

Mall developer seeks advice from women

By Sana Siwolop
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In designing shopping centers and mixed-use properties, the Trademark Property Company of Fort Worth, Texas used to do what many developers do: put together teams of professionals like architects, designers and building consultants; send out surveys; and hold community meetings.

But in 2005, when Trademark began planning a large mixed-use center, Watters Creek, for a 52-acre site in Allen, Texas, near Dallas, it decided to consult a group it had never called on before: women.

Terry Montesi, the company's chief executive, first hired two retail consultants who are women: Claudia Sagan and J'Amy Owens. But Trademark also invited two dozen women from the Allen area to pick apart its plans for the center. They included Kirsten Fair, a stay-at-home mother of two, and Debbie Stout, a City Council member, who runs a company that sells business forms.

The women weighed in on dozens of features, like the center's layout, landscaping, parking options, pedestrian walkways and outdoor art. "They asked us about every detail, and then they listened," Stout said recently.

Listening to women shoppers may seem like an entirely logical thing to do, yet many retail developers and consultants say such input is often missing during the early stages of shopping center development.

"Developers, in too many cases, are still focusing on data points and demographics, and keeping shoppers at arm's length, which can make it easy to fall back on to gender stereotypes," said Andrea Learned, the founder of Learned on Women, a company in Burlington, Vermont, that monitors trends in how women make purchasing decisions.

But, whether using consultants or focus groups, some developers are paying more attention to customers and their emotional connection to a store or shopping center. With so many options available, women shoppers now want to feel as though retail centers have been "customized" to meet their needs, said Tracey Gotsis, the executive vice president for marketing and development at Macerich, a real estate investment trust based in Santa Monica, California

Instead of relying on questionnaires or formal

focus groups, Macerich, Gotsis said, often takes boxed lunches to the workplaces of more than a dozen local women who are acting as a "sounding board" for the company's redevelopment of Santa Monica Place, an older enclosed mall that is scheduled to reopen in the fall of 2009.

There, the company is now planning to add more luxury retailers and stores that meet the needs of women in the 35-to-55 age group, after it discovered that the women thought too many nearby retailers were focusing on teenagers and the so-called "junior" market.

The women also wanted more restaurants and different types of restaurants, and Macerich is now talking to a half-dozen restaurateurs as well. It also has plans to add a double-deck carousel to the food court at the center as well as an outdoor amphitheater for children's performances. "Our network of women is telling us they want more things to do with children," Gotsis said.

In Gilbert, Arizona, the company first put plans for developing SanTan Village before about 90 women from the area in 2002. They told the company they wanted considerably more restaurant space than originally envisioned, and also sidewalks that were far wider than the five feet it usually installed in outdoor centers.

SanTan Village opened last autumn, with sidewalks that are at least 10 feet wide, and in some cases 15, so that women shoppers can navigate them easily with strollers and children in tow.

At Caruso Affiliated, a development company

based in Los Angeles, Rick Caruso, the president and chief executive, said that four years ago he heard a young mother complain about the lack of nursing stations in shopping centers. That, he says, prompted him to make sure that the company's upcoming mixed-use development in central Glendale, California, the Americana at Brand, would have a large children's playroom in the main lobby ("usually they're stuck behind the garbage area") and private changing rooms (fully stocked with diapers), two private nursing rooms and a small kitchen for heating baby bottles.

Caruso said that because so many women with children drive large cars, his company has been building parking spaces at least nine inches wider than the eight-and-a-half-foot-wide spaces that tend to be the industry norm.

At Watters Creek, Trademark Property discovered that some of the input it got from its women's focus groups also challenged conventional retailing wisdom.

Like many retail developers, Trademark Property was used to installing tall, often ornate, brick or stone buildings, as well as sidewalks, at developments like Market Street, a mixed-used center it opened in the Woodlands, Texas, near Houston in 2004. The core of that mixed-used center was designed to have a classic Main Street look.

The Watters Creek center, however, was to be part of a 500-acre planned community whose

master plan called for significant green space as part of environmentally friendly design.

Soon after the company began working with the women in Allen, it discovered that they wanted something very different from what it had built in the past. They favored buildings that were both less prominent and less formal. They also wanted more abundant landscaping, curved streets, meandering pathways, more parking options and a community fireplace, which they regarded as the kind of a flourish that might be found at a resort.

Instead of fountains, large pieces of abstract outdoor art and drab pedestrian walkways between parking garages and stores, they wanted "calming" water areas, interactive art that children could climb on, walkways that were visually appealing and an abundance of outdoor restaurant seating. The women also wanted a village look and feel, with buildings of various sizes, colors and textures that followed the rolling topography of the area, rather than sitting flat.

In the end, Trademark executives realized that instead of looking at buildings and facades, the women wanted to be "revitalized and inspired, with something that would also invoke a sense of discovery and whimsy," Montesi said. "They said, 'Transport us to somewhere else.' "

The first phase of Watters Creek, which is expected to cover 1.15 million square feet eventually, opened in May. So far, Trademark has studied it with buildings that act mostly as a backdrop to a park-like area with two stone bridges, a pond, a creek, a community fireplace, climbable

sculptures, and 10 restaurants that have outdoor seating with views of the pond, creek or village green.

By contrast, at the Market Street development, there are only two restaurants with outdoor views.

Market Street has one large parking garage, while Watters Creek will eventually have three garages and two valet stations, in addition to streetside parking.

When Fair, one of the women in Allen who worked with Trademark, visited Watters Creek, she liked what she saw. "I have almost unlimited opportunities to shop in our area," she said, referring to at least 12 shopping malls within a 30-minute drive of her home. Still, she has her design preferences and this one pleases her. "Here, every restaurant has an outdoor patio, and everyone has a different view," she said. "I can't think of another center like it."