

# Developers also have social obligation to ensure their place is safe



## PROPERTY INSIGHTS

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SEASON'S greetings and happy new year to everyone who chances upon this column today.

If your holiday break involved a trip to the mall, you may have noticed you were not alone.

In fact, I calculate that Klang Valleyites make an average of 76 mall visits per person every year. In a recent survey, we found some habitues who would regularly visit the same mall three times a week.

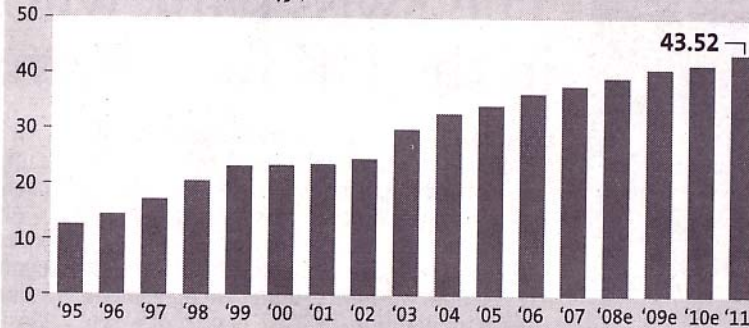
In the past 20 years, a visit to the mall has insinuated itself into the Malaysian culture to the extent that it is now as routine as watching TV. A desire to get out of the house and congregate somewhere is socially not a new phenomenon.

Today's mall offers all the attractions of the amusement parks of yesteryear combined with Malaysian necessities of life, including eating out, and visiting the *pasar malam*. All of this overlaid with the opportunity to spend some of the new wealth supposedly showering on the emergent middle class.

The belief that we visit malls to enjoy air conditioning is both condescending and outdated. There is usually plenty of air conditioning at home. In any case, it's the al fresco, outdoor shopping experience that's now pulling the crowds.

## Cumulative supply of shopping centres in the Klang Valley

Total net lettable area (mil sq ft)



Source: Regroup Associates

And what crowds! By contrast, I was present at the opening day of Westfield's new London shopping centre a few weeks ago. This is a retail complex with a catchment of maybe eight million people. The newspapers triumphantly reported that the crowd on this opening day "exceeded 100,000 people". Excuse me. If Suria KLCC didn't regularly get 120,000 visitors on a Saturday or Sunday, they'd be worried.

As at Dec 19, the Klang Valley had 117 malls comprising 39.1 million sq ft. Three new ones slipped into the public realm without much fanfare last month. We have 6 sq ft of mall space per head of population, amongst the highest in Asia.

Believe me, our best malls are world class. Ask a Swedish lady I met recently who came here to retire because she fell in love with the KLCC!

The mall is now as much a part of our daily lives as a visit to the park or

a walk down Batu Road. But, while the high street is officially public domain and subject to extensive safety codes and public interest legislation, the shopping mall owners suffer no such burden.

And that's why we're treated like cattle.

I've begun to tally up the horror stories. In Bangsar, I've driven ramps so narrow I instinctively duck my head and breathe in. Elsewhere I've queued 45 minutes to get into a car park and spent another 30 minutes looking for a parking bay.

Many times I've driven up to drop off or pick up my family at a mall, only to be shooed away like some kind of criminal. Recently, I had to flee the car park at a shopping centre in Kota Damansara because the music on the public address system was so loud that my ears hurt.

We search for a solitary machine to pay for our parking ticket and

then have it reject our banknotes. You get out of your car in a shopping centre in PJ and step right into deep puddles of rain water.

Floor directories are rubbish and, in any case, there are no signs to tell you which floor you are on! There's nowhere to sit. The toilets are filthy. My friend waited 20 minutes for a lift capable of taking his shopping cart, baby stroller and family up to the car park. Meanwhile, people are paid to extort you for parking somewhere more convenient.

Why do we put up with this? Malaysians must be a patient lot. After all, they drive hours to work every day and then spend another 30 minutes looking for a car park.

But enough's enough.

If malls are now part of the culture, then mall developers have a very sizeable moral responsibility to ensure our visits are pleasant and safe. It is not just a question of legislation, it's a social obligation, and one that is all too often neglected.

I'd like to see every mall dotted with signs inviting public opinion and providing the contact numbers of owners and managers.

They need this feedback now more than they realise. The best managed malls are prospering but plenty more are in decline. There are some that have already failed.

It's an increasingly competitive world out there, and shoppers can vote with their feet.

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