

## Inside retailing



# Maintaining the edge

## A sound strategy for upkeep helps shopping centre owners optimise their returns

■ By Mohd Nizar Jamaluddin

What many people are unaware of is that the building maintenance for shopping centres is now a science. This probably came about some 10 to 15 years ago due to higher expectations of the industry as it matured as well as foreign influence. Our exposure to the way complex maintenance is being carried out abroad made us realise the importance for the need for a systematic building approach.

But just what is the science of building maintenance? Essentially, it is the application of all rules, principles, practices and procedures by experienced and skilled workers to sustain the material lifespan of a particular building and all the systems and equipment found therein to derive an optimum economic return.

The question that arises then is: When should this management system take effect? Ideally, it should be considered right at the beginning, during the formulation of a mall's design. During this period, building owners can be guided by the management team to lay down specifications conducive to safe and convenient maintenance that isn't only beneficial in reducing or controlling costs but also in enhancing the reliability and capability of other infrastructure that will be put in place.

Malaysian building owners tend to regard maintenance as a necessary evil, something inevitable given the passage of time. But many also realise that it is much better to "take the bull by the horns", so to speak, and tackle maintenance to reduce its impact on costs and operational down time.

### The role of design

While the mindset of owners is changing, part of the reluctance in maintenance can be attributed to building designs that aren't maintenance-friendly. In fact, the saying that "an architect's dream is the engineer's nightmare" may bear far greater significance than what many may have thought.

During the years of strong economic growth in the 80s and early 90s when construction was at its peak, designers were competing to create buildings with unique architecture without taking into consideration aspects of maintenance and its related fields. While we have received accolades for design, we have also ended up with buildings which are not only dangerous but sometimes literally impossible to maintain.

Food for thought: In Malaysia, a building with a gondola or some form of a tower crane on the rooftop is assumed to be still incomplete, whereas to a foreigner (Europeans especially), a building is regarded as incomplete without one. After all, who would ever suggest or decide to have one on their rooftops other than those with sufficient maintenance awareness?

Costs for maintaining such "difficult" buildings are undoubtedly high and this has resulted in building owners being reluctant to invest further in their buildings. Nevertheless, higher expectations from tenants and visitors demand that proper maintenance be carried out. The question of standards of services (ISO and the like), global health and safety requirements, continued economic returns and strict Government

regulations require these aspects to be addressed professionally and objectively through scientific maintenance. To fulfill these challenges and requirements, building owners must be prepared to accept the financial commitments that come with them.

### The role of maintenance

Building maintenance entails operating the necessary systems and sustaining them at optimum levels to prolong the lifespan of the building.

While that may sound simple enough, more often than not, most building owners or developers (before issuance of strata titles) are ill advised on what this task entails. Often, one finds insufficient technical staffing required to successfully operate such systems, resulting in poor results. To be effective, there must be strategy and synergy by a team of experienced personnel that should include:

- Mechanical, electrical, electronics and IT engineers;
- Computer and systems scientists;
- Safety, security and quality officers;
- Air-conditioning and mechanical ventilation technicians;
- Chargemen, wiremen and electronic technicians;
- Elevator, fire fighting and sound/PA technicians;
- Civil, plumbing and hydraulic technicians;
- Landscaping, cleaning, housekeeping and environment managers; and
- Those which the industry calls "smilers" (such as rental and service charge collectors, billers, public relations officers, clerks and marketers).



**Maintenance benefit:** Malls that are well maintained ensure the safety of visitors as well as protect the owner's investment.

These personnel should be empowered to plan and decide all commitments involving maintenance and the resulting financial implications, taking into account owners' or shareholders' interests. They should also be equipped with the latest state-of-the-art maintenance gadgets and tools including online training.

### Energy and utilities

One of the most important roles of a successful building maintenance team is to continuously monitor the efficient use of electricity to avoid wastage. Presently, electricity charges that work out to be more than 45sen per square foot per month is considered to be on the high side. This rate can be lowered with proper controls implemented by the maintenance team. Building owners must bear in mind that when most mechanical and electrical equipment are systematically and periodically maintained, it will result in considerable savings and prolonged lifespan.

Special year-end incentives to maintenance personnel on achieving a certain level of reductions would be one motivation. And if you consider the fact that the rate of staff turnover in a maintenance department is fairly high, such an incen-

tive would help stem the staff turnover.

However, any energy conservation exercise must not, at any time, jeopardise the comfort, safety, security and convenience of building occupants and patrons.

### The way ahead

The industry must realise that a profitable investment stems from the presence of an empowered maintenance team that performs all of the above tasks. What most building owners in the country need to do is ensure that the maintenance team is pro-active and decisive in its daily operational chores.

The "wait and see", "last minute", "still okay", "no money", "not now", "until it breaks" attitudes must be discarded as they have brought about permanent damage and, at times, tragedy. The industry needs to mature and move beyond such short-term thinking and focus on the benefits of a sound maintenance culture.

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