



# A whole new MALL GAME

*Redefining the shopping experience*

By *Andrea Li*

THE SOLACE to be found in retail therapy has few equals. An afternoon meandering around a shopping mall can appeal to all five senses, lift flagging spirits and do wonders for the self-esteem, if not the wallet, purse, or credit card. Even the humble window shopper is free to let their imagination soar, entertaining dreams of expensive purchases that they can almost reach out and touch.

It was ever thus; indoor shopping is hardly a recent innovation. Perhaps the earliest recorded example is Isfahan's sprawling grand bazaar, which dates from the 10th century and is still teeming with shoppers today. This Iranian city was a major trading centre and eventually became part of the Silk Road that linked China with Europe.

Over the centuries, the bazaar has evolved into the modern shopping mall, the product of the rise of au-

tomobile culture and the growth of suburban life in the United States in the 1950s. Today's full-service mall is a global phenomenon and a stark contrast to the more sedate shopping experience offered in traditional department store settings back in the 1980s. Today's malls are seductive, marble clad behemoths that offer 360-degree retail opportunities on a grand scale.

Where better to focus on than Hong Kong, the shopping mall paradise and retail mecca that attracts both legions of domestic consumers as well as shoppers from all over the world. But fashion and food, footwear and flat-screen televisions, beauty products and baby wear are simply not enough by themselves any more. Malls need to stand out from the crowd in what has become a very congested market place.

Permanent fixtures such as children's playgrounds, ice-skating rinks and bowling alleys are leavened with temporary attractions of ever-increasing sophistication, from food fairs and





**Shoppers are entertained by attractions such as dog shows and acrobats.**

star-studded live performances to sporting events and even dog shows. And where simple food courts might once have done the job, malls must now offer a range of more sophisticated restaurants to tempt the consumers' palates.

"People used to go to shopping malls for very specific purposes. They needed to buy a gift for someone or something for the home," said Tony Tsui, Hutchison Whampoa Property's Deputy Managing Director. "But the mall today is much more a place for leisure and relaxation. It's part of the lifestyle."

For a mall to be successful, every detail - from basic design development to the minutiae of its daily operation - needs to be considered. "To begin with, you need to have a beautiful looking mall in terms of material, design, colour and layout. All these elements need to meet with consumers' expectations," said Mr. Tsui.

After getting the hardware right, an efficient management team is needed to look after the customers and tenants properly. But to be really exceptional it is wise to take a leaf out of the Hutchison Whampoa Property book. The company operates six malls in Hong Kong and over the years has been responsible for some of the most creative and innovative ideas ever showcased there.

For example, take Wonderful Worlds of Whampoa in Hunghom which boasts 1.4 million square feet of retail space. One December, the promotion team struck on the brilliant idea of importing a snowmaking machine from the US and lined the walkways outside the mall with real snow at Christmas. The Snow Carnival, featuring snowballs, snowmen and a snowtube slide, attracted great media coverage and huge crowds, with over 10,000 shoppers taking part in the fun over a period of four days.

This Christmas, shoppers flocked to the same place to see the Wow Wow Dog Circus from Japan, the only one of its kind in the world. The dogs showed off their spectacular acrobatic abilities and one even played the piano! Other events that have pulled in the crowds include a pork bun-eating contest that saw the winner eat 100 buns in just 12 minutes.

"Events like this create a win-win situation for all the different stakeholders. They raise the profile of mall, increase the volume of shoppers and boost business for shops and restaurants," said Patrick Leung, General Manager of Hong Kong Marketing.

With competition intensifying, mall operators are constantly trying to offer shoppers something a little bit different. Discount offers to promote the mall's restaurants, international food festivals or partnering an airline to award extra miles to big spenders - anything to give the mall an edge.

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
*The first HWPG mall was the Aberdeen Centre. The 340,000-square-foot shopping centre was built between 1980-1982 and renovated in 2000.*



But it is not just in Hong Kong where the need for innovation is growing stronger by the month. In Mainland China, where the bulk of Hutchison's new commercial complexes are being developed, a similar story is unfolding as the emerging middle class develops an insatiable appetite for consumer products.

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
*The largest HWPG mall is Wonderful Worlds of Whampoa which houses more than 300 shops in an area of 1,400,000 square feet.*

Hutchison plans to double the number of malls it operates in the Mainland over the next decade. It is now running Oriental Plaza in Beijing, Westgate Mall in Shanghai and Metropolitan Plaza in Chongqing, to name a few, and plans to increase its presence

in these commercial centres as well as branch out into cities such as Shenzhen and Tianjin. The Metropolitan Plaza in Guangzhou, one of the company's major projects, is scheduled to open in 2007.

One of the toughest challenges is to gain a thorough understanding of the local market. "Good positioning is extremely important and that involves finding the best locations for our shopping malls," said Mr Tsui. "As a Hong Kong developer, we really have to do our homework in terms of market research to find the best sites if we want to be successful. We face intense competition from mainland property developers and overseas players."

According to Jason Tam, General Manager of China Marketing, although the variety of entertainment still lags that in Hong Kong, impressive steps are being taken to raise the bar, especially in Shanghai where promotion events such as a dinosaur exhibition and an international fencing competition were staged at the Westgate Mall as part of the annual promotion programmes.

"We approach the promotional activities slightly differently in the Mainland as we try to come up with initiatives that will win us

## IT'S SHOWTIME!

OVER THE YEARS, Hutchison Whampoa Property has pioneered some of the most memorable events in shopping malls in Hong Kong and Mainland China. Here are some of the highlights.

■ **Aquaworld:** The Flying Lotahs from Australia thrilled audiences with a series of 17-metre high dives into just 2.5 metres of water at Whampoa.

■ **The Crazy Dunkers Show:** The Crazy Dunkers from France showed off their amazing basketball skills at Whampoa.

■ **Get in touch with the Ocean:** To celebrate its ninth anniversary, the Chongqing Metropolitan Plaza launched a month-long calendar of events linked to the ocean. Interactive activities included turtle feeding and fishing.

■ **Let's be Wild:** Shanghai's first human pyramid competition at the Westgate Mall. The winning team thrilled the crowd by making a human tower that was seven metres high.



**Mall the merrier: today's malls offer everything from a 360-degree retail experience to sporting events and exhibitions.**

government support and fuel a sense of patriotism," said Mr Tam. "In China, we have to take into consideration our role in society more."

Mall operators in China also have to address the issue of counterfeit products. Hutchison Whampoa Property staff may need to regularly inspect the products sold in the premises to ensure that tenants are meeting consumer rules and regulations and goods are priced fairly. The inspections boost consumer confidence as well as the shopping malls' reputation because

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
*HWPG's signature creation is the **Whampoa Ship**, which was built in 1989 on the site of Hong Kong's largest shipyard as part of the **Whampoa Garden development.***

shoppers know they are buying good and reliable products.

With a host of local and international industry players jockeying for position in order to take part in China's developing retail landscape, Mr Tsui predicts the standard of shopping centres in the

Mainland will catch up with Hong Kong in five to 10 years.

But if Hutchison Whampoa Property's track record is anything to go by, the question will not be whether these malls succeed, but rather to what degree.



## IT'S ALL ABOUT SERVICE

**M**ALL MANAGEMENT has changed beyond all recognition in the last 10 years, according to Carman Wong, Estate Manager of Wonderful Worlds of Whampoa.

Life was relatively simple in the early days. Back then, you hired cleaners to make your mall spotless and guards to ensure the safety of the shoppers and tenants. Today, growing demands from consumers has pushed the boundaries of service to the point where mall managers now have to function like hotel concierges.

"It isn't just about ensuring the smooth operation of the mall. You also need to actively develop good relationships with tenants and go out of your way to help the customers," said Ms Wong.

"We have to train all staff across the board from customer

service attendants to technicians. Every job now effectively encompasses some degree of customer service."

For example, a shopper might ask a security guard or the staff at the information desk where to find a certain product or service. Both should know the correct answer and be able to help the customer.

The concierge at the Wonderful Worlds of Whampoa has taken the customer-friendly ethos a step further and now provides services that are beyond the traditional parameters of mall management. "We do little things that make a difference," Ms Wong explained. "For example, you can borrow baby strollers and wheelchairs from us. We also provide plasters and sewing kits and sell stamps to shoppers too. We even reheat baby bottles!"