shore and the distant call of gulls. But wait! The natural lull is punctuated by the distinct cha-ching of cash registers in the campus-style environment.

It’s all part of the organic sense carried over from The Camp’s sister center that’s been reincarnated to attract a dual market. On one end there’s the teen into surfing, skateboarding and mountain biking, who wants to explore kayaking, rock climbing and hiking. Rounding out the target mix are affluent baby boomers in their 40s and 50s, eager to balance career success with family fun and to stay in touch with nature. “Sports and outdoor activities are a common ground for these two groups,” says Sadeghi, who wants nothing more than to share his enthusiasm for snowboarding, surfing and skating with his kids.

He can do that within The Camp, where anchors Adventure 16, Patagonia and Liburdi’s Scuba and Dive Shop provide such attractions as a rock-climbing wall, skate ramp and an indoor pool to test kayaks and scuba equipment. Amidst natural design inspired by national parks, rendered by landscape artist Andy Spurlock of Getty Museum fame and renowned local architect Jay Bauer, retailers are positioned around a central amphitheater with a fire pit where environmental speakers, athletes and product representatives hold court. All seek to educate with healthy living seminars like this past summer’s Life Series,

and such sponsored activities as Saturday morning bike rides.

Others in the complex include Cycle Werks, Bikram Yoga, The Lodge (operated by the Goodells of Aubergine fame), Village Bakery and Native Foods, specializing in vegan cuisine. Most recently, Active Ride Shop debuted, offering the latest fashions for surf, snow and skate.

## The new frontier

What’s next for the retail visionary? In April, Sadeghi purchased Shooters, a 5,500-square-foot sports bar that will become a new eatery within The Camp by next year. Perhaps most anti-boring of all is his ultimate aim: creating a mixed-use hub he’s dubbed SoBECA, an acronym for South on Bristol Entertainment Culture and Arts, that will incorporate artists’ lofts, open space, restaurants and specialty retailers. He’s making it happen through work with Costa Mesa’s Planning Department and the Bristol Street Mixed-Use Overlay Committee, a business group he’s chaired for the past two years.

Of Sadeghi’s impact, Costa Mesa assistant development services director Perry Valentine observed, “Shaheen has found a way to add life to a non-descript area by turning unused industrial buildings and a weed-filled vacant lot into something with spirit and character.”

Chances are, it can only get better from here. **OCM**

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