The Bird Mall

ALTHOUGH ENCLOSED ARCADES existed for many years in Europe, shopping malls are an American creation. The first plaza appeared in 1922, but it wasn’t until 1956 that a roofed-over complex opened. Downtowns since have had to compete with all-weather, suburban Main Streets, where the central focus is not a courthouse but a department store.

Pennsylvania’s first mall was reportedly Northway Mall on McKnight Road in the North Hills area of Pittsburgh. It began as a strip plaza with an A&P grocery, a bank, and a hardware store, but was enclosed in 1962. Northway Mall was anchored by Horne’s largest suburban store and a Woolworth’s. The mall cultivated its image as a family destination, and even the early plaza offered a 300-seat community room with kitchen and stage. But the mall’s most intriguing feature was a lush tropical decor, including a floor-to-ceiling aviary having a mynah bird, a Chinese pheasant, and several dozen parakeets. Children quickly dubbed the chirp-filled place “The Bird Mall.”

The aviary has since closed, as have Horne’s, Woolworth’s, and A&P. Northway Mall lives on, but remodelled and without the birds. — Text by Brian Butko and Kate McGroder, photo courtesy HSWP Library & Archives.