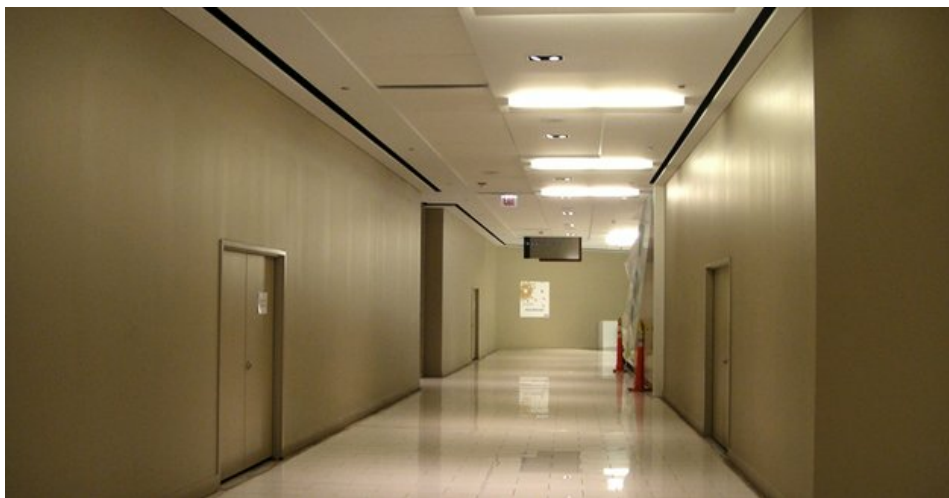


Bizarre Chicago shopping: 6 reasons why walking through Block 37 feels like stepping into *The Twilight Zone*



Ooh, shopping.

Michael Juliano

By Michael Juliano September 14, 2010

Let's unload all of the clichés about Block 37 in one sentence: Block 37 is a high-profile project in the middle of the Loop with a long, storied history full of legal and financial roadblocks that have seen major tenants pull out and a transit superstation scrapped. Oh right, and it's actually a mall. From its quiet opening almost a year ago to its resurfacing lately in the context of an express train line to O'Hare and the outgoing mayor's failed business initiatives, seemingly none of the news coverage of Block 37 has ever focused on what it's actually like to shop there and how utterly bizarre of a place it is.

With about 15 stores open now, the mall is still very much a work in progress (the exposed concrete, plastic wrap and power tools in some corners of the building are a dead giveaway), and it's about to get its most high-profile tenant so far with the opening of a high-tech interactive Disney Store this fall. But for now, walking through Block 37 is a surreal experience that feels pulled right out of *The Twilight Zone* for six big reasons.

There's nothing but soft, liquid food.

Godiva Chocolatier aside, the only food in Block 37 is located on the bottom floor, the pedway level. For those zipping between the CTA Red and Blue Line stations, the selection of solid food is pretty limited. There's an Au Bon Pain with plenty of empty tables, and mall-staple Auntie Anne's Pretzels. But the rest of the options? Two smoothie places, a vitamin store, and a frozen custard shop that looks ready to open. The future is here and it has lived up to its promises of food in liquid and pill forms.

The escalators lead to nowhere.

The directory promises that there's a spa and a new Lettuce Entertain You restaurant coming soon to the third floor, but there's no way to actually see what's going on up there. The second floor escalators are tantalizingly running, but roped off. The sign reads "upper levels will be opening soon," although "soon" seems to be open to interpretation as these same signs were up last fall as well. The lights are on up there and there are a few quick glimpses of temporary walls, but it begins to feel like the escalators were purposely engineered to obscure any revealing details from view. What are they really hiding up there?

The hallways are alarmingly faceless.

An empty storefront window here or there and some "coming soon" temporary walls aren't really

ARTICLE TOOLS

Like 44

0

E-mail

Print

Share

NO RELATED

uncommon sights in a mall. What make Block 37 so bizarre, though, are the unbroken strings of temporary walls with no signs of coming down any time soon. It becomes kind of disorienting when there aren't any recognizable storefronts that you can use to navigate. On the second floor, all three of the stores (Puma, Zara, Anthropologie) are just continuations of shops on the ground floor. Otherwise, the rest of the level is lined with these neutral-looking, lifeless walls and their curious wooden doors. (Curiosity killer: Some peeks through the doors reveal the grey, empty guts of a high-rise building.)

There's no one there.

There is a slow trickle of people coming through in the early afternoon, but during most times of the day the space is a borderline zombie movie. All of the lights are on, the piano music in the background is still audible, and the stack of arcing Big-Brother-like screens on each level is still advertising bits of the *Billy Elliot* soundtrack. The only other human presence is limited to the occasional shuffling of a security guard, construction worker, or someone looking for the public restrooms.

It feels like a clinic, the really unsettling kind.

Maybe the lack of foot traffic has something to do with it, but Block 37 is extremely clean. Other downtown high-end malls like North Bridge and Water Tower Place are neat and cushy too, but Block 37 feels thoroughly sterile in comparison. Add lots of white tiles, bright lights, restricted areas, and signs reminding you about video surveillance, and it starts feeling just a little bit like some kind of institution (or the Aperture Science Computer-Aided Enrichment Center from *Portal*).

It houses a portal made of soap.

There are many weird things about the Body Shop vending machine, most conspicuously that it's a machine that dispenses scented soaps while a monitor in the upper corner loops some exotic-themed PR spin. But the most inexplicable feature is how there's a slit of light that leaks out of the wall around the vending machine. You can actually see into the naked room behind the machine, and it's like peering into another dimension.

SLIDESHOW: Inside Block 37

Pardon, indeed

« [BACK TO A.V. CHICAGO HOME](#)

SHARE TOOLS

Like 44

0

MORE FROM THE A.V. CLUB

Bill Murray gets uncharacteristically candid on late Chicago comedy legend Del Close

Mighty Morphin Power Rangers burlesque is a thing now, because of course it is

Chicago is a safe, comfortable place for hipsters to live

Triumph The Insult Comic Dog visits the Wiener's Circle

Hear new Lupe Fiasco tracks from Food & Liquor 2









You must be logged in to comment

[Login or Register](#)

Real-time updating is **paused**. ([Resume](#))

Showing 21 Reasonable Discussions

Sort by oldest first

-  Neytiri
 Is this...
 ...what's been going on inside the old Carson Pirie Scott building??
09/14/2010 12:02 PM
-  The Ghost of Richard J. Daley
 No, that's some ritual summoning of some sort of hellish creature as per my final instructions to my son. It was gonna terrorize the olympics, but I figure, now it can just terrify Cubs fans by raising their property taxes.
 This Block 37 shit is why they decided to fuck up the Red Line so there's no more stopping/transferring at Washington.
09/14/2010 12:25 PM
-  Neytiri
 I've been downtown exactly once this whole summer. That shows how little I care about going into the city.
09/14/2010 05:09 PM
-  YoYoMa
 What it shows is how lame your life is. lol
09/14/2010 06:44 PM
-  Neytiri
 Go back to 4chan, little troll.
09/14/2010 07:43 PM
-  Mother Fuckin Qbert
 @!#?@!?
09/14/2010 10:14 PM
-  Oxperiment
 Damn, it's all night with this guy!
09/15/2010 08:53 AM
-  Adolph Oliver Pubes
 I'll tell you what's going in on the third floor - Obama's death panel. There will be a big

room with stadium seating for spectators to watch and if your palm crystal has turned red you gather in the middle and they'll blast you to dust with military grade lasers.

Fucking health care reform!

09/16/2010 10:04 AM



Violet Crumbles

These are the things I do at Block 37

Take shits without feeling obligated to make a purchase, look at ridiculously overpriced twee cocktail dresses at Anthropologie, consider the purchase of a Beard Papa cream puff and almost inevitably decide against it, look at that Billy Elliot poster and consider the viability of the Canadian tuxedo, think about my lost youth spent making minimum wage for producing arts and crafts on that very plot of land. But seriously I think about buying a denim jacket every single time I step into that instant ghost mall

09/14/2010 02:38 PM



Mortimer Buttons

Wait a minute...

but I'm wearing an outfit entirely composed of items purchased at the Block 37 Zara!

09/14/2010 02:51 PM



Chicago Seamus

Lettuce Entertain You & Lawyers at Block 37

The building's lawyers and Lettuce Entertain You have started killing many, many trees with litigation over their proposed restaurant.

<http://www.chicagorealestateda...>

I don't know when "coming soon" will happen, but if it's lawyer time we're probably not looking at anywhere to eat up there until 2014. But some solid food options would be nice. Eating something called Beard Papa is just creepy.

09/14/2010 04:02 PM



huh

what's strange...

is that ive lived in chicago 5 years and have never once heard of this place....i need to explore more

09/14/2010 05:19 PM



Neytiri

That's kinda how I feel.

09/15/2010 10:30 AM



lurker-person

Hm.

The food level is often very busy during lunchtime. Also, Beard Papa doesn't really count as just another "smoothie place". Those cream puffs are fabulicious. It's just the upper levels that are ghostly, because... there's no stores there yet! Surprise!

09/14/2010 05:56 PM



jello pudding

duh.....

since the space is empty regardless, put up temp., rotating art exhibits.

09/14/2010 07:51 PM



Bob Marshall

Either I'm blind or...

I spent my entire morning within a one block vicinity of Block 37. I realized this when I just Google Mapped its location.

09/14/2010 08:57 PM



sbcthemuse

I find it annoying

I'd be much more likely to cruise through the mall if I could actually cruise through it. With things half open/closed/under construction, there's no way on the main level to cross from east to west without being fed back out to the north or - worse yet - back east. So annoying.

09/14/2010 11:23 PM



Chad Sexington III

Yet another Daley Sinkhole:

Considering how much of my tax dollars went to subsidize this structure, I think I should be allowed to live there free of charge . . . or at least have an office there.

09/15/2010 07:59 AM



Oexperiment

loft space for everyone!

09/15/2010 08:54 AM



Resident Smartass

Where 'coming soon' means:

"Sometime before this building gets demolished by Mayor Daley III"

09/15/2010 03:18 PM





David Sohl

WPA

I figure this building is a product of the latest iteration of the Works Progress Administration. We're building a better future-- employing workers to build malls so when the poverty rate drops below its current 14%, we'll have somewhere to buy our new Puma shoes and top-shelf beauty product from Sephora.

09/17/2010 10:03 AM

 [Subscribe by email](#)  [RSS](#)