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talk

Stephen Roberts is the **Chairman** of the architectural firm **Bentel Associates**. As one of the driving forces behind Bentel Associates, Stephen has a significant role to play in its success. He has four decades of experience in the architectural business and holds a degree in Building Construction from the Brixton School of Building, London, UK. He was previously with Norman and Dawbarn Architects and Ivan Schlapobersky & Partners. He is the member of SCAI - Shopping Centre Association of India. Roberts has been an esteemed panelist in many forums such as India Shopping Centre Forum and India Retail Forum. He also has many authored articles to his fame. Roberts is based in South Africa and travels to India often. **Stephen Roberts** spoke to **Architecture Update** on the areas to focus on while designing retail or a mixed use interiors.

Mixed-use is the way to go

— **Stephen Roberts**, Chairman, Bentel Associates

Q. Please discuss your design strategies while designing a mall or retail interiors?

A. Interiors which are being designed for retail or commercial purposes are constantly changing. One has to be up to date about the design trends in the sector.

We try to make spaces sufficient enough for feeling the openness as the open spaces are essential for visual interaction, natural lighting and effective air conditioning. The efficiency of malls is the best when there is 80: 20 per cent ratio for commercial and open spaces including the



common areas. The open spaces ensure that there is enough visual connectivity between different levels. The openings also provide natural lighting which makes the building more energy efficient. This would also help keeping balance in heat gain and reducing the use of air-conditioning systems. While openings are made for natural light to seep in, one should make sure that correct glass is used, which is heat-reflective. The floor-to-floor height is another important approach which controls the heat within. Indian developers should look into these matters and should increase this height, just not considering only the cost issues. The floor to floor height ideally should be minimum 4.5 to 5 meters. Use of colour and lighting are other key aspects of mall design.

Q. Other than the retails projects, what kind of work are you doing in India?

A. We have done offices and residential projects. It is mostly mixed use projects that we go for, which is a combination of retail, hotel and offices. We are also doing a couple of residential project in India which have kick started recently. Most of our mixed use projects are based on the retail part. The developers in India are also looking for maximizing the efficiency of space for which mixed-use is ideal. Retails form the basis of development. Then we decide upon rest of the space based on the location and the need. Free standing offices or hotels can be put together in the retail centric mixed use development. At present we are involved in retail development with multi-storied apartment projects in Coimbatore and Dehradun in India.

Q. When you are designing office areas, how do you plan the interiors?

A. The interior design concept for offices very much depends up on whether it is for a corporate office project or for multiple tenants. The design for corporate interiors should follow certain specified standards including their colours. If it is for a multiple office space which is to be leased out to the tenants, then we should know their requirements. We design comfortable spaces with great finishes.

Q. What about furniture and lighting for office spaces?

A. If it is a corporate office, we select the samples of furniture including



desks, chairs, and soft furniture, etc., assemble them within the entire interior intact. It is a process which needs a lot of planning and understanding the client's requirements. Since the clients will have their own say in specifications of furniture in terms of colour, quality and material, designer may not have much of flexibility at times. At the same time, while doing the retail part in a mixed use project, the designer has a free hand relatively, for selecting materials and design for the interiors. Thus there is much more flexibility in retail design.

Q. How do you carry out a project?

A. We have done few projects in India. First we go with the pre-concept plan to the developer. Our plan is based on location of the site, looking at the town planning rights (especially for our projects in South Africa). We come up with few options as to how we configure the site looking at three most important aspects. I.e., **access, parking and Visibility**. Looking at these three key elements in mind, we recommend one option which we feel would be most efficient one for the project. Then we do the concept planning. Once the concept is approved by the developer, involving rest of the professional team we carry out the project.

In India we are doing a mixed use - Residential + commercial project - in Coimbatore, which is a high rise development. The residential project planning rules in India is completely different from what we do in South Africa. Hence we have to study, analyse, and go for the best functional and efficient design.

Q. Could you please tell us about your experiences while working on Indian projects?

A. Working in India is quite different from that in South Africa. Design wise it is not so. But the way in which things are put together, the cost of development, etc are very different here. With the pre-planned budgets, it is much easier to do asses the cost in South African projects. But in developer-oriented Indian projects, since the financial part of the project is very much in the hands of the developer, the designer has not much of say on the selection of materials or the design expanse. It may so happen that, in the middle of the project, the developer is worried about the cost, and we may have to change the material chosen or the plan for the interior itself at times. If there is a specified budget for the interior designing, like how it is done in other developed countries, it is much easier to work on projects. But this is not the case in India.

With reference to the quality of material and acceptability standards, or the artisan and their skills, India is exceptionally good. The skilled manpower and knowledge of designers/ architects are also very good and people are prepared to work harder here in India. The designers have thirst for knowledge and they are up to date on technologies too. So I would like to use their skills in our projects in other countries too! ▲

