



Photos by MICHAEL MALONEY / The Chronicle

The historic dome from the old Emporium store will be part of the new Bloomingdale's project in San Francisco.

Framing retail's future

By Dan Levy
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The ceremonial final steel beam was hoisted into place Wednesday in a topping-off ceremony at the Bloomingdale's development, setting up the final construction phase for a project that is about to have a huge impact on downtown retail in San Francisco.

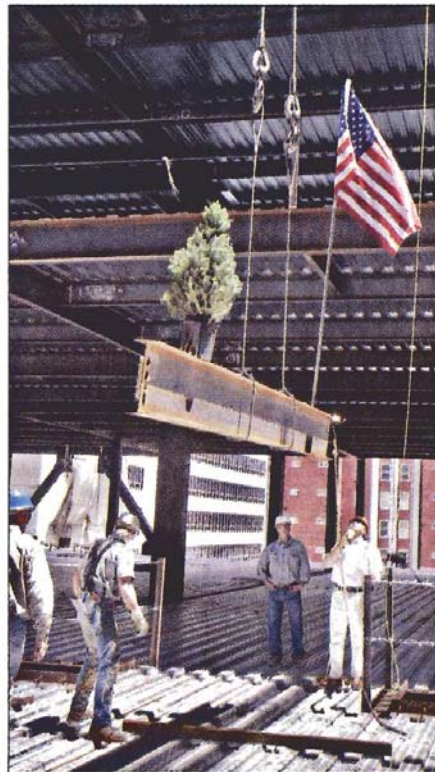
Bloomingdale's mall gets final beam fitted atop structure

Eager shoppers have to wait only 16 months before reveling in 1 million square feet of new shops, restaurants and cinemas — a combined consumeristic and architectural bonanza that will make Bloomingdale's the single largest retail magnet in the city.

"You guys got us here to this milestone date," project superintendent Tony Williamson told a group of 300 construction workers just before the topping-off beam was raised by crane to the top of the massive steel skeleton stretching from Market Street to Mission Street.

More than 9,500 tons of steel have been used in the framing, which has lasted 18 months. Construction of the interior comes next, and completion is set for fall 2006.

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Steel workers, under the direction of supervisors Lee Wakamatsu (right) and Tony Williamson (center), raise the Bloomingdale project's final steel beam on Wednesday.

Bloomington's mall project topped off

► STEEL

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Retail experts said the mall will have a major effect on downtown retail, which suffered badly after the dot-com crash and is only now beginning to rebound.

"The economy keeps plugging along, and we're seeing new retailers coming onto the market around Union Square," said Seth Nodelman, senior director of retail services at Cushman & Wakefield. "But there is no question that Bloomington's is going to put downward pressure on rents and pull Union Square south."

Two retail operations are about to open near Union Square.

Zara, a Spanish brand sometimes likened to the Gap, took 18,000 square feet at the former Eddie Bauer store at 250 Post St. in the heart of the Union Square district.

H&M, a Swedish apparel company known for "disposable fashion," inexpensive but stylish clothes, is building a 40,000-square-foot store at 150 Powell St., down the block from the square.

Nodelman said the Bloomington's project, which will include 300,000 square feet of enclosed retail space, may be the right place for retail tenants who can't afford the high street-front rents at Union Square. Ground floor rents in the square today average about \$200 per square foot, he said, with premium space running as high as \$500 per square foot.

Westfield, one of Bloomington's co-developers, has malls all over the world and relationships

with retailers that could be persuaded to come to its new San Francisco location.

"They were very aggressive at the (recent shopping center) convention in Las Vegas," Nodelman said. "Westfield knows people everywhere. I'm sure they will try to leverage those relationships."

Najla Tabbah, a marketing director for Westfield, said the company has signed up some tenants but is not ready to announce any leases.

When it is done, the Bloomington's project will include the department store, the restored dome and Market Street facade of the old Emporium store, a nine-screen cinema and more than 300,000 square feet of retail shops.

"It's the largest construction project on the West Coast except for the Bay Bridge," Williamson, the superintendent, told the assembled steelworkers, glaziers, sheet metal workers, pipe fitters, electricians and plumbers.

Both Bloomington's and Nordstrom, in fact, will be owned and operated by Westfield and Forest City. Technically, the combined centers are to be known as Westfield San Francisco Centre, although it's anybody's guess whether that moniker will stick.

The steel framing job was complicated by the special requirements of handling the Emporium's dome, rotunda and Market Street facade, which are the only historic elements from the 19th century department store being retained in the new project.

A system was devised for brac-



MICHAEL MALONEY / The Chronicle

Superintendent Lee Wakamatsu watches the ceremonial last steel beam rise to the top of the Bloomington project's frame.

ing both the dome and the facade.

The star of the topping-off show was Hayward resident Lee Wakamatsu, 62, who is retiring after spending 40 years as a steelworker, mostly on construction jobs in the Bay Area.

Now a field superintendent in charge of a crew of 29, Wakamatsu was given the honor of ordering the ceremonial beam into place with the command of "Up easy."

The beam was decorated with an evergreen tree, a tradition that began centuries ago with Scandinavian builders who believed that spirits would be appeased if they placed a tree atop their new buildings.

Wakamatsu said he has performed every aspect of a steelworker's job during his career, which started on U.S. missile sites

in North Dakota in 1966 and has taken him to Oregon, Washington, Alaska and Hawaii.

"I've been in raising gangs, plumb-up crews and bolt crews," he said. He lost the tips of two fingers on his left hand while driving piles for a bridge project over the Sacramento River in 1969. He was lucky to have the tips sewn back on, leaving only faint scars.

"Nothing really serious," Wakamatsu said with a shrug. "Some ironworkers have missing fingers."

He has helped build the airport and several high-profile office buildings in San Francisco — Hills Plaza, 333 Bush St., 444 Market St. and 101 Second St.

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