

What are the most important elements of a successful retail project?

SC Question of the Month



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Many elements must come together in order to create a successful retail center. Those elements range from proper and astute financial planning to an understanding of demographics and appropriate retail mixes followed by excellence in design, and finally the acquisition of necessary approvals and execution. Without the proper mixture and balance of those elements, the developer runs the risk of building (or not) a faltering or failing retail center.

I believe, as in life, the key word in developing a successful center is "balance." Without balance, the most beautiful and noteworthy design may fail miserably as it does not contain the proper mix of retailers, may not have convenient parking adjacent to retail uses or too much competition for those parking stalls, or may have an improper mix of uses, which will affect the project's synergy and lead to failure of the center. Conversely, if a center is planned properly, where the developer has put together an experienced "team of professionals" who work *together* and where the design professionals accept input from the broker, a center may be planned where all elements come together to create a center with synergy, human scale, a proper mix of uses in a design well thought out to consider aes-

thetics and economy and executed in a manner which is approvable.

Larger retail centers of 250,000 s/f of gross floor area and greater should contain a mixture of small, medium, and large box users, a variety of eateries, some forms of entertainment as well as personal services. Additional amenities must include passive features, such as public gathering places, park like features and pedestrian walks. When this mixture of uses is arranged in a design form that attracts people by creating a "sense of place," the center stands a very good chance of succeeding.

In order to create a center with a "sense of place," design elements attractive to walking, sitting, meeting, eating, and being entertained in addition to shopping, will address most human desires and therefore attract people to the center.

These design elements must come together in a common theme which blends the building architectural elements with site features such as pedestrian friendly walkways, seating areas, plazas, and focal points such as fountains and other amenities. The balance of parking stalls to retail areas will provide convenience sought out by most shoppers. Parking stalls should be spread throughout the project and designed to accommodate longer term patrons in larger parking lots as well as head-in, short-term parking adjacent to quick visit types of uses. The short term parking adjacent to retail uses may have time limits such as 30 minute parking which will keep those areas of high turnover uses open to a certain degree.

As mentioned earlier, the use of a theme which ties together archi-

tectural design, landscape architecture and site design will aid in attracting the public to the center as well as provide excitement within the community which will in turn pave the way for approvals of the project.

With respect to pedestrian activity, although we live in a society where most of us jump into an automobile to drive one block to pick up a loaf of bread, it is becoming more and more common to provide centers that are extremely pedestrian oriented. This allows visitors to stroll from store to store, stop in and have coffee at a sidewalk café, enjoy a sunny day or have a place to visit and spend time on a rainy day. In order to accommodate pedestrians, it is recommended that centers provide interesting walkways utilizing inlaid patterns, planters, park benches and other features integrated with the architecture. Raised crosswalks in different patterns than the drive aisle pavement are also becoming popular in that they create a highly visible pedestrian crossing.

Integration of retail centers with entertainment and recreational uses are becoming more and more common. Entertainment components such as multiplex theaters, community theaters, children's play places and internet cafes provide additional interest and attractiveness to the general public. Quite often, these uses have their greatest peaks during low peak retail utilization, thus creating a compatibility which draws the intensity of the shopping center out over a longer period of the day and weekend. These entertainment uses should be located near ample parking and are compatible with restaurant and public space uses. Adequate traffic and pedestrian circulation should be considered when planning entertainment and recreational centers.

The integration of residential uses within retail centers such as a town center or a main street type of center is also becoming more prevalent throughout the nation. This provides for second and third story apartments or adjacent townhouses integrated with main street uses, which emulates turn of the century downtowns. By the integration of residential uses within a center, a natural vitalization occurs where the center is occupied 24 hours a day with activities well into the evening hours.

There appears to be a renaissance of shopping centers or retail centers occurring in America. The components which are being added as well as the designs which are being implemented promote balance and sense of community and family.

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