

MODERN LUXURY
MIAMI

A Legacy of Style

By Riki Altman-Yee | Photo: Portrait by Nick Garcia | November 19, 2015

Marking its 50th anniversary this month, Bal Harbour Shops continues to up the ante on luxury retail with ambitious expansion plans for an even more prosperous future.



“I always had a very clear vision of exactly what I wanted,” says Stanley Whitman, the nonagenarian who envisioned and founded the now world-famous [Bal Harbour Shops](#) in 1965. “It couldn’t look like every other mall out there. I wanted people to feel as though they were shopping in a garden.”

Fifty years later, millions of shoppers—locals and tourists alike—still flock to this tropical retail utopia, whether it’s in search of that limited-edition Chanel bag or an alfresco lunch with a healthy side of people-watching at Makoto. Regardless of whether they come to shop, sightsee or just be seen, the center’s charms are inescapable.

“There’s a special intimacy about this place that people connect with,” says Matthew Whitman Lazenby, Stanley’s grandson and the CEO of Whitman Family Development, which owns the mall. “They feel Bal Harbour Shops is a sanctuary.”

When the Whitman patriarch bought the property in 1957 from Robert Graham, the developer of Bal Harbour Village, he was no stranger to retail real estate, as his parents owned stores on Lincoln Road. In time, he came up with the idea to create an open-air shopping center. “He

literally created the genre,” says his son Randy Whitman. “When he first started, everybody thought he was crazy.”

That’s because back then boutiques were generally squeezed between grocery stores, cobblers and dry-cleaners. But, after Stanley traveled the world to see the most exclusive boulevards dedicated to retail, he returned to Miami and decided a stroll-friendly promenade approach (punctuated by boutiques, restaurants, cafes and bookstores) was the way to go. “I was told that no one in the United States had paid more than \$1 a square foot for retail property at that time,” adds Stanley. He paid 20 times more than the plot of land was worth, trusting that affluent tourists would make up the difference... someday.

Randy remembers concrete trucks pouring the foundation in 1964. After joining the Navy and serving in the Vietnam War, he worked in real estate for a bit and then joined Bal Harbour Shops as a leasing agent. At the time, the stores Mark Cross and Martha Phillips were already in place. Soon, Gucci and Fendi came along, followed by the first Louis Vuitton outside of New York and the first Hermès housed in a shopping center.

“Bal Harbour Shops brought more luxury designer stores to this city than any [other] place,” adds Stanley. “We were responsible for bringing a high-fashion image to Miami.”

The center’s two main anchors, Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus, did not arrive until later. It took Stanley seven years to get the top brass at Neiman’s to finally open its first location outside of Texas in 1971. Saks debuted five years later, marking the first time the two powerhouses co-habitated in the same development. As for the trademark koi ponds? Those were installed in 1999.

Along with the uniqueness of the concept, the Shops’ architecture was also quite revolutionary for the time. Designed for vertical expansion (the second level was constructed in 1983), the property’s walkways were angled to serve as conduits for the prevailing southeast winds off the Atlantic, keeping the environment cool even in the most punishing of summers. “He wanted his merchants’ windows to be the stars,” explains Cheryl Stephenson, the property’s director of marketing for almost 14 years, “and the tropical garden setting, the sound of the water [and] the feeling of the ocean breezes [to be] the essence of what people remembered.” This, along with the blue-chip merchandise behind the pristine store windows, of course.

“In the modern world you can buy just about anything you want online,” says Whitman Lazenby. “The smart developers figured out that [retail] needs to be experiential.” There’s no denying BHS has gotten that part down. Even in these casual-friendly times, meeting for lunch or shopping there has an unspoken set of rules: Look your best; walk around even if you have no plans to shop; go home happier. At least three longtime regulars have asked that their ashes be scattered in the center after their deaths, Whitman Lazenby reveals. One even told him: “This is the only place where I know my wife would visit me.”

And, yes, while BHS makes an incredible impression, it also tipped the scales for Miami’s economy and continues to do so in a positive way. “This center put Bal Harbour Village on the map,” says Randy. “The intelligent people who live in the Village recognize that.”

To that point, Bal Harbour Village is going to reap even more benefits in the near future as the Whitmans are spending \$100 million for traffic improvements, sidewalks, streetscapes and parks. Simultaneously, they hope their lofty expansion project for the Shops will commence any day now, with \$500 million budgeted for upgrades such as adding a Barneys New York, completing the third level, moving Saks to a new location, and expanding both horizontally and vertically. And those are just the long-term plans: A recent visit revealed a new 200-seat French bistro from Stephen Starr, called Le Zoo, set to open this month; in-the-works remodeled spaces for jewelry brands like Chopard and Van Cleef & Arpels; a major expansion of the Sante Fe News & Espresso cafe; the addition of The Grill bistro on the second floor; and plenty of “Coming Soon” signs. In the past year, the center has seen the high-profile openings of Vince, Buccellati, Dsquared2, Tomas Maier, Richard Mille and Morgenthal Frederics, as well as renovations and upgrades at La Perla, Vilebrequin, Bulgari and Tiffany & Co.

“[We have] to be competitive and relevant in a changing world where luxury stores today want to be bigger and bigger,” says Whitman Lazenby. “In 1965 it was determined that 2,000 square feet was probably about the right size for a store. If a store really wanted to be big they would take over two bays. Now they want to be 8,000, 10,000, even 20,000 square feet. In order [for us] to do that, we have to grow.”

In 2012 the International Council of Shopping Centers ranked BHS as the highest performing mall in the world in sales per square foot, but that’s not the first time the venue has earned such a designation. Since the business is privately held by the Whitman family, financials have never been open for evaluation, but Randy says BHS has remained fully leased since the beginning, with continuous demand from tenants for space. “Never once has anyone in my family ever asked about what type of returns we have quarter to quarter,” adds Whitman Lazenby. “We think about the future in terms of 10 years. That enables us to do things that, over the long term, clearly have been best for the property.”

As for the competition that other areas like the growing Design District and the expansion of Aventura Mall represent, Randy is succinct: “We’ve been the victims of our own success,” he says. “We’ve done so well that everybody’s tried to emulate us.” Many of the property’s employees and members of the executive team have been at BHS for more than three decades, adds Stephenson, emphasizing Randy’s point. “[That] speaks volumes about the integrity of the Whitman family.” To this, Whitman Lazenby adds: “At 96, [my grandfather] still comes in to work more often than not. His focus has always been on the long-term strategy.”

It may be hard to believe BHS’ founder is still so involved, but Stanley’s reasons for doing so are clear: “We are totally unique in having three generations of family that are going through the shopping center every day looking for ways to improve it.”

They’re also reveling in those accomplishments as well. On Nov. 12, a four-day celebration will commemorate BHS’ golden anniversary, starting with a kickoff event exclusively for supporters of The Buoniconti Fund to Cure Paralysis, a cause closely associated with the center. On Nov. 13 and 14, the mall will open to the public with a showcase of vintage and exotic cars as well as viewings of *50+50: A Century of Fashion*, an exhibition at the Fashion Project gallery in honor of BHS’ five-decade mark. The party culminates Nov. 15 with a gathering in honor of Stanley’s

97th birthday. That day, BHS patrons and employees can toast the man many credit with putting Miami on the global fashion map.

“[My father] tells others he’s guilty of making the classic real estate mistake: falling in love with the property,” adds Randy. “Smart people get in when the getting is good and then get out. He never got out.”

And Miami’s retail sector is all the better for it. *9700 Collins Ave., Bal Harbour, 305.866.0311*

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