

Lifting Malls?

Lifts and escalators are pandering to architectural requirements ignoring the primary purpose of aiding people's flow

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After close to two decades in the vertical transportation industry, the middle age crisis hit me. As a consequence, a career shift appeared to make sense and what better direction than Retail. I read up various books on the subject, talked to numerous people and even attended a couple of workshops and seminars. The subject was addictive. After so long in an industry, I guess the virus never leaves and I was slowly drawn to exploring how vertical transportation was being addressed within the science.

It slowly started to dawn that I was either spending time with the wrong information sources or the 'retail science' did not necessarily find it necessary to address the impact of the vertical transportation system in the entire scheme of things. A little bit of rewinding to all the shopping and multiplexes that I had been involved with or visited for competitive intelligence and a theory started emerging.

While pedestrian planning, flow of traffic, circulation, etc. were all high priority considerations for the retail expert, there was little input being considered on how the vertical transportation system should be established or integrated into the whole scheme. The lifts and escalators were being fitted in to accommodate architectural requirements or on the basis of observations from other properties. A fly-on-the-wall presence at a meeting between a prominent architect and a major developer pointed that this had some basis. The mantra of 'location,

location and location' to a successful mall and outlets did not extend to the elevators and escalators. And to complicate matters, even the vertical transportation configuration selection did not have a scientific basis. It appeared to be obvious that the approach was based on a belief that retail was not really impacted by lifts or escalators.



About the same time, I chanced upon a few news articles indicating that the retail outlets were closing down or were not doing too well. Visits to about a dozen malls and general talks with the retailers on the other hand seemed to indicate that this was a fact. The visits also gave me some practical insights into all the retail theory I had been reading. I did not need to be a retail expert to spot the glaring case studies to most of Philip Kotler's, Levy & Wetz's and Paco Underhill's 'do not & do's'. Yet, I was not too convinced that these were the only contributing factors. While there was no statistical data to support the theory, it appeared that higher the floor, higher the despondency. A meeting with a prominent developer with a very ambitious mall project under execution was another pointer.

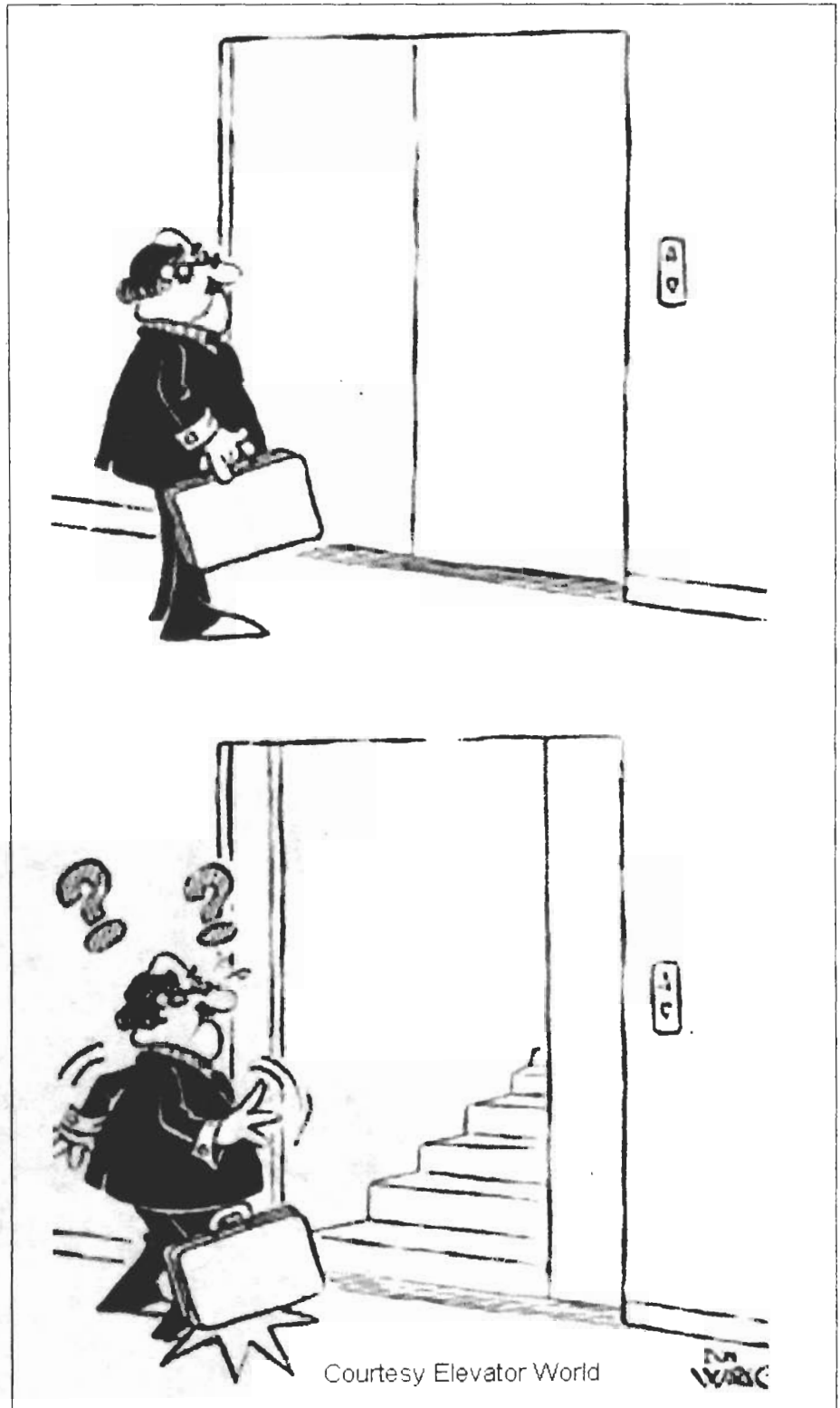
The project design, including the vertical transportation system, had been finalized and was under execution. The list of potential tenants read like a 'who's who' from the retail and entertainment world. A joint review of the design basis for the project did not throw any evidence that the traffic assumptions had been established, let alone the other prerequisites to finalizing the vertical transportation scheme. The developer admitted that his organization had never scientifically approached this critical aspect and that some problems they had faced at their existing properties could be the consequence of this lapse.

The final concluding experience was at a newly constructed mall-cum-multiplex. After a movie, the only way out was a climb down eight flights of enclosed stairs. The disconnect was obvious. Beddington's statement that "people flow like liquid following the line of least resistance and greatest attraction" combined with Barney's contention that "in a shopping centre or mall, the former must be enabled and the latter encouraged" sums up the ideal approach to planning the Vertical Transportation System for a

Retail Property. Yet, I am not far off the mark when I conclude that while the primary role of the vertical transportation system is to enable least resistance, the current design and selection priority is focused on making it part of the attraction, even to the extent of totally neglecting the primary role.

About the Author:

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