

IT'S A MALL WORLD

WITH CITIZENS OF METROPOLISES CONVERTING MALLS INTO PICNIC SPOTS AND LIFESTYLE DESTINATIONS, THE TIME TO REDEFINE THE MALL STRUCTURE HAS COME, SAYS ARUNA RATHOD



1. Centre One, Vashi, Navi Mumbai.

ARE MALLS WITHIN RESIDENTIAL COMPLEXES A GOOD IDEA?

Malls are a great idea within a residential complex, as this becomes a local community centre, simultaneously taking care of the needs of the people living there. "These township malls could be great destinations if planned properly, and can become convenience malls," says Sunil S Dugarwal of Beyond Squarefeet. However, these malls will also get in unwanted traffic of people and vehicles, which may disturb the residential fabric of the township. "Hence, caution has to be taken in the proper placement of the mall in a residential complex so that it becomes a convenience centre rather than a congestion magnet," he adds.

It is beneficial if the mall is either surrounded by residential complexes or placed within the township. "They complement each other. While the mall elevates the overall standard of living of the residents by becoming a platform for national and international brands under one roof, as well as a leisure hang-out space of convenience for the local residents, the mall itself benefits by getting a ready catchment group to cater to," explains T Anupam of Kalpataru.

Browse and buy, dig into some

specialty cuisine, catch a movie – this is what spells weekend leisure for most denizens of a metropolis. Even if it is for just a stroll, where do you get to walk in air-conditioned environs without having to pay an entry fee or shell out an annual subscription? You can do all of this under one roof – at the malls, which have become a lifestyle destination, a place of urban convergence.

With Mumbai's population now looking for places to spend their free time, malls with their food courts and restaurants are a way of life. For developers and retail giants, the affluent consumer's changing preferences are creating a huge new opportunity. T Anupam, associate vice president, Kalpataru Retail Ventures and the promoter of Korum Malls, says, "Today, shopping has become more mall-centric, with various malls offering a range of shopping and leisure options. Lifestyle is a macro-concept that includes various demographics such as choice, preference, likes and dislikes of a person, in terms of shopping," adding that Indian consumers are becoming more brand conscious with the increase in international brands entering the Indian markets.

A mall is the ultimate medium that brings all brands together, offering a

variety of options in shopping and catering to different age groups. "Gradually, Indian consumers are adopting a higher standard of living – which, in turn, influences them to follow a particular lifestyle. Malls fulfill this aspiration," maintains Anupam.

BOOM TIME

While builders and developers are taking the plunge and setting up retail monoliths, there are others who super specialise in malls. Susil S Dugarwal, founder and chief mechanic at Beyond Squarefeet, decided to set-up a specialised company to focus on mall development, mall marketing and mall management. "Before planning a mall, it's very important to prepare an infrastructure accessibility report and do a catchment area analysis – failing which, even well-planned malls can be failures. By catchment area, I mean the place where one may find a sizeable population of affluent people who do not mind spending a lot more on some of their smallest luxuries," says Dugarwal.

Just a large expanse of land in any location is not enough to set up a mall. "Besides this, just because there is a huge residential colony around the mall doesn't mean that it will be a quick-fix success factor for the mall. It's important to ensure that the malls are built in locations that

are retail friendly," he continues.

Though malls are coming up with a vengeance, the infrastructure just doesn't seem to match the growth. "Mumbai's infrastructure is lagging behind by at least 30 years in all aspects, including malls. Mumbai needs to add a lot of infrastructure, such as roads, parking spaces, open areas and relaxation of FSI norms to boost the mall culture in the city," observes Dugarwal.

Besides roads and parking spaces, the mall itself requires in-house infrastructure. Infrastructure management refers to the management of facilities provided to the tenants within the mall. This includes provision of adequate power supply, safety issues in case of emergency and miscellaneous issues related to signage, water supply, sanitation, etc. "These form an integral part of mall management, as they are the basic amenities that any tenant would look for in a mall. Infrastructure management also includes risk management issues such as essential safety measure asset liability and environmental audits, as well as emergency and evacuation training," says Dugarwal, adding that the overall shopping experience provided for consumers becomes an important factor for the success of any mall.



GHOST MALLS OF NAVI MUMBAI

Malls like Palm Beach Galleria, City Centre and Raghuleela – all three based in Navi Mumbai's Vashi node, which once witnessed stampedes on weekends, are a pale shadow of their heyday and are now battling for survival. For Navi Mumbaiers, these malls had brought a breath of fresh air, as the culturally-starved residents suddenly discovered an altogether new lifestyle and form of entertainment.

It began with some premium outlets just shutting shop. While some big stores and international brands shut shop when the abysmal footfalls left them deeply in the red, others migrated to the newer, swankier Inorbit Mall that emerged as the newest destination for Navi Mumbaiers just over a year ago. Even Raghuleela Mall's proximity to Vashi Railway Station didn't prove to be of much help, attracting the wrong footfalls of the casual visitor and not enough of the serious shopper.

Seeing these malls facing bad times, even upcoming malls are having second thoughts now. Ripplez, a mall in Sector 8 of Airoli node, that was expected to change the way the residents of the node shop, is yet to open its doors even three months after completion. Two other ambitious projects, the Wedding City and Gold City theme malls, are similarly almost ready for occupation, but there's no news about their formal inauguration as yet.

Meanwhile, the ambience management includes management of parks, fountains and the overall look of the mall. Lush green landscaping with seating facilities and the presence of food and beverage inside or outside the mall can increase footfalls. Rituraj Verma, national director – retail agency, Knight Frank India, says, "Malls that are run successfully take care of environmental concerns in addition to meeting the needs of the community. The trend towards lifestyle shopping is increasing, as consumers go in larger numbers to these 'destinations'."

DESIGN FACTOR

Internationally, malls focus predominantly on interior design, circulation patterns and right brand and user mix to attract the consumer. But in the Asian context, even the external design plays a major part in attracting the retail customer. "External appearance and design serve to grab the attention of the buyer, but interior planning and design play a greater role," says architect Manjunath Hathwar, partner, Space Dynamix, adding that positioning of shop fronts to allow visual contact from all parts of the mall, visibility into the store and availability of anchors such as multiplexes and major brands are essential for long-term success of the mall.

It is not only the facilities that attract consumers to a mall, but the design of a mall too. "The design and planning of the mall is one of the key aspects. The layout, circulation plans and zoning are very important to ensure constant footfalls to the mall," reiterates Dunganwal.

"Design is key to any mall's success, and acceptance depends on its design. A

well-designed mall looks into all aspects of 'occupier identity types', such as high-end boutiques or jewellery stores, fashion labels, supermarkets, white goods, electronics, entertainment, etc. Food courts should be strategically located in a manner that avoids noise but boosts visibility," says Anupam. He also points out that the façade treatment, signages, anchors and plain-vanilla store segregation add up to the overall experience.

The obvious intention behind any mall design strategy is to increase the number of footfalls – which may eventually increase the number of conversions. Clear demarcation of spaces also acts as a guide for a customer strolling into the store. "Malls are intended to entice and captivate, and large, wide walkways do precisely that," says Hathwar. Among amenities, an adequate and convenient parking facility is a major factor in attracting the high-end retail client. "In addition, features like creche/kid's zone also help in making the shopping experience more hassle-free, as the kids can be left alone happily while the grown-ups do their shopping," he adds.

STUMBLING BLOCKS

According to industry estimates, as many as 700 malls have been planned in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), of which about 170 are already operational and barely a dozen of them are considered as runaway commercial successes. Why do some malls fail? "The three key reasons for a mall's failure are poor planning, inadequate research and sold-out models. Malls have to be perceived as long-term assets by the developers, rather than short-

term commercial projects," says industry observer Sunil Bajaj, adding that another important component for the success of a mall is the right tenant mix and zoning. "Needless to say, the facility management and the mall management need to be in tune with the times," Bajaj adds. Many projects just end up being structures, a collection of unplanned and unrelated stores with no focus on the consumer.

UP AND COMING

Given the acute shortage of large land masses in Mumbai, the current operational malls and those that are now under construction could well be the last of the malls in the city for years to come. "There is no space left to build another large mall. The existing malls and those under construction are evenly spaced, right from High Street Phoenix in the south to Thakur Mall in Dahisar along the South Mumbai-Western suburbs corridor, and from the under-construction Phoenix Market City in Kurla to Big Mall in Thane, along the Eastern suburbs corridor," says Tony Ward, mall mechanic and chief leasing officer, Beyond Squarefeet Advisory.

Meanwhile, K Raheja Group's Hypercity plans to open three of their malls this fiscal year, adding about 14,00,000 sqft of organised retail space. Neptune Magnet Mall will be adding a wing of world's number one retail chain 'Walmart'. The mall is spread over 30mnsqft at Bhandup, where Walmart has acquired a 60,000sqft store. Walmart, in equal partnership with Bharti Enterprises, will be offering products ranging from groceries to electronic goods.

It's a mall world, indeed! ■

2. Then: City Centre Mall in Vashi during busier days.

3. Now: City Centre Mall wears a deserted look.