Roslyn Heights' @250 lures affluent shoppers

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Eric Villency found the perfect opening at Exit 37 on the Long Island Expressway. That's where the long stretch of sound barrier wall opens, giving motorists a clear view of his new upscale retail development in Roslyn Heights.

"It happens to be one of the few areas not blocked on the LIE, and that visibility acts as a huge billboard," said Villency, chief executive of the Manhattan-based Villency Design Group. "And, it's one of the most affluent areas in the entire country."

Called @250, the 41,000-square-foot structure -- named for its address, 250 South Service Rd. -- is devised as the antithesis of the typical suburban strip shopping center in both its tenant mix and design, said Villency, 37, whose firm does interior and architectural design as well as product design and development.

The two-story, multimillion-dollar development centers around the theme of "wellness." The project is not dependent solely on fashion retail, which, Villency says, is more vulnerable to economic cycles. He figures that people invest in health and beauty in both good times and bad.

"When people get divorced, people want to look good," he said. "When they are looking for work, they always want to look good."

The Bar Method and SoulCycle, both of which offer popular, exclusive exercise regimens, are among the tenants already packing the parking lot with customers. Thea, a high-end shop selling "gifts with a conscience," also has been drawing patrons to the light-filled space that opened in December. The development is 75 percent to 80 percent leased, Villency said.

Truth + Beauty, a luxury spa offering skin-care and beauty treatments from lipsticks to lasers, is now under construction. Kidville, the franchise providing classes, birthday parties, and indoor play spaces, plans to make its Long Island debut here in May. Organic Avenue, which sells organic juices and other health-conscious foods, will soon set up shop. And Villency hopes to bring in a celebrity-chef cafe.

The density and the high traffic of the location, as well as the area's wealth are good indicators, especially for a high-end retail center, said Cedrik Lachance, managing director of Green Street Advisors, a Newport Beach, Calif., real estate research firm.

According to a 2009 estimate from Villency's firm, the average household income within one mile of the location was $175,369 and within five miles was $139,869. High-end mall sales are up more than 30 percent over the last three years, Lachance said. By contrast, sales at moderate to low-end malls have recovered by less than 10 percent over the same time frame.

"It's part of a national trend where higher-end neighborhoods can deliver attractive retail to the few who are able to build," he said.

David Miller, owner of the Kidville franchise, was sold on the demographics.

"You have a high density of affluent people living in an area that's so easily accessible, whether you are coming from Queens or Eastern Long Island," Miller said.

Villency's family, which runs the prominent furniture design company Maurice Villency, has owned the property for decades, but had used it as a warehouse and had leased it to other retailers. He had long harbored ambitions to transform the property but only was able to move forward when the last tenant relinquished the lease under bankruptcy protection.

"I wanted each part of it to have a different feel," Villency said, as he pointed out the various materials on the exterior, "almost like a cityscape with steel, glass, wood and mixed stone. There isn't a sameness."

That type of eclectic aesthetic and tenant selection made @250 the perfect spot for the gift store Thea, said owner Thea Mitzman. Each of the stores "have their own brand and niche," she said.

"It's not a takeoff of Madison Avenue. It's not a takeoff of the Americana" Manhas-set, the shopping center that boasts international luxury brands, Mitzman said.

"It's its own gig."

In some ways, @250 is "a slice of Manhattan," said Cori Goldfarb, who co-owns Truth + Beauty with her husband, Sandy Goldfarb. "I feel that when I go into the city, I get another level of service," Goldfarb said, "so we are bringing it here under one roof."