



Hip to be

by Joe Tougas '86

Developer Roger Peters has a long history in Mankato, and his touch on University Square ensures he'll have a role in its future as well.



University Square developer
Roger Peters

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In less than a year, University Square on Stadium Road has become a staple of MSU life — a place where students live in

apartments upstairs while a concentrated array of commerce takes place below in such forms as a two-level coffeehouse, some hot little restaurants and the city's last remaining independent record store.

As a developer and businessman, Roger Peters has been making his marks on Mankato for four decades. And a few of those marks have shown “big-picture” priorities — whether he was providing Little Leaguers with free milk shakes after a homerun or, forty years later, revitalizing off-campus life in hopes of making a cultural contribution.

The latter is Peters' goal for the University Square development he launched in 2002. Now, with apartments above and stores below, University Square at Stadium Road and Warren Street is a novel pulsepoint for the campus and a good business move — bringing fast, decent and inexpensive food into the thick of a college community, and housing a few hundred students above it all.

But at age seventy-two, Peters says he's not in it for the business, not anymore. Perhaps he's getting more philosophical, or more benevolent. Either way, what prompted him to turn his otherwise quiet business property into a thriving hotspot near campus was the idea of pitching in for the future. He wanted to provide a place



Photos by John Cross



The locally owned coffeehouse and diner, The Hub Café, sits in the center of University Square — a welcome hangout for students and noncampus customers alike.

where MSU students of today can bring their children tomorrow, he says.

“I’m interested in the challenge of doing something here that can contribute to the culture,” Peters said in 2002, when he announced plans for the complex. “I’m through wanting to do business. I’m excited there’s an opportunity here to do something that makes a contribution.”

Today, students and nonstudents alike are drawn to the mix of fast- and not-so-fast food choices from vendors both national and local at the complex. In a town that has a notorious affinity for burger and other chains, the addition of Chipotle, Noodles & Company and Jimmy John’s provides some new variety.

At the same time, locally owned coffeehouse and diner The Hub Café serves gourmet coffees and homemade meals throughout the day. In mid-February, the locally owned Great Wall opened its full-service restaurant for fans of fresh Chinese cuisine.

Peters says he’s still talking with other potential tenants, and that the project remains only three-fourths complete. But even with more on the way, the spot is already a reverse-positive spin on a once problematic area.

Throughout the 1980s, the main attraction of what’s now University Square was the Albatross, the large, mildly infamous bar that offered big margaritas and a sunken dance floor and was usually packed. It provided plenty of memories for alumni, but impromptu homecoming parties in the parking lot — which amassed broken glass and unruliness — became an annual headache for police and campus officials.

The Hub Café loft is a favorite spot for student and community group meetings.

The 1990s were calmer on the lot, but at the end of the decade the Albatross folded. There was still some life in the small mall — Burger King, the Boomtown bar, Cine 4 and Kinko’s — but mostly at night. Days were still.

A University of Michigan architecture graduate, Peters’ initial idea was to have the complex serve as a perimeter to a small village-square environment with green spaces, seating areas and other inviting elements. (Work still remains to be done on that end, Peters says, as the square itself still serves as a parking lot.)

Before he made any moves in terms of getting vendors in the complex, Peters began consulting with student focus groups in Mankato to get a feel for the kind of food and shops they’d patronize. In the meantime, and in a sign that something seriously different was underway, the Albatross building was gutted and rebuilt to make way for new shops inside and apartments above. The Cine 4

complex was also renovated into six theaters with stadium seating — a first in Mankato.

Gauging the success of University Square took about as much time as propping the front door of Chipotle at its silent opening in the spring of 2004. For the first few days, lines formed down the outside walkway. With each new restaurant launch that followed, people flocked to the Square and Peters’ vision came to life.

“Living in University Square has been an awesome opportunity,” says MSU sophomore Merideth Benson. “It’s such a great addition to campus, and I love being a part of it. Being able to walk downstairs and have so much entertainment right out my door is more than I could ask for.”

Benson, a Mankato native, had lived in Gage residence halls during her first year of college. She made the switch this academic year.





“Walking to my classes is probably shorter from University Square than it was from Gage dorms,” she says. “I’m glad to experience U Square in its first year up and running.”

Like other food vendors near campus — including those recently opened in the Centennial Student Union — University Square is by design open to the community as well. But rather than serving as a campus-

oriented curiosity, the development pulls in far more members of the community than one proprietor expected.

The ratio of students and residents is about equal at The Hub Café, a coffeehouse and diner owned by Dennis and Lisa Smith of Mankato. For two years, they had been seeking a building in which to operate a small coffee shop. They met with Peters, who encouraged them to locate in University Square and drop the “small” from their plan.

“He said, ‘you know, Burger King is going to be leaving, and there’s no place up there serving breakfast,’” Lisa Smith says. Peters then dropped some more hints about the lack of a good burgers-and-fries kind of place in the Square.

Today, The Hub Café is a mix of coffeehouse and diner. A loft in the back serves as a secluded, comfortable lounging area complete with framed black and white photographs and track lighting.

“This is much larger than what we started out hoping for,” laughs Lisa Smith during a lull between the breakfast and lunch crowds. “But we’re very happy with the results.”

Those results are a shop that serves as a hangout for the students and faculty as well as a dining option for noncollege residents.

“There are customers who come in for food who’ve never had a latte and have no intention of ever having one,” Smith says.

On the other hand, some University Square tenants are experiencing more of a trickle of new business than a blast. Tune Town is an independent record store that has been housed in the University Square area for several years. In conjunction with the renovation, Tune Town owner Carl Nordmeier expanded the store to twice its size, adding inventory that includes video and DVD sales

and rentals and used vinyl records (the latter a surprise big-seller, Nordmeier says).

It was all part of the University Square renovation, he says, but sales are not up dramatically between this year and last. “It’s taking a while for people to catch on.”

Now living in Salt Lake City, Peters has put four decades of energy into the Mankato business community, beginning in 1964 when he owned and operated three Robby’s hamburger stands, one on Madison Avenue (the fast-food Mexican restaurant Zanz is now housed in the same building) and the other on what is now University Square. At one point Peters owned a chain of eighty Hardee’s restaurants before selling them. Even as far back as Robby’s, Peters often extended a personal touch to his businesses. Mankato native Greg Husak, now a media consultant for Advertising and Design, Inc., remembers how Robby’s was the place where Little Leaguers would go after games and where home-run hitters of the day received a free milk shake.

“Most of the teams went over there after the games. It was the place to go,” Husak says. “If you got a home run, you got a shake. People talked about it for years.” Husak, who worked with Peters on a recent promotion of University Square, said he felt Peters was sincere in wanting to contribute to the area’s cultural landscape. “That wasn’t just PR,” Husak says.



Peters, who lives in Park City, Utah, last visited campus in November, and he got a look at the activity that was taking place at the now-bustling University Square. What he saw pleased him a great deal.

“It was functioning as a gathering place,” Peters says. “That made me feel good.” 🏠

The Hub Café is interested in creating a display to commemorate the Albatross. Alumni with memorabilia should contact the TODAY editor at today@mnsu.edu.

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