

The Fab Five

By Michael Baker

Just after lunch on a recent afternoon in the Tsim Sha Tsui neighborhood of Hong Kong, I wandered onto the outdoor piazza of the K11 mall, took a seat near the giant LED screen, and, in the company of a couple of dozen locals who had also ducked in for a few minutes respite from the noisy street, relaxed to the pitter-patter of jazz music piped out across the communal space.

I tried to think of something interesting that was going on in retail property, but to be perfectly honest the task was beyond me and I dozed off.

In Australia, the industry is consumed by concerns about e-commerce and the economy, and much of the media commentary has given way to serial whining about how far behind Australian retailers are in the technology arms race.

I pondered my surroundings in the K11 piazza. Since its opening a couple of years ago, I had always thought K11 was a rare gem of innovation in a sea of shopping centre sameness.

And that's when I nailed my storyline.

"Everyone loves a list, so why not a list of the most innovative malls of all time?"

So I thought it over and came up with the Fabulous Five of shopping centre innovation. And here they are. Agree or disagree as you like, but it's my list and I'm sticking to it, at least until you come up with a better one.

1. Southdale Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota (opened 1956)

Created by industry legend Victor Gruen, Southdale was the world's first climate-controlled mall, made possible by engineering breakthroughs in air conditioning technology. Southdale was also revolutionary because it brought two competing department stores into the same property.

These "anchor stores" were separated by the entire length of the mall, which consisted of an enclosed pedestrian walkway lined by specialty stores. The modern regional centre was born.

2. Potomac Mills, Woodbridge, Virginia (opened 1985)

With more than 1.5 million sq. ft. of gross leasable area and 20 anchor stores, Potomac Mills was a pioneering "value megamall."

By combining large entertainment anchors with numerous big box stores and value- and full-priced specialty retailers, Potomac Mills merged and expanded the regional mall, factory outlet and entertainment centre concepts at a single stroke.

Not resting on its laurels, the centre has led another trend in recent years by hosting the off-price units of several large department store chains, including Nordstrom, Saks Fifth Avenue and Bloomingdales which have all set up outlet shops there.

3. Easton Town Center, Columbus, Ohio (opened 1999)

Not the first town centre development in the shopping centre era, but industry analysts, including this one, believe it brought the

concept to a peak that has probably not been bettered anywhere.

Developed by Steiner + Associates, Easton has a retail GLA of about 1.5 million sq. ft. that includes more than 150 specialty stores and restaurants, one upscale department store (Nordstrom) and one moderate department store (Macy's).

The centre does an immaculate job of combining alfresco dining, shopping, open-air community space and architectural design features to achieve an authentic sense of place and an outstanding shopping experience.

Among other things, Easton also boasts a 30-screen cinema, three on-site hotels with 559 rooms and more than 800 units ranging from studio apartments to three-bedroom townhouses.

4. The Lab/The Camp, Costa Mesa, California (opened 1993 and 2002 respectively)

The twin inspirations of clothing designer Shaheen Sadeghi, these two centres face each other across the same suburban street that hosts the much better known Goliath of shopping, South Coast Plaza.

The Lab "anti-mall" has 50,000 sq. ft. of floor space and The Camp "eco-retail campus" has 60,000. Both centres have only about a dozen tenants each, which are focused on apparel suited to the lifestyle of the immediate neighborhood and restaurants with fanatical local devotees, such as The Camp's vegan "Native Foods."


Both centres have unique layouts and design features, stores that occupy eccentric shapes, and a vibe that speaks directly to an unconventional segment of the local market.

5. K11, Tsim Sha Tsui (Kowloon), Hong Kong (opened 2009)

Finally, the mall that started me thinking about the Fab Five in the first place. K11 is the brainchild of Adrian Chang. K11 departs from the humdrum in so many ways it's impossible to catalog them all.

For example, while plonking an art gallery into a shopping centre has become a bit of a fad lately, only K11 has seamlessly interwoven two and three-dimensional art into the very fabric of the mall so that it is part and parcel of the shopping and recreation experience.

K11 has also walked the walk when it comes to community involvement, leasing to an unusually high percentage of independent retailers and operating several design stores of its own in the mall that source exclusively from local producers, designers and artists.

So there it is. Most of these centres are well worth seeing despite their age, partly because they are still benchmarks. I hope they will be able to give you ideas and inspiration, just as K11 did for me. 

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