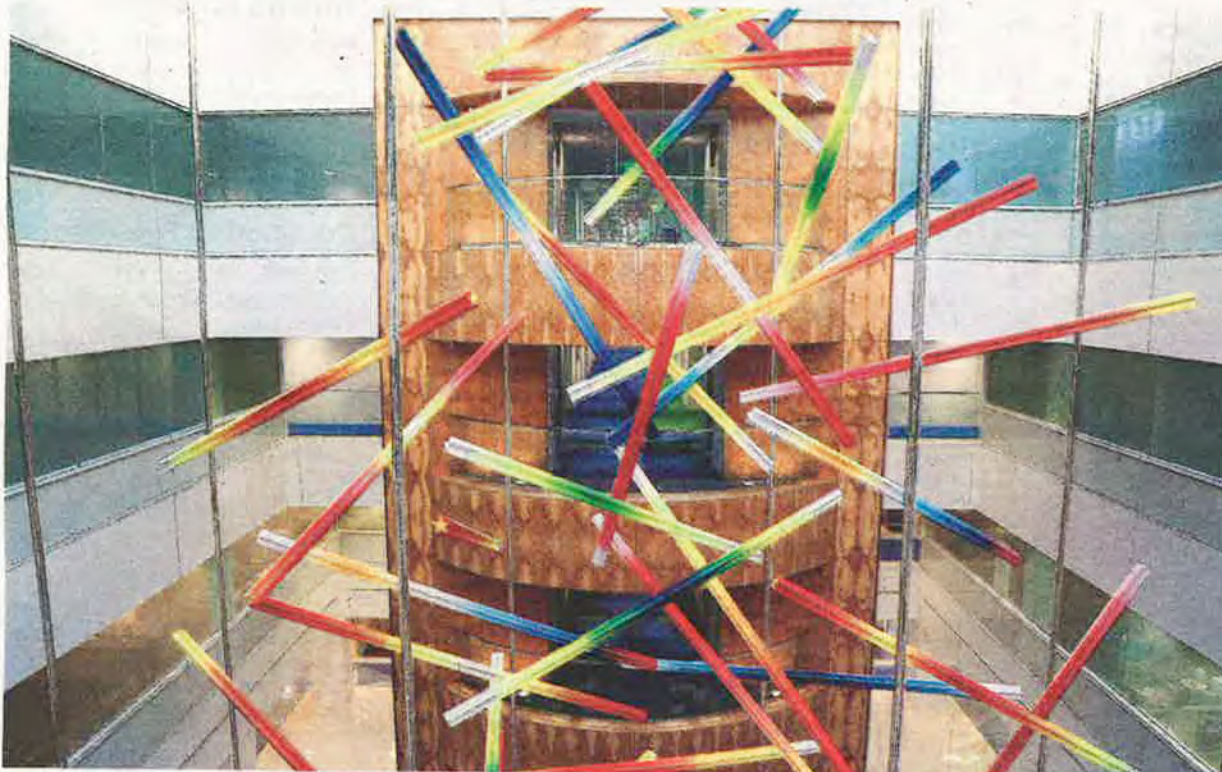


▲ Dow 17,673.02 (+6.62) ▼ S&P500 2,041.51 (-8.52) ▼ NASDAQ 4,716.70 (-11.04) ▼ OIL \$48.45/bbl. (-\$4.60) ▼ 10-YR. NOTE 1.75% (-0.04)

“There’s a lot of investors and foreign money building magnificent homes. DCOTA is definitely coming back.”

Frances Herrera, Fort Lauderdale interior designer



PHOTOS BY SUSAN STOCKER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The renovated atrium inside the Design Center of the Americas in Dania Beach is colorful and eye-catching. Now entering its 30th year, DCOTA has undergone a revival now that the housing market is booming again.

DCOTA experiencing a post-recession revival

BY MIRIAM VALVERDE
Staff writer

Design is becoming fashionable again.

The sprawling Dania Beach design center is once again becoming a destination for designers seeking to outfit luxurious homes in South Florida and beyond, say company executives, designers and retailers.

The center, named the Design Center of the Americas, is a collection of showrooms for designers of high-end fabrics, elaborate lighting fixtures, custom kitchen cabinetry and furniture.

During the recession, many DCOTA designers vanished as their customers scaled back on spending. The number of showrooms at the 775,000-square-foot design center plunged from 120 to about 50.

“There were tenants that just couldn’t make it. They couldn’t hang on. Their customer base had dried up,” said Charles S. Cohen, president and owner of the center at 1855 Griffin Road. “People were cutting back, people were reluctant to spend money on what they would view as non-necessities.

“We’ve now turned the corner.



An overhead view of the renovated atrium inside the Design Center of the Americas in Dania Beach. It’s become a busy place again.

We are seeing expansion. We are seeing tenants and particular showrooms coming to DCOTA from South America, Europe and from other places around the world.

DCOTA has brought up the number of showrooms to about 70, according to the center. Cohen, who also owns other design centers in New York City, Houston and

West Hollywood, Calif., hopes to have about 120 showrooms open within two years.

Florense, a Brazilian brand specializing in kitchen and closet wall units, cabinetry and furniture, opened its third U.S. showroom at DCOTA in 2013. Its other U.S. showrooms are in Chicago and

See DCOTA, 2D



SUSAN STOCKER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Janus et Cie is a luxury outdoor furniture showroom inside the Design Center of the Americas in Dania Beach.

DCOTA

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New York.

Marcel Menegolla, business developer for Florense, says DCOTA's location — between Miami-Dade and Palm Beach County — attracts designers from throughout the tri-county area, particularly those from Boca Raton and Palm Beach who would rather not travel to Miami.

"It's a one-stop shop for designers," he said.

Florense used to have a flagship store in Miami that closed in 2009, Menegolla said, and it no longer had a presence in Florida until 2013.

When it considered opening a South Florida showroom again, it thought of the Miami Design District, but decided against it because "it was taken over by fashion," he said.

Since acquiring the property about a decade ago, Cohen has invested at least \$30 million upgrading the center and transforming it into a "country club atmosphere" for designers. Improvements include an on-site restaurant, better signage, lighting, landscaping and interior finishing.

During the economic downturn, Cohen also began leasing office space for non-design businesses, among them car rental company Avis.

About 185,000 square feet of space at DCOTA is now occupied by offices, Cohen said.

This year, DCOTA turns 30 years old.

"I think it's not unfair to say that every 30-year-old has always gone through some growing pains," Cohen said. "You can call it adolescence, you can call it young adulthood, but I think DCOTA has turned the corner, weathered the storm quite well."

Frances Herrera, president of Frances

Herrera Interior Design in Fort Lauderdale, says she's noticed DCOTA's revival.

The interior designer moved to South Florida from New York about three years ago. She used to frequent Cohen's Decoration & Design Building in Manhattan, one full of energy with designers running in and out.

Her first time at DCOTA was a bit of a shock, she said. She was swooned by the center's valet service, grand, well-kept premises and amenities.

"But when you walked in, it was a like a ghost town. You could hear your echo," Herrera recalled. "It was a beautiful and glamorous establishment, but nobody was there. The only people in the showrooms were the people who worked there.

"I thought, 'Is there no interior design business in South Florida?'"

It's not like that anymore, she said.

"Now, it's a completely different story," Herrera said. "The market has turned around. There's a lot of investors and foreign money building magnificent homes. DCOTA is definitely coming back."

More designers wander the campus, more showrooms are opening up and more events take place to promote the center and

industry, she said.

DCOTA is a go-to destination for Herrera when she's working on homes with a minimum design budget of a quarter-million dollars, she said.

The center is open to the public, but not all showrooms sell to the end consumer. Instead they work directly with designers.

"You can definitely see changes," Herrera said of DCOTA. "You can tell by the energy."

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Frances Herrera is a prominent Fort Lauderdale interior designer.