

# Insights into Fit-Out Management

By Susil Dugarwal & Anand Ray

**Ignorance or lack of expertise in planning is often the primary reason for malls getting delayed in the fit-out phase. Getting about 150 odd retailers to be aligned with the developer's dream and the fit-out manual, not only creates confusion and chaos, but may sometimes lead to loss of relationships. Professional fit-out management is critical to not only ensure timely delivery of the mall but also to lay the right foundation for its timeless appeal and success.**

In the early years of organised mall retailing in India, it was believed that a great location, good circulation pattern, and the right tenant mix could guarantee 100 per cent success. However, today, with the rising competition, mall developers are beginning to realise that they need something more than just the right building and brands – they find that great looking and well designed stores are as important. The appearance of the stores directly reflects the mall's positioning and impacts its overall image. For example, if a mall has been positioned as a premium space, making use of the best materials in the common areas to achieve the desired look & feel; it's very important to communicate the same philosophy to all the licensees to ensure its implementation, such that the licensees don't end up making stores which are inferior or not in sync with the mall's design philosophy.

To ensure this balance, the new generation malls follow a process of Design & Fit-out Management. This can be simply described as a process where a dedicated team of retail design architects manage the whole gamut of store fit-outs in the mall. These teams could be in-house or

outsourced. More and more malls, nowadays, prefer to outsource this process to a professional team specialising in fit-out management rather than resorting to an in-house team. A focused approach is desirable as it is a complex process requiring constant involvement of the team, right from the concept design stages, to monitoring of the site execution until final fit-out completion and store opening.

Internationally, this process has evolved over the years, and now

years back. Storefront signages is a small example of how the design and fit-out management has improved the look and feel of new malls. The first generation malls in India had the conventional 'Box' type storefront signages, which were generally placed in front of the glazing; and the emphasis on visual merchandising, lighting and other design aspects was minimal. However, now the new generation malls and their fit-out management teams emphasise



is very streamlined. Malls under fit-outs have multiple teams of two members – one person to drive the design and another to drive the site co-ordination and project delivery.

Although this process is fairly new in India, it is fast being recognised as a specialised field. Malls, today, bear a completely different look, compared to a few

on the significance of various aspects of store design. There is a significant change in the way the stores are being designed today – the storefront signages are much more vibrant, there is a lot of focus on visual merchandising, and creating interesting window displays. Storefronts and signages are just a small part of the whole



gamut of things that the fit-out teams manage – from initiation of the store design to driving of fit-out completion until store opening. Let's take an in-depth view of what goes into fit-out management.

## Managing Pre Fit-out Processes

The first action point in the fit-out process is the creation of a

Design & Fit-out Criteria Document. As the name suggests, this criteria document is created to provide the licensee and his architects, a detailed insight into the mall's design philosophy, and to ensure that they are in sync with the same. This particular document sets out to identify the character of the retail environment established by

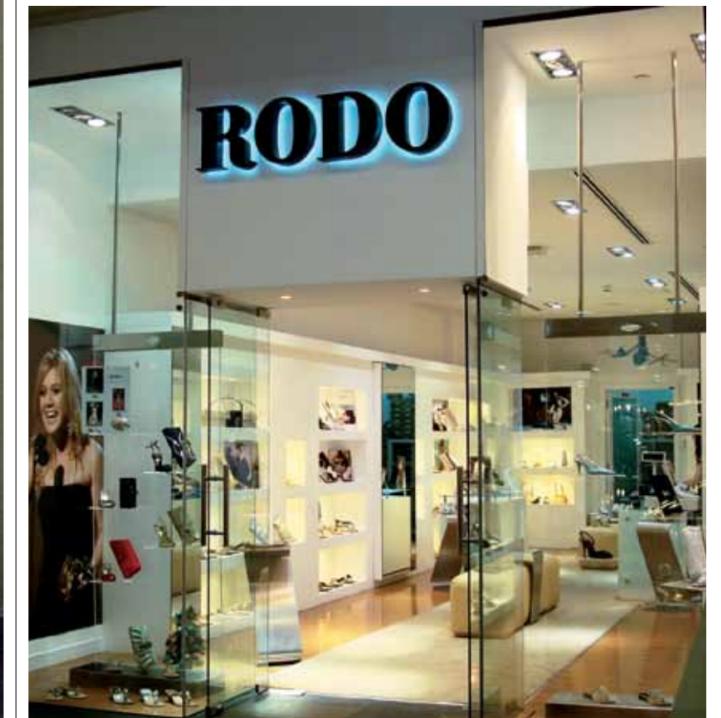
the developer, the intended aim of which is both – a stunning and a comfortable retail experience. It's part of the constant endeavor of a developer to keep improving the presentation of the mall's retail spaces, at par with international standards. The modern day design criteria aim to give the Licensee complete freedom to express

their individuality through the store design layout, materials and storefront signages, to create vibrant and exciting retail spaces. All the technical aspects, safety and security aspects, and ecological conservation are elaborated and well articulated within this document. With vivid pictorial presentation, the criteria manual attempts to encourage and inspire brands to create stores with engaging ambience that can establish emotional connect with the consumers.

Alongside the Criteria document, the Line Out Drawings (LOD) or Services Drawing as they

typical storefront drawing to be followed by licensee etc. The licensee is obliged to engage the services of professional architects, designers & MEP consultants to prepare store designs and drawings and to manage the fit-out ensuring that the work is executed in accordance with the standards laid out in the fit-out criteria.

The release of the Criteria document to the retailer along with the LOD and a list of drawings, which the retailer is required to submit, marks the start of the design process, this is also referred to as 'Activation' of Fit-out process. This entire effort is concentrated



are commonly referred to, are prepared. The objective of these drawings is to provide detailed information and understanding of the condition of the premises, required by the licensee's architects to commence store designing. This communicates the dimensional details, along with details of all services provided within the store,

towards creating stunning stores with successful atmosphere as that is the key to better business opportunities and a wonderful retail experience.

Parallel to this Drawing Approval process, the Fitout management team also carries out a detailed site survey to check the site readiness, so as to check that all



the works within the mall's scope are completed and that the site is ready for the retailer to move in. This includes a clean and complete shell with plastered walls on three sides, all MEP provisions complete, mall neutral columns complete, clear demarcation of the lease line, enclosed from front with a board-out, in case this is in the mall scope. In case, execution of any of these deliverables is missed, it is brought to the notice of the mall project team and its completion is ensured.

Once the brand is activated, the focus shifts to driving of the design approval process, the objective of which is to ensure that the Licensee's proposed drawings are in sync with the mall's design philosophy. During this phase, the mall fit-out management teams, are in constant touch with the licensees to ensure that the licensee has appointed a fit-out architect, the licensee's architects have started the design development process, and that all technical queries which the licensee may have are resolved on time to ensure smooth progress of the design drawings.

Also, through constant follow-ups, it is ensured that complete drawing sets from the retailers are received within the scheduled



timelines. The receipt of the complete drawing set from retailers, marks the start of the Design Evaluation process, which is an exhaustive exercise wherein the complete detailed drawings are reviewed based on numerous parameters, and design value addition and inputs are provided by the design & fit-out teams, to enhance the store planning and design.

**Layout planning & optimum utilisation of space**

- Aesthetics, ambience and lighting
- Storefront & Visual Merchandise display, which are a store's best calling card

- Integration of store's proposed MEP requirement vis-a-vis the mall's infrastructure provision, i.e.:
  - a) Air-conditioning: to evaluate that air conditioning capacity is suitably planned
  - b) Electrical: electrical load proposed by licensee is within the technical parameters of the mall design.
  - c) For F&B: Fresh air, exhaust, water and gas are catered for and in sync with mall infrastructure provision.
- All other critical points in the mall design fit-out, as per the mall criteria and fit-out guidelines

The drawing evaluation is a lengthy process and can take anywhere between 20 days to a month depending on the complexity of the fit-out and the response on the drawings by the retailer's architects. Once both teams – the mall's design team and the licensee's architects – reach a consensus that the design is in line with the mall's design vision, a Design Approval is issued by the mall design team, to close the design process and facilitate initiation of work on site.

The fit-out management team's retail relations expert then takes over the mantle of active co-ordination with the licensee's fit-out team to complete a host of pre-fitout documentation including familiarising the licensee's fit-out team to mall's fit-out norms, operations, safety procedures and processes. After successful completion of all pre-fitout procedures and completion of legal and commercial requirements, permission to 'Move-in' and start the fit-out is issued by the centre manager. For a mall under fit-outs, this is generally the most challenging phase of fit-out management, due to the sheer volume of work happening at a given time. For example, an average size mall of about 200 vanilla stores and four anchors, can have anywhere between 2,000 to 3,000 workers working in the mall premises under one roof, everyday. Therefore, a very organised approach is required to ensure that this phase is carried out smoothly and without accidents or mishaps. The mall fit-out management team works hand in hand with the mall engineering and operation teams to put in place a set of well identified processes to ensure a smooth working. These include:

**Operations, Safety & Security Management :**

- a) Identification of goods entry and worker entry points
- b) Planning designated worker circulation routes
- c) Issuing of identity cards and gate passes to workers working in the building

- d) Stringent material movement measures to ensure that material, which is not permissible as per the mall fit-out guidelines, is not brought into the premises
- e) Keeping a check of all works happening within each store fit-out including welding works etc, so that necessary additional safety measures can be taken
- f) Ensuring that the licensee's fit-out team adheres to all safety norms when working within the premises including safety helmets, safety belts to be worn by all workers, fire extinguisher and first aid box to be placed in stores, emergency contact numbers put up in the stores.



**Engineering Facility Management:**

- a) Monitoring the licensee's fit-out works to ensure that integration of the store's proposed services with the mall provisions are implemented as per the mall fit-out norms and local norms. To ensure this periodic checks are carried out by the mall engineering team, which includes checking of all ceiling services prior to closing of the false ceiling to ensure that best practices have been followed in use of materials and

execution. Also, that adherence to local fire norms, provision of ceiling trap doors etc, as per mall fit-out guidelines is followed.

- b) Ensuring that necessary assistance required by the licensee's fit-out team to carry out the integration between mall and store services is provided, for instance, draining of water from the mall sprinkler system to facilitate connection of store sprinkler to mall's main system etc.

- c) Provision of temporary power / construction water etc to facilitate licensee's fit-out works and requisite metering of the same.

**Design Fit-out Management:**

- a) The Fit-out Management team periodically visits the licensee's site to check the fit-out works to ensure that the work is progressing as per the approved and agreed designs. In case of any deviation in the use of the materials or deviation from the drawings, the same is brought

- b) All the materials used by the licensee's fit-out team are as per mall's prescribed guidelines.
- c) Site progress by the licensee's team is closely monitored and tracked by the fit-out management team to ensure that the fit-out is being executed as per timelines. Periodic site progress reports are sent to the licensee team, any foreseen delays are highlighted in these reports. This process ensures complete transparency in the way the fit-out is managed.

Once the fit-out is nearing completion, the retailer relations executive from the mall fit-out management team, touches base with the licensee's team to follow-up for completion of pre-fitout documentation and submission of the 'As Built' drawings. And once the site fit-out works are completed, a 'Joint Final Fit-out Inspection' is scheduled between the licensee's architects and fit-out team and the entire mall team including the fit-out management team, operations team and engineering team. This process is driven by the fit-out management team. On successful completion of the fit-out including submission of all snags and submission of the 'As Built' drawings as final, Fit-out completion Certificate is issued by the design & fit-out management team. This document is a pre-requisite to store opening. A final permission to open the store is then issued by the center manager, after completion of all other pre-opening documentation and procedures by the licensee's team. In this manner, the fit-out management team ensures smooth completion of fit-outs from initiation, until store opening.

This entire cumbersome exercise known as the 'Fit-out' phase is generally the most apprehensive phase for a mall developer due to the sheer disconnect and lack of understanding of the retail specific needs of each of the retailer. This ever increasing gap is fast being recognised as a potential avenue of providing specialised services to cater to the specific needs of the retail market.

Do's	Don'ts
Plan Fit-out management in advance	Take the risk of making mistakes and learning at the cost of your mall
Create a detailed professional Fit-out Manual	Hire novices
Have competent and experienced people on board	Take fit-out as cost, rather than as an investment
Create a tangible tracking process	Neglect relationships
Timelines & Schedule Management	Mistake fit-outs as PMC

**Key Challenges**

One of the key challenges for a mall developer is to ensure that all the retailers/ occupants of the mall are in sync with the mall specifications pertaining to design, services, infrastructure etc. A mall developer would ideally need a special pool of experienced people, which may consist of mechanical engineers, electrical consultants, plumbing consultants, retail architects and structural consultants, tenant coordinators among others to manage the fit-out of the mall.

sets in, the damage is already done. The complexity increases because of different needs by different occupants in the mall including hypermarkets, department stores, F&B outlets, Family Entertainment Centres multiplied by over 100s of vanilla stores. Getting these 150 odd retailers in an average size mall to be aligned with the developer's dream and the fit-out manual, not only creates confusion and chaos, but may sometimes lead to loss of relationships.

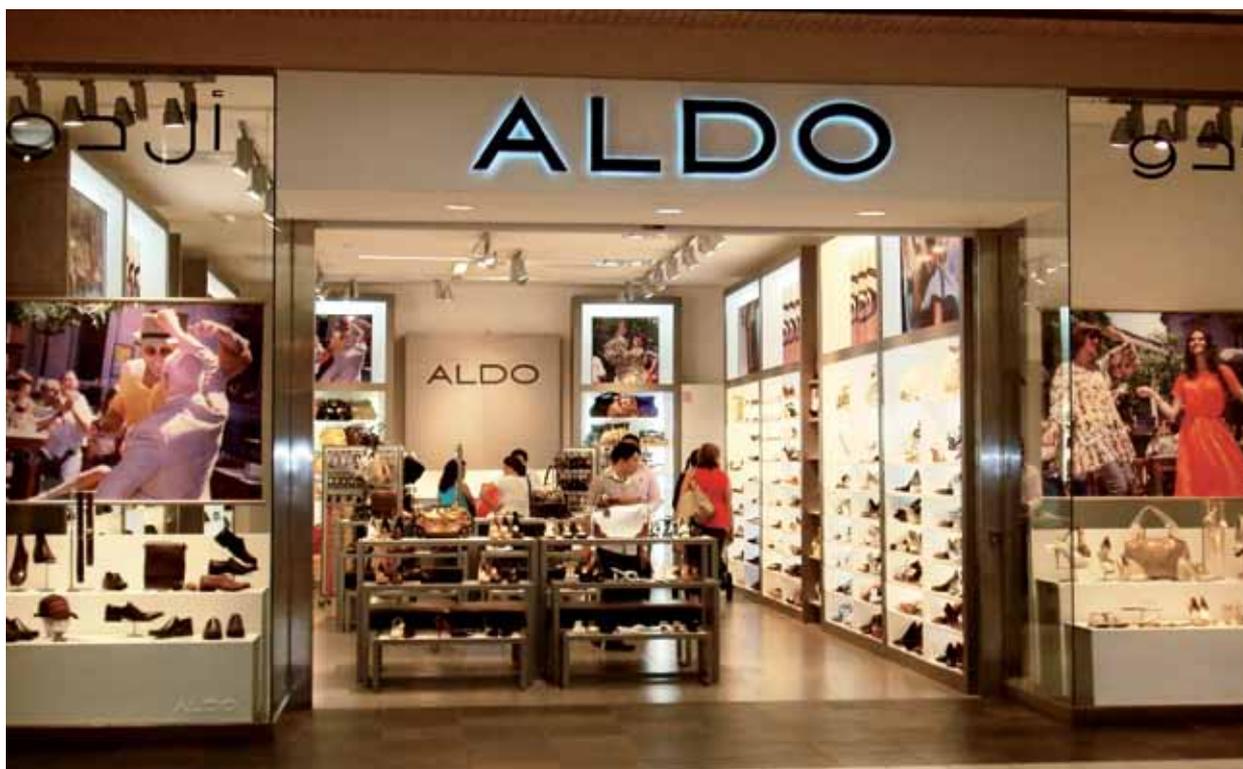


Mall developers in India, need to understand the importance of this phase, as this not only brings in time discipline but also ensures accountability by the retailers and occupants on the quality and standards of fit-outs. In the absence of specialised players in this segment, most mall developers have gone through nightmares during the time between leasing and mall operations.

With the learnings of the last few years, mall developers are now seeking professional help to fill in the void of a fit-out management

or large volumes of work can be managed very effectively.

With the second generation of malls coming into existence now, every segment of mall development and management would become critical, scientific and process driven, thereby making room for every segment of mall development to be of great importance. All the 2G category malls being set up in the country now display clearly the aspects of better mall development. ●



The primary reason for malls getting delayed in the fit-out phase is generally the lack of proper understanding and planning prior to starting of the fit-out phase. Most Mall developers are unaware to the technicalities and the serious long-term implications on the success and maintenance of the mall. In most cases, by the time the realisation of the sheer magnitude and its complexities

**Looking ahead**

Although there are numerous malls coming up in the country every other month, there is still a lack of understanding of the importance of the fit-out management by most mall developers. While this concept was unknown to the Indian mall developers, internationally most good mall developers have a special team to manage their fit-out phase, which is also termed as "design & delivery" by some of them. The

team. As our contribution to the betterment of mall development, we at Beyond Squarefeet understand the significance of the Fit-out phase in the life cycle of a mall, and realise that this phase requires to be professionally managed by a team, which is technically well versed with all facets of fit-outs. We have laid-out and worked out simple but very effective processes, by which even the most difficult of site conditions

**About the authors:**

Susil Dungarwal is the founder & chief mall mechanic of Beyond Squarefeet Advisory Pvt Ltd, a boutique mall advisory company. A true home grown retailer and mall professional, with over 24 years of experience, he has been involved with many reputed projects, spanning over 20 million sq ft and has been associated with reputed retail and 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).



Anand Ray is mall mechanic & general manager – design & development at Beyond Squarefeet Advisory Pvt

Ltd. He is an interior design architect, with over a decade of rich experience in retail design, malls, hospitality, airport interiors and high profile residential projects. Anand has been part of the core design development teams for prestigious retail and mall projects such as HyperCity, Inorbit Malls (Vashi, Hyderabad, Pune and Mumbai), Phoenix Marketcity (Bangalore & Mumbai), and specialises in all aspects of retail design & fit-out management. He has been involved in about three million sq feet of retail/mall space.

