



How to Design a Mall Inside-out

Understanding customer habits & expectations play a very important role in the design of any mall

For most Developers, especially the first time Mall developers, building a Mall is their sentimental dream project, about which they are very passionate. The project starts with great enthusiasm & fervor, but many a times this dream soon turns into a nightmare, when reality strikes and it is realized that mistakes have been made which are irreversible. In most cases, the crux of the problem is improper planning & a disorganized design approach. The problem arises when one designs the space & decides to build without proper understanding or knowledge of the business requirements. Most Malls in India have been designed outside - in, which means that the elevation of the mall has been given too much of importance than the actual mall inside. Infact, many architects first make the error of designing an elevation of the mall first, to impress upon the mall developer, which is a sure ingredient of failure.

Today, we have so many malls opening in the country, but at the same time, there are only a very few who are able to sustain the treacherous path of retail. Many of these malls are either closing or dying at the same pace. One of the primary reasons for the decline of the mall is the improper Design & Planning. The Mall's design has to be custom made, to suit the specific retail needs. The developer has to have a clear thought process & vision of what he wishes to make & for whom. One should not refrain from taking professional help in this context.

A common mistake is that while designing a Mall, a lot of emphasis is given to the look & feel or exterior finishes of the Mall, but not as much to the basic circulation planning, zoning – with respect to the site & project requirements. Look & feel undoubtedly is an important factor, however, an efficient Design, Planning & Circulation is most critical. For example; A Mall in the suburbs of Mumbai, which opened around 2004-05, is till today known amongst the best Malls in the country. The reason for this success is probably, an impeccable operations team but moreover a very efficient Mall Design. At the same time, a mall which is much newer & having better finishes, is probably not doing well & the brands are dying or shuffling every 6 months. Which brings us to realize that without the correct Mall Design & Planning, even the best Mall Management team will not be able to deliver.

An efficient design is always driven by common sense. But having said that, there is always a certain science of shopping involved. Understanding customer habits & expectations play a very important role in the design of any mall.

Simple steps to achieve an Efficient Design.

The Right Advice

We would all agree that Shopping Center design is a learning curve, similar to any other aspect of Retail. In most cases it is very difficult to get everything right the first time. Therefore, considering the multiple complexities involved, it is most advisable to appoint an “Shopping Mall Specialist”. The Shopping Mall Specialist brings in, in depth knowledge, expertise, understanding & experience in various aspects of running a shopping center. In simple words one could say that these people have become experts by the sheer virtue of the number of mistakes made by them & more importantly by learning from their mistakes. This expert could either be an individual or a group of people generally from the background of Operations & Leasing, Design Architects etc. with in-depth understanding of the Mall Mechanics. The objective of having such experts is that they can bring in a clear thought process and can handhold the entire development from the initial concept stages, till the Mall opening. Beyond Squarefeet is the leading Mall Advisory in India by size, by team, by topline, by projects, etc.

About the Author:

Susil S. Dungarwal is the Chief Mall Mechanic of Beyond Squarefeet Advisory Pvt. Ltd, a shopping mall specialist company. A true home grown retailer & Mall Professional, with over 24 years of experience, he has worked in a continuum of retail Chains & Mall Development Projects. He has been involved with many reputed retail, realestate projects, spanning over 20 Million sq. ft. For long he has been a visiting faculty & guest lecturer in top business schools across India.



Mr. Dungarwal has been associated with reputed retail & Mall brands such as Saint Mark, Big Kids Kemp, Shoppers' Stop, Haiko Supermarket, The LOFT, The LOOT, The Forum Malls (Prestige Group), Emaar MGF Malls, Ishanya, Neptune Magnet Mall, Bergamo, Lonavala Square, CG Malls (Nepal), Parco Mall (Doha) and is successfully carrying the mantle of the Shopping Mall Specialist from conceptualization to Mall Management.

Infact, such Mall Advisors / Shopping Mall Specialists should be on board, even before you initiate dialogue/hire an architect.

Clarity in Concept

It is very crucial to have the right concept worked out for the Mall. There are various factors on the basis of which a Concept is based i.e. Market Study / Market Survey, Customer Expectations, Demographics, Geographic Conditions, size of the land parcel, whether the Mall is part of a larger Mixed Use Development or whether it is stand alone etc.

In simple words, once the Developer has identified the concept for their dream project, it is important that this dream is shared with all the concerned Design Partners & Mall Advisors so that they are then completely in sync with what the developer's expectations are.

The most important stakeholder in terms of Design of the Mall is undoubtedly the Architect as he/ she is the custodian of the Design; therefore, it is very critical that Developer's Mall vision is shared with the Design Architect. The appropriate method of sharing this vision & the expectations from the design is through a document commonly known as the 'Design Brief to Architect'. The ownership of making of this 'Design Brief to Architect' lies with the Developer or the Mall Advisor – incase appointed.

Choosing the Right Architect

For most Developers, this decision is always a confusing one; whether they should appoint international architects, which is the trend set by the Leading Mall Developers or whether they should hire a renowned Indian Architect to entirely design the project, which would attract & convince the local consumer about the development & instill confidence in them.

Which-ever may be the case, what is most important is that the Architect who has been assigned the job, should not only have an in-depth understanding & knowledge of Retail Architecture but should have a hands on approach & a grasp of the local market trends, shopping habits etc.

Design Brief to Architect;

Generally when the Design of a Mall fails, more often then not, the Architect is held responsible for this down fall. This may be true to an extent, however, at the same time it is essential to understand that the Architect's design can only be, functionally - as good or as bad, as the Design Brief given to him. Therefore, it is very important that the correct brief is given to the Architect and his team, as this is the first & most critical touch point in the Mall Design process. The 'Brief to Architect' should be clear, simple & easy to understand. All the requirements & expectations from the design should be clearly listed down.

A good brief should at least cover the following aspects;

Introduction;

The introduction of the brief should be intended to give the reader a complete understanding about the following;

- It is very important the reader is aligned and given an understanding of the objective of the 'Brief to Architect'.
- The developer's background with details about the group and its success in various ventures.
- Details about the City & Location should be mentioned in 'Brief to Architect'.
- It should also mention the considerations & provide understanding of the basis of the data source, e.g. whether it is through a market research or through direct site visit etc.

Project Vision;

To align the Architect with the developers vision it is important to share the Developers objective & inspiration for the proposed project and why the project is important to the group, For, e.g. Whether the key vision is to create this development as a dedicated shopping mall or a mix use project comprising of components such as a Star Hotel and a Shopping Mall etc.

Project Positioning;

This is an extension of the project vision where, the intended positioning of the project should be shared in the 'Brief to Architect', e.g. The Mall is positioned to create a landmark project in the heart of the city.

Aesthetic Brief:

This 'Brief to the Architect' should provide an understanding of the proposed design language. As earlier mentioned, this intended design language is generally an outcome of the market study & Mall positioning. For example if the market study indicates that the people of the city want a high-end mall, automatically the design language would be directed accordingly. However, having said that, it is important to define the Design language within this parameter e.g. if the research shows that the people of the town prefer a traditional looking building, then this is the broad parameter, however, the brief should define whether the developer desires a blend of the traditional & contemporary or a full fledged

traditional structure.

Planning brief

Normally the circulation theme is always planned by the architect in conjunction to the shape of the building, which to a large extent is dictated by the shape & size of the plot. However, it is always advisable to share the basic theme desired by the Developer, considering that they have a prior understanding of the property & the surrounding areas, the people habits e.g.

- Whether a single entry or multiple entries should be planned, depending on the location & main road access etc.
- Or clarity on whether multiple atriums should be avoided or planned etc.
- Operational requirements e.g. all stores to have a rear service entry.

Clear expectations from the design in terms of circulation should be highlighted, e.g. the whole mall to be positioned as a 100% wheel chair accessible etc.

- Clarity on, which level the travollators/ escalators are required.
- Nos of guest and service Elevator required for customer areas and service areas.
- Main access entry to Mall, parking etc.

Infrastructure Requirements;

Sufficient clarity on all technical & infrastructure requirements should be provided in the brief, as it is important for the Architect to know the requirement prior to planning.

Understanding the Leasing Concept:

It is essential that the right leasing concept be explained to the Architect, these details are generally provided by the Mall Advisor or Leasing Experts. This brief should provide a clear understanding of the basic zoning and its related requirements, which is based on the detailed study of the research data. A wish list of the required locations of the different format is mentioned e.g. a Grocery store is required on a specific floor, Anchor stores on 1st & 2nd floor etc. This data is necessary because it gives clarity to the architect of the different services & infrastructure requirement of each of the format so that they can plan accordingly.

Changing Trend

Although it is an internationally accepted practice, to have a special team or shopping

mall specialist to Conceptualise efficiently, manage & coordinate the Design planning phase. However, which was, till recently a lack of understanding of the importance of an organised approach towards Mall Design & Planning, by most Mall developers- though there are numerous Malls coming up in our country.

With the new generation of Malls now coming into existence, every aspect of Mall development is becoming critical, ergonomic, scientific, requirement driven & process driven there by creating a niche for every segment of Mall development to be of great importance. All the new Malls being developed in the country now, clearly display the characteristics of better Mall Development.

Process Flow

