

- **From** the rise of e-commerce to the changing tastes of millennials, the modern shopper has changed
- **Malls** need to redefine three things to meet these changing needs



by  
**Timothy Liew**

As individuals, it is said that we live our lives in three different places. The first place is our home and the second our workplace. So what is this concept of a third place?

Ray Oldenburg in his book *Celebrating the Third Place* defines for us that the third place is a public place on neutral ground where people can gather and interact. In essence, it is a space that allows individuals to put aside their anxieties and simply enjoy the fellowship and conversations with those around them.

Oldenburg went on to describe a good third place as having eight characteristics but we have listed what we believe to be the top five attributes:

1. A great third place has to be neutral with the individuals coming to and going from it as and when they wish to do so.
2. A third place is for all to enjoy regardless of their wealth or social status.
3. A third place's primary function is to create conversations which spark joy among the occupants.
4. It should be easily accessible to everyone and be accommodating to meet the needs of its occupants.
5. A comprehensive third place must create a sense of warmth, comfort and function as a home away from home.

In fact, it was Austrian architect Victor Gruen who first envisioned a potential third place in what has become known as the modern shopping mall.

Gruen designed the Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota, which opened its doors in 1956 and represented the first modern climate-controlled indoor mall in the US.

The central feature of the Southdale Center was a massive centre court covered in a skylight and serving as a sort of the town square where people could congregate and spend time together in conversation.

Gruen's vision was for Southdale Center to be used as a mixed-use facility, with apartments, offices, medical centres, child-care facilities, and libraries which unfortunately was not to be.

The developers of the mall were quick to pivot from Gruen's original vision of the mall as a third place by placing more prof-

# In defence of the mall as 'the third place'



**Ginza Six Mall's rooftop park is where shoppers can have a quiet moment to themselves**

itable stores such as Dayton's department store and Walgreens within Southdale.

This brings us to the situation with malls today.

## The situation

From the rise of e-commerce to the changing tastes of millennials who favour experiences over ownership of "things", the modern shopper has changed.

We need to ask ourselves – are the malls of today meeting the changing preferences of shoppers? We would argue, not necessarily so. It is our opinion that the malls of today are dedicated to facilitating retail transactions and not yet fully functioning as a third place for community building.

Our malls are focused on metrics such as achieving maximum net lettable space (that is how many lots there are to rent out) and maximum return on investment. These metrics may blind us to the fact that today's shoppers see the shopping mall as not so much a place to buy things but more a place to congregate and create new experiences together.

It also does not help that the rise of e-commerce whose main pull are customers looking for convenience and more importantly, a good bargain and this has essentially taken away the reason for us to go the mall purely for purchasing purposes.

In essence, because our shopping malls are filled with retailers who are there to sell you things and shoppers who may not be interested in buying, could that be the very reason we see so many stores not doing well and no real differentiation between one mall and another?

## The solution

For mall owners, they need to strike a balance between the need to position the mall as a retail centre and moving it towards what was originally envisioned by Gruen as a true third place.

Here are three things that can be done to immediately rebalance this equation:

### 1. Providing more free public space for shoppers to enjoy

A surprising solution comes from Japan where space is at a premium, yet there are many exam-

ples of shopping malls within Tokyo city centre that dedicate a huge amount of space to public use. A prime example of this is the Ginza Six shopping mall where the whole rooftop is a garden area where shoppers can have a quiet moment to themselves or sit with friends and family.

Another example is the EmQuartier Mall in Bangkok which houses a 32,000 sq ft garden where shoppers can roam freely.

This space is full of greenery and even has a flowing stream. It is important to note that these spaces are located in potential prime retail spots and could be very profitable if rented out.

However, the mall owners choose to understand the need of shoppers for spaces which create joy and a sense of relaxation.

### 2. Have more public play spaces for young families

A notable trend of late in most shopping malls is to introduce more experiential retailers such as large children play areas, electric trains and other types of play areas within the mall.

However, most of these services are pay-to-play for shoppers. We would propose that some of these basic play services be provided free by the mall management because shoppers with young families will tend to favour malls over going to other places such as parks due to the variety of services which are available the mall such as restaurants, clean restrooms, changing rooms for kids and, of course, a temperature-controlled space.

A good example of a mall which has given this some thought is 1 Utama with its sizeable free children's play area.

Our strong recommendation would be for malls to offer more free play areas for children to

enjoy. Thus, mall managements can focus on bringing in tenants who are able to provide even better and different types of play spaces/activities which can use the pay-to-play model.

The free offerings benefit the surrounding retail tenants as they bring in direct captive customers. Another great example of a mall which focuses on this aspect of play areas is the Central Festival Eastville mall in Bangkok which comprises several spaces for families to enjoy with their kids and also play spaces such as a sand pit which caters primarily for children's activities.

Furthermore, the mall positions the lots surrounding the free play areas with food & beverage tenants.

### 3. Providing more community spaces for shoppers to enjoy

Dedicating community areas within a mall to services such as public libraries or make spaces dedicated to the DIY community is also another way that shopping malls can reposition themselves as true third places.

A fine example of this endeavour is the public library which was opened just last year in Jaya One, Petaling Jaya. The 5,000 sq ft space functions as a safe and conducive environment for children and parents to enjoy. Spaces like these also give young adults a quiet space to study, and if complemented with services such as free Wi-Fi and printing, it would be a great benefit to the community surrounding the mall.

Perhaps, the mall management could consider taking it a step further by organising question and answer sessions by local published authors or even book discussion clubs. These activities could take place around the mall to bring a greater sense of community building with the mall being the catalyst of this endeavour.

The idea of putting in some of these spaces at what will surely be a significant cost is difficult for most mall managers to consider, but we do not see the shopper behaviour changing in a contradictory manner any time soon.

It is our strong belief that the malls that will win in the long term are the ones which cater to the shoppers' needs for an equal balance of experience and retail at the same place. Let us not forget that it was Gruen's original vision that malls should be a third place, a place away from home and work where we feel comfortable staying for a while and spending our precious time and money. **FocusM**

*Timothy Liew is from interior designing firm Visata Creative Sdn Bhd, an affiliate member of the Malaysia Shopping Malls Association (PPK)*



**Library @ The School, Jaya One is a public library that offers 5,000 sq ft of space**