

DESIGN

INNOVATIVE IDEAS IN MALL DESIGN

Malls today are not just meant for shopping, rather these have become places of social interaction. Sales generated in shopping centre depend upon the amount of time people spend there. It has therefore become all the more important for mall developers to innovatively design their property to keep the customers entertained for longer

BY STEPHEN ROBERTS



When it comes to planning and designing of shopping malls, the first basic principle is to remember that despite the change in trends over various

generations, the reasons people shop remain the same and principles of good planning must be adhered to. Over the past 50 years, we have witnessed retail evolving from shops on high streets to strip malls, enclosed centres and multi-level super shopping malls. But in spite of all these variations, few constants such as location, access, visibility, good parking, a well-planned footprint and a good tenant mix will never change and contribute to successful mall development.

Everything else you do is complementary only to these fundamental principles. Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule, but in general, if you are guided by these, you should have a successful development. So, given these so-called unchangeable principles, what innovative ideas should we expect in mall design?

Shopping centre today is what a village square used to be long ago - not only a place to shop but also a place of community, and these two have an important link. Research has shown that the amount of money spent in a mall increases with the amount of time the customer spends there. Any innovation in designing shopping centres, therefore, will be focussed on how to keep the customer entertained for longer.

The big difference between the old village square and today's shopping mall is not the basic function of shopping but the amount of social interaction. Malls are in the leisure business as much as they are involved in retailing. Shopping is not just a matter of selling and buying, it involves emotions and interaction of people. Shopping needs to go beyond just a necessary function to become a pleasant outing. There should be some creative ideas that will contribute to making malls more socially interactive. The best place to achieve this is the food court comprising either fast foods, restaurants or both, and this is the one thing that Indian shopping centres do well. But the question is - "Can these be improved in the future?"

According to me, this is where the social element plays a big part in recreating what I call the village square or the community meeting place. Food courts are not just about serving food, rather these are the places where people meet, which also happen to offer food. The purpose of food courts in malls is not to get people to eat and leave as these are not retailer's canteens. Food courts want people to meet friends and family, share some quality time together, compare shopping bags, and talk about the mall and its tenants. To achieve this, food courts must avoid low-quality furniture and finishes must be warm to create comfort rather than hard tiled surface that may be easy to

■ MALL DEVELOPERS ARE GIVING PERSONALISED SHOPPING EXPERIENCE TO THE CUSTOMERS



■ OPEN AND SPACIOUS COMMON AREA IN A MALL IS ABLE TO ACCOMMODATE LARGE NUMBER OF FOOTFALL



■ PEOPLE SPEND A LOT OF TIME IN FOOD COURT, SO MALL DEVELOPERS SHOULD EMPHASISE ON ITS DESIGN ASPECT



■ GREENING OF MALLS IS NOT A MATTER OF CHOICE ANY MORE; IN MOST COUNTRIES IT IS ALREADY A LEGISLATION

To have a better food court, mall owners need not think about changing the tenants, rather they should create an inviting space and add some high-end fine dining locations to complement the tenants. In the Indian context, food courts play a big role in being able to add an extra floor to the mall and link it to the multiplex. I am not sure what the figures are for India, but according to an ICSC survey in the United States, only 7 percent of the shoppers say that they go to a mall specifically to eat. In other words, stopping for a meal becomes only one part of the shopping trip, though at the same time the study reveals that food service is the second most lucrative segment of non-anchor tenants. In that case, it would make sense to create food courts more comfortable and pleasant for the customers.

Mall owners want their customers to stay longer since the length of a shopping trip is directly connected to sales per square foot. So something has to be done to keep the customers stay for long in the mall. Shopping centre owners can create different food zones catering to different demographics; create special areas for men where they can enjoy while their wives shop; instead of locating the tenants just around the perimeter of food court, try introducing something like a sushi bar where customers can sit around the bar and watch the food being prepared; or make a business centre where men can drop in to watch news or surf the Internet.

In order to make shopping trips a more personalised experience, malls have to be more welcoming, with common areas and food courts where people feel comfortable and are prepared to spend more time. Much of this can be achieved by

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carefully chosen finishes, using natural textures such as stones and wood, strategically placed furniture and lighting that need not add too much to the capital expenditure, but at the same time create a more homely feel.

One cannot think about innovation without considering the need for energy saving and sustainability. Consumers are becoming lot more conscious of green building design, so it is a developer's interest to acknowledge that. Even more critical, major national tenants also are protecting or enhancing their images by adopting green principles in their own stores, and therefore more demand will come from these major tenants than the landlords. Retailers and developers both have to realise that customers are increasingly becoming aware of environmental issues.

Most developers, when faced with sustainability, almost immediately think of increased capital cost. But greening of malls is not a matter of choice any more; in most countries, it is already a legislation. Depending on the location, it has been calculated that making a project green increases the capital cost by 3-5 percent,

which does not sound much. But on a project worth 300 mn, whatever currency, that is an additional cost of 9 to 15 mn.

On the positive side, despite higher capital costs, there is no question that green solutions do provide longer-term savings in the efficient use of water and energy. These solutions include rain water harvesting, natural light, alternative energy sources such as solar power, LED lights and advanced cooling systems. Mall developers can also contribute to the environmental consciousness by providing simple facilities such as waste bins that separate paper from other waste products and by providing recycling stations in parking areas where the public can dispose of paper and glass in large quantities because people are increasingly becoming concerned about the well-being of our planet and want to recycle their waste. So mall management should also play a great role in this by ensuring that their tenants also contribute to energy efficiency.

Hence, there are two areas where innovation in retail design is required. One is a choice to provide activities that transform the shopping trip into a social event. The other is a result of reacting to the needs of the world in which we live and the problems of climate change. ■■■



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