



newsletter

Subscribe

FUN AT THE MALL

As you enter the Mall of America (MOA), in Bloomington, Minnesota, from the East Parking lot and turn right towards Sears, you will find the worlds' largest underground aquarium housing 4,500 creatures. Halfway around the world at the Mall of the Emirates, you can strap on your skis and glide on real snow year round although the temperature outside regularly hits 45 degrees Celsius in summer.



Ski Dome at Mall of the Emirates

Both of these examples are thousands of miles apart and both cater to different clientele. But in both cases we can see how high quality entertainment features manage to serve as a mark of distinction that sets these places apart in the minds of shoppers – both within the region as well as beyond.

As the target audience for malls grows more affluent and sophisticated, so must the malls grow more varied and equally sophisticated to vie for their guest's precious leisure time. Today, amusement rides and other attractions are becoming a more frequent feature in shopping malls around the world.

As the competition for out-of-home spending becomes stronger, shopping malls are now facing increased pressure from other leisure attractions. Those who have been following the industry explain that developers are coming to the realization that in order to continue drawing shoppers there must be more variety in the shopping mall experience. But it is critically important for investors to go into these projects with their eyes open and fully aware of what their target market will be able to support.

Tim Sorge, President of Swings-N-Things Family Fun Park, in Olmstead Township, Ohio, points out that some areas of the world are more receptive to indoor entertainment than others. Indoor go-kart tracks are found in many shopping malls in South America, but there is a lack of this kind of family entertainment in shopping malls in the US.

Go-karts miniature golf, and other similar activities are mainly seasonal in the minds of many Americans. "How many women really will go to an indoor family entertainment center (FEC) at their mall by themselves when their kids are in school?" asks Sorge. The answer to Sorge's question is, "not very many".

While moving a seasonal activity indoors is appealing to many FEC operators, the cost of leasing the space drives down the rate of return for those hoping to open an entertainment venue within a mall. But what if it was the mall itself that opened an entertainment venue in order to entice more footfalls in their stores?

That is precisely what malls, such as the MOA, have done. Dan Jasper, Director of PR at the MOA explains how it provides not only a large number of stores, but also a quality entertainment experience that many of their shoppers are looking for. And when it comes to entertainment, the MOA certainly has several options available to guests.

The amusement park that is at the heart of the MOA, called "The Park at MOA", is positioned in the center of the mall. You can ride the massive Pepsi Ripsaw Rollercoaster, take a spin on the bumper cards, or let the kids race on the miniature speedway. Features include a wide variety of rides and attractions that are appealing to the whole family.



Tradition and Culture are always a crowd puller

In addition to the amusement park, several other attractions such as the NASCAR Silicon Motor Speedway, the A.C.E.S. Flight Simulator Center, and a 1.2 million gallon aquarium are featured at MOA. "It is the largest underground aquarium in the world", Jasper explains, "and we recently were voted the word's best shark encounter by the Discovery Channel." Jasper acknowledges that these family attractions play a significant role in drawing the large numbers of visitors to the mall.

Of the estimated 43 million guests that visit the mall in a year, Jasper estimates that roughly 40 percent come from distances greater than 100 miles away. "We see guests from all over the world," says Jasper, "England, Scandinavia, Japan, and of course our closest international neighbor, Canada."

Why is the MOA's seamless incorporation of entertainment and shopping elements so successful? "People are multi-taskers. They want to shop, have fun with their kids, eat, and relax, all on their own time. Destinations like the Mall of America can provide all of this" Jasper continued.

The MOA, and other malls similar to it, represent this turn towards retail-tainment. Retail-tainment is the blending together of retail and entertainment facilities to produce a rich shopping experience that appeals to the entire family. Some malls have turned to entertainment facilities back to their stores. To find cutting edge retail-tainment projects, in the Middle East developers have been blazing the way in blending entertainment and retail on a breathtaking scale.

Last year, the Mall of the Emirate opened one of the world's largest indoor ski slopes featuring real snow. By 2008, the Mall of Arabia will be completed and it will feature 5.9 million Sq.Ft. of space and 12 anchor stores. The project will also incorporate an elaborately themed, and thoroughly researched, dinosaur theme park called the Restless Planet, in addition to a 650 seat performance based theatre centered at the heart of the mall. These projects have been designed to give a one-of-a-kind sensory experience that appeals to a multigenerational audience.

Randy White, CEO of White Hutchinson Leisure and Learning Group, specializes in the design and production of family and children's leisure venues. With offices in both the United States and Qatar, White is familiar with the development of shopping malls in the region.

"The Middle East is light years ahead of the rest of the world when it comes to retail-tainment," says White. The seamless incorporation of amusement facilities within Middle Eastern mall design stems from developers who are very much in tune with their target audience. Because of the importance placed on the family, it is vital that shopping malls in this region be designed with a wide variety of family friendly attractions, such as amusement parks.



White explains that if a mall is going to succeed in a family-centric culture, it must provide not only an enticing retail experience, but an all encompassing entertainment experience as well. The importance of designing this complex shopping and entertainment experience, with the family in mind, is echoed by other major retail designers within the region.

Ibrahim Ibrahim, Managing Director of Portland Design, explained that in regards to the region, "we have witnessed a shift in customer expectations, there is a demand for shopping malls to deliver a real sensory experience," Ibrahim stresses the importance of understanding the role of the family and the "requirements for family based amenities as part of a crucial element of most shopping centers."

Ibrahim explains, "it is therefore necessary to include a family based entertainment component to some degree." As Middle Eastern shoppers' tastes in malls becomes increasingly sophisticated, so too do the entertainment options that are offered at the region's malls. This level of sophistication can be seen in the designs for Restless Planet at the Mall of Arabia.

With the growth of young affluent families, and growing numbers of tourists from countries such as India, amusement attractions in new Middle Eastern have honed the "wow"-factor of their shopping mall entertainment attractions in response to the demands of their target audience.

Is there a future for amusement facilities, similar to Restless Planet? Ibrahim cautions that entertainment in malls can only be successful, "Entertainment elements should not be add-ons but should represent a fully integrated retail and entertainment experience with a true connectivity between public anchors and retail offers."

From skiing in the desert, to swimming with sharks, malls around the world are offering profound entertainment options that are blended together with name brand retailers. Projects currently in development continue to show that the new target consumer demands both high quality merchandise as well as high quality entertainment, all from the same venue. Ultimately, it all depends on what the target market is able to support, but it is clear that this is a challenge that is being met with enthusiasm by shopping mall developers around the world.

By Robert Ek, technical writer for the Int'l Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions. Contact: rek@iaapa.org.

© RetailMe 2006

This article was published in RetailME magazine <http://www.retailme.com>
August 2006

