



Anne Shiflet (shopping with daughter, Tatum) says she often visits the Domain at least once a week.

# A NEW BREED OF RETAIL

As Austin's population grows, so too does its taste for the finer things

BY A.J. MISTRETTA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRETT BUCHANAN

In the last decade, the city of Austin's per capital income has jumped 40 percent.

Who says Austinites don't know Dolce from Gabbana? On a crisp night last March, the city's party set showed face for the event of the season — the gala debut of Neiman Marcus. Champagne flowed and models pranced as well-heeled crowds absorbed the local version of retail grandeur. There may never have been so much Botox in one place in this city before — ever. Sure the shindig was ostensibly to benefit area charities. But

in reality it was Austin style's coming-out party, a long awaited opportunity for the who's who of Capital City to don tux and gown for something other than a Junior League mixer.

The opening of Neiman Marcus and other upscale shops as part of the first phase of The Domain may well have marked a turning point in the local retail landscape. Certainly, Austin has developed a hodgepodge of upper end shopping

# A NEW ERA IN WINDOW SHOPPING

The city's youthful population makes it a major draw for a new breed of high-end retailers



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through the years — a Nordstrom here, a Saks 5th Avenue there. But in luring retail's A-Game—stores like Barney's New York, Louis Vuitton and Tiffany — the developers of the mixed-use Domain proved that the city can sustain a new level of shopping, at least in theory.

For decades Austin has held itself out as a renegade, the anti-establishment cousin of more materialistic Texas cities. Like it or not, a wife beater and jeans still gets you into just about anywhere in this town. So it's no surprise then that more than a few gathered at that swanky Neimans gala were compelled to point out that The Domain looks like something people here have been fighting tooth-and-nail for years. In a word, it looks Dallas.

In a city that prides itself on vintage and thrift, loathing the fashion-conscious — and arguably pretentious — city 170 miles north has passed popular banter status to border on cliché. In truth, Austin isn't in imminent danger of turning metropolis overnight. But the city is changing. The population is growing. And not many of those moving here to exploit that intangible "high quality of life" have a clue what the city once was or what it holds dear. They do know what they want though, and they have the money to buy it.

Recognizing this, retailers from coast to coast are looking to tap into the local scene. Call it the upscalization effect; out with vintage, in with Valentino. Whether it's The Domain, the evolving Market District at Sixth and Lamar or Second Street downtown, Austin shopping is getting trendier, hipper, and much more expensive.

Anne Shiflet knows her way around Prada, Gucci and Louis Vuitton. But in

years past, she and her husband Gord haven't found much of what they want in local stores. So the Austin couple got their label fix on regular trips to places like Las Vegas and New York. That's changing.

Shiflet says she sometimes hits The Domain as often as once a week to check out the latest at stores like Intermix and Ralph Lauren.

"I think there's just a hunger here [for fine retail]", she says. "There are people in Austin with money to spend and they're probably excited that they finally have somewhere to spend it."

Local retail experts agree. Many have long pointed to the fact that Austin was losing out on significant sales tax revenue because of its lack of high-end retail, pushing locals to shop in bigger cities. In a way though, it made sense.

"Historically Austin was first, not a very large city, and second, a city without a

lot of high net worth," says Eric DeJernett, senior vice president with CB Richard Ellis. But with the advent of the local tech boom that gave birth to Dell-ionaires and other overpaid execs, Austin rapidly developed an upper class. In the last decade the city's per capita income rose more than 40 percent.

The onslaught of high-end retailers "has everything to do with the influx of people, particularly young people, and the higher levels of income that they are enjoying today in Austin," says Angelos Angelou principal of Austin consulting firm Angelou Economics. The 25 to 44-year-old segment of the local population — typically the most sought after among retailers — has a much higher percentage of personal income than the national average. "Austin is trendy and hip, and all of that contributes to this type of development," says Angelou.

Austin's Second Street District has retailers that were previously only found in larger Texas cities.

