

- **Mall** developers are pondering different ideas in seeking the best design to pique the interest of consumers
- **Yet** many shopping malls place little emphasis on the functionality of the facility



by  
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**T**he Malaysian landscape for shopping malls has seen a diverse influence of shopping mall designs. Since the 1970s advent of the first shopping malls in Malaysia, there have been different approaches as to the best designed shopping mall.

The birth of the enclosed shopping mall conceptualised by the legendary Victor Gruen, an Austrian-born American architect began the basis of design in 1954.

He dreamt of having a community space where commerce, art and entertainment can be integrated and mixed. It has evolved to be a more commercially focused space today.

The first climate controlled large scale shopping mall which he designed came about with the Southdale Centre in Minnesota USA in 1956.

In Malaysia, our shopping mall designs can be seen evolving from those seen in shopping malls of the 1970s to the 1980s, 1990s till now.

Developers have started to look at different ideas in the search for the best design to pique the interest of consumers. Form had taken a front seat.

Many had thought that the provision of a unique design and something which would create a marathon-like interest to sustain the minds of customers would be the answer to being popular and successful.

### Overdesign?

We have seen how shopping malls have started to create themed spaces and also Instagram-worthy locations to further place their property in a higher position than the rest. Much has been spent on good interior design.

But is that enough? Having an emphasis on design would at times cloud the very basics of creating a shopping mall.

Is it a case of overdesign? Is it a case of creating elements which a consumer is not interested in or fails to create a mood to encourage spending?

The answer is this. A shopping mall exists to provide for the community it resides in. It is not the community providing for the shopping mall. This must first be gotten right.

The Japanese have function and form as their ultimate design philosophy. In many Japanese shopping malls, you would find that they place a huge importance

# Does function follow form in shopping malls?



Malls have been growing and evolving over the years to cater to the changing consumer behaviour and needs of shoppers

on both. Functionality is thought of in the formation of its design. The Japanese have ensured that all aspects from the layout to the provision of facilities are with the customers' needs in mind.

Malaysia has seen how this is done. Developers have taken heed of this and have created a hybrid. Yet, we still hear of many who attempt to focus on design which offers no functionality.

Let us look at the basic facilities. First would be car park facilities. Today, in view of the current shopper behaviour, cars are still the main mode of transport especially where there are no LRT, Monorail, KTM Commuter and/or MRT. At most, they would have bus connections. The car park facility is also the first and the last point of contact for a shopper.

### Poor traffic flow

Many shopping malls do not place much emphasis on the functionality of the facility. More often than not, the elevators and escalators are in the same location when they could have been better spread out.

Dim lighting and bad wayfinding compounds the issue. It is even worse when the car park facility is not well ventilated and the traffic flow badly designed.

Some shopping malls in Malaysia have traffic flowing to a dead end and they expect cars to do a near impossible three-point turn. The U turn arrow on the floor is just meant to tell you that

there is no way through.

In such a case, you would wish that no one is behind you as you would have to reverse all the way out to the intersection.

Having a nice car park without thinking of functionality is a huge issue for shoppers. A car park should be convenient, safe and bright for everybody.

Many shopping malls in the Klang Valley have also started to improve the outlook of their car park facility.

The use of epoxy or polyurethane coatings on the floor is not just for aesthetics but also provides better protection of the concrete floor. It guards the floor from reinforcement corrosion and structural risks due to oil leaks, water and soluble pollutants from exhaust fumes and stuff brought in by tyres.

Some do not think that it is important but the car park facility is one of the most important structures and investments to protect. As the coating is available in various applications and colours this would create a good first impression as it brightens the premises.

Second would be toilets. We have seen with amazement that shopping malls still continue to have beautiful toilets to create an impression.

### Locations of toilets

A good idea no doubt as a nice looking toilet is always welcomed. But then, a toilet should be functional first and the design

should come thereafter. Many would agree that the formula of having a ratio of 1:2 for male and female toilets in a location is acceptable.

However, when you discover that a busy location has only three male cubicles and six female cubicles, you would understand why some shopping malls have queues for their female patrons. This is one example where form is placed before function. It should be the other way round.

A toilet facility today must be clean and hygienic. Above all, the toilet facility must be functioning well at all times.

The use of sensor taps and sensor flush is no longer a benchmark but a standard requirement. A push tap seen in some shopping malls would still need you to physically push the device.

The idea is to minimise touch and keep the toilet dry. Hand bidets should be looked at again.

In Japan, all toilet cubicles have seat bidets and a child holder where you place your child whilst you do your business. They even provide baby change stations in male toilets.

Humidity is also controlled as this aids in odour control. In Malaysia, you can do the same with a 24 degree Celsius controlled environment.

Humidity breeds microbes, which make you sick. It just shows you how much the Japanese emphasise on functionality.

The Japanese shopping malls also provide children's toilet

facilities, located outside those for the adults.

### Artificial plants

Third is on layout and community space. The layout should not be complicated but be straightforward and follow the natural form of functionality. Facilities and seating or rest areas should be sized and spaced adequately. There should also be an emphasis on natural lighting and a seamless outdoor and indoor experience.

Artificial plants attract dust and increase cleaning costs. Real plants provide oxygen in the day and absorb carbon dioxide. Some plants help purify the air while artificial ones just look good.

The materials used should be functional. Tiles must be easy to clean, replace and safe. Balustrades must be safe first and look good second. Many designers go overboard with elaborate designs and in the selection of materials. How many times have we seen the novelty of themed precincts within a shopping mall become outdated just as quickly as it is introduced?

I believe it is better to look at the function leading the form in a design. A good understanding of function creates a better form in which a design is based upon. It makes a better shopping mall for the community, the commerce, the retailers and the entertainment providers. **FocusM**

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