

Mega-malls in your future?

By **Rachael Lax**/ Special To The Tab

Wednesday, October 5, 2005

Imagine spending the weekend at a five-star hotel powered entirely by renewable energy, dining at top-end restaurants in the glow of solar-powered light, and passing a perfect spring day kayaking along a calm river running through the Adirondacks. Sound like an environmentalist's dream vacation? Probably not, if this getaway is Robert Congel's proposed mega-mall, DestiNY U.S.A.

Scheduled to begin construction this summer in Syracuse, N.Y., the \$20 billion "retail-and entertainment complex" of 1,000 shops and restaurants, 80,000 hotel rooms and a 40,000 seat arena will be powered completely by alternative energy sources. Congel envisions this shopping haven to be the world's biggest attraction, bringing in millions of people from around the globe. Not only will guests find all the top-of-the-line shops and major chains, they will also enjoy the biosphere-produced spring-like climate, an artificial mountain peak and a river for kayaking. Moreover, not a single tractor or crane will use fossil fuels in the construction of the complex. Although it sounds like a valiant effort to model and promote mass use of renewable energy, DestiNY may actually be as false as its faux ponds and mountain peaks.

How environment-friendly can a mall really be?

For starters, by encouraging and embracing consumerism, DestiNY defies the environmentalists' motto: "Recycle, Reduce, Reuse." Regardless of its energy sources, a mall is a mall; its primary purpose is to attract consumers to consume more material goods, which will therefore pollute the environment, epitomizing and magnifying the problems of our growing disposable culture. Furthermore, DestiNY is boasted as a post-fossil-fuel project and is expected to attract millions of visitors, but ironically, the only means of transportation to upstate N.Y. is fossil-fuel powered cars and planes, further encouraging fossil-fuel use and pollution. And doesn't the term environment-friendly imply some appreciation for nature? DestiNY will be located in the Adirondacks, one of the most naturally beautiful regions of the United States, yet visitors to the resort will be encapsulated in a fake climate, encouraged to appreciate only the synthetic mountain and artificial river.

Congel, a commercial real-estate developer, is currently owner of 25 malls. He is a businessman, not an environmentalist, and his motives are suspect. He claims that DestiNY, which will be bigger and better than Disney, will save upstate New York's declining economy. The locals are skeptical, like the architect who said: "He is hardly interested in the environment or the well-being of anything in the city aside from his financial interests." Because Congel is expected to receive significant government funding and enormous tax breaks from the state, his professed concern for our planet looks more like a thinly disguised effort to exploit growing public environmental concern.

On the other hand, perhaps DestiNY offers a unique opportunity for public education. Promoting alternate energy sources through a multibillion-dollar project will surely bring environmental issues to the public's attention. And beyond merely modeling the use of alternative power sources, the project has enormous potential to encourage

mechanisms for mitigating the destructive effects of consumerism. Could there in fact be ways to meld consumerism and concern for the environment? Imagine: electronic retail stores that encourage trading in old items to be refurbished and resold; clothing stores that promote clothes drives, supermarkets that sponsor food drives, and DestiNY could choose to give an enormous boost to the use of shopping bags, shipping boxes and receipts made from recycled materials. In theory, a mega-mall could stimulate change, but DestiNY U.S.A., regardless of its proclaimed virtue, may sadly be just another example of unsustainable growth.

Rachael Lax, Wesleyan University 2006, is a Newton North graduate. A psychology major, she spent this past summer working as an intern for the Newton Office of Volunteer Services and volunteered for the Green Decade Coalition.