

A MALL HERE, A MALL THERE, A MALL EVERYWHERE ...

By

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“We’ve had a hectic week. Let’s go and chill somewhere. Where shall we go to?”

“Let’s go and check out the new mall down the road.”

“We’re expecting visitors from Durban this weekend. Where do we take them?”

“To the new mall in the neighbourhood.”

“I just need a few ingredients to complete my cake recipe. Where can I find them?”

“I’m sure the latest mall on the block stocks them.”

It seems that the shopping mall is the only place people frequent nowadays. Mall-hopping over weekends has become our all-time favorite hobby, and developers have been quick to notice this. People have forgotten that there are better ways of spending their weekend, rather than window shopping, bargain hunting, sampling new dishes at restaurants and staring at what people are wearing or how “hot” they are looking. People will foolishly pay a packet for exercising in an indoor gym and ice-skating, whereas frolicking around in the free outdoors is much more healthy and natural.

There are so many new malls currently being built in South Africa that if you miss a turn or two, you will still land up at one! Gone are the days in the good old South Africa when major businesses were mostly situated in the City Centre. They had to close by 1:00 PM on a Saturday and re-open on Monday morning. Back then, people had a life, spending quality time with their family and venturing out in nature over weekends. Today, the mall is no more a place to purchase our necessities; it has become a giant entertainment centre where everything from a tyre to a tiger can be found.

Hardly a month had gone by in the past two years without construction starting on a new mall, or a newly completed one opening its doors. In fact, at least 25 new shopping centres, each one exceeding 30,000m² in size, are expected to be added to the market between 2013 and 2016, according to figures from the South African Council of Shopping Centres. That will bring South Africa’s tally of large, regional and super-regional malls to an estimated 180 - more than double the number five years ago. Some of the mega-malls expected to open in the next one to two years include JSE-listed Attacq’s massive 120,000m² Mall of Africa at Waterfall City near Midrand, Billion group’s Bay West (87,500m²) in Port Elizabeth, and Flanagan & Gerard and Intaprop’s Atlantic Mall (78,000m²) in Cape Town.

Does South Africa need so many malls? I personally don’t see the need for it as the same chain stores seem to be mushrooming everywhere. Our small upcoming local businessmen are not

given a chance. However, in a recent report, the Macquarie's property and retail research team observed: "South Africa seems overshopped in some areas. Yet overall, on indicators such as vacancies, trading density growth, occupancy cost ratios and bad debts, it seems that the South African retail property sector is still in decent shape." However, property analyst Leon Allison said that given consumers' weak financial position, investment returns on new shopping malls would decline unless the pace of retail development picked up. Indeed, besides consumers feeling the pinch, many malls are feeling it too. Notwithstanding charging exorbitant rentals, some malls have been accused of fraud and financial mismanagement. Some malls did not pay their rates and electricity bill for a few months, causing businesses to come to a halt for a few days.

And indeed the market is sluggish at the moment. Small to medium businesses are struggling to keep their heads above water, and one can now even find retail space in the many Chinese Malls all over South Africa, many of which have become white elephants. Many shop owners, stressing on how to pay their monthly rentals, simply cannot fall off to sleep at night, so you will see them fast asleep in the shop during the day! As the demand for local retail space drops, the recent arrival of global fashion brands such as Zara, Cotton On, Gap, Burberry, Mango, Forever New, Steve Madden, Topshop, Burger King etc. has buoyed demand, especially in regional and super-regional malls. And so, as wealthy foreign tenants continue to be a driver of new retail development in South Africa, local brands and local businesses will continue to suffer, and millions of rands will continue to leave our shores.

Economically, malls are not feasible for investors, and nor for consumers. Walk into a mall desiring to buy only one item, and you will walk out with ten. After admiring all the latest fashions and examining all the latest gadgets, you will also probably upgrade your cell-phone contract. Malls are designed to be attractive, so you would also want your home to be just as attractive. Did you know that there are no clocks in malls to give you a sense of time, and subtle "disorientation schemes" are used to keep you there. The lighting is calm, the carpets are soft and the music is comforting – all perfect ingredients for impulse buying. Psychologically, a mall is designed to be so comfortable and alluring that it becomes your second home. Depressed people come here for "retail therapy" or "comfort buying," and the lonely flock here for company. Couples come here to show how much they are in love with each other, singles come here to date and thieves come here to hijack your vehicle and steal your children.

The economic downside apart, the mall is also the place to darken your heart. Our most noble Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said that the most beloved of places to God are the Masjids, and the most hated places are the markets. Fulfilling our necessities is a must, but being obsessed with what's the latest in the market and keeping up with the Jones is an implication of an empty and purposeless life. Muslims are supposed to find satisfaction in good deeds, not in personal belongings. Keep yourself busy with what you will actually take with you in the grave, and not what you will leave behind.

Do not attach your hearts to the world, and the mall is one of its greatest attractions. Keep up with the latest spiritual developments in your community, rather than when the latest BMW model will be released. Mall shop owners practically have no life as the long business hours consume all their time. Let us all relearn the art of speed buying, or buying only what we need, and not what advertisements tell us what we need. Let us learn to walk in and out of the local supermarket or clothing store, for there are many who spend money they haven't earned, to buy things they don't want, to impress people they don't like.

Lastly, a word of advice: there is no such a thing as "quickly getting in and out of a mall." The stores selling the basic necessities are located deep within any mall, and the most basic of necessities are towards the end of the store. The bread will be to the extreme right and the milk to the extreme left, so you will have to pass the entire shop before reaching it. Studies show that 60% of people come out of a mall with things they do not need, having wasted an entire day. Rather connect with people, and not with things.