



Lifestyle

Mall on the way side

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The Centrepoint is where families hang out at, but it will face challenges when Robinsons moves out next year

It is iconic to generations of Singaporeans who knew it as the hangout place of choice back in the 1980s, and the preserve of Centrepoint Kids, as they were known - youths who loitered at the mall.

But time has marched on and now The Centrepoint faces being upstaged by shiny, newer malls in the vicinity such as 313@Somerset, Orchard Central and Mandarin Gallery.

While still popular and a well-known Orchard Road institution, the mall now seems more the preserve of an older crowd, drawn by tenants such as department store Robinsons and supermarket chain Cold Storage.

But change is in store. Next year, Robinsons, the mall anchor tenant, will be moving to The Heeren.

Dentist Cara Teo, 25, says the three-decade-old mall is the "family hangout place", as the Teos often have meals there and shop at Robinsons department store, Marks & Spencer and Cold Storage.

But she adds: "My mum says that once Robinsons goes out, we will probably go to The Heeren."

Construction works nearby are not in the landmark mall's favour.

A traffic light that once provided convenient access to The Centrepoint has been moved from between 313@Somerset and Orchard Central to the front of fashion store Zara. Pedestrians now have to walk further to the traffic light, or access the mall via an underpass in Orchard Central.

Still, despite this, The Centrepoint - "The" was added to the name of the mall in a rebranding exercise in 2006 - continues to draw a loyal, older, more family-oriented crowd.

Editor John Chan, 33, who works at The Centrepoint, notes: "It's particularly busy during Robinsons sales. It's not as crowded as 313@Somerset, but that's because they have the MRT station. I see a lot of tourists, mostly. And I do see families and lots of middle-aged women during the sales period."

Well-known Singapore designer Celia Loe, who has maintained a shop there since 1983 selling her eponymous sleek workwear, says that while she has seen a decline in business over the last few years, it has not been "drastic".

She notes: "There are so many new malls such as 313@Somerset and suburban malls coming up, and people shop so much online these days, so I depend more on my regular customers. Centrepoint is not a very big mall, so I think they will have to upgrade. When Robinsons goes, it will definitely have to look for a good tenant to come in."

The Centrepoint is not that small, though - it comprises about 332,240 sq ft of shopping space. In comparison, 313@Somerset is 294,000 sq ft in size.

Ms Loe has no plans to relocate: "We have been there since day one. We have our regulars, and wherever we go, they will follow us. We don't depend on walk-in customers."

Other tenants such as yoga studio Real Yoga, which moved to The Centrepoint three years ago, also have no immediate plans to move. Spokesman Cedric Chang says: "We are not too concerned about Robinsons relocating, since our industry is targeting fitness/yoga enthusiasts and not so much Robinsons customers."

Robinsons declined to comment for this story, as did other tenants such as Prima Taste Kitchen, which specialises in ingredients for local dishes, Times The Bookshop and optical retail chain The Lens Men.

In response to queries from SundayLife! about shopper traffic at the mall, a spokesman for Frasers Centrepoint Malls, which manages The Centrepoint, says: "Footfall and traffic in malls along Orchard Road generally follow a pattern that is mirrored by seasonal peaks and troughs in human traffic.

"The entry of newer malls in the Somerset precinct have definitely added to the vibrancy of this stretch and provided consumers a wider variety of shopping options."

The spokesman adds that foot traffic in the mall is expected to increase once the roadworks are done. When asked if there were any plans to revitalise the mall, he would only say that more details will be released in due course.

Retail expert **Lynda Wee**, an adjunct associate professor in retailing at Nanyang Technological University's Nanyang Business School, says The Centrepoint no longer has the area all to itself.

"In the good old days, there was nothing much there, and Centrepoint drew crowds because there was little competition. But now, with all these new buildings, you are competing for attention," says DrWee.

Noting that Robinsons is "a very strong anchor", Dr Wee says the mall will need "something unique and new to market" to attract shoppers.

Retail experts that SundayLife! spoke to suggest that The Centrepoint could bring in more home furnishing brands such as Japanese lifestyle store Francfranc and Hong Kong home and accessories label Goods Of Desire (G.O.D) to retain its appeal as a destination for homeware shopping.

The mall has 10 furniture and homeware shops including bed and mattress company Slumberland, electronics store Harvey Norman and European home furnishings brand The Bear Knows. Mr Samuel Tan, course manager of Temasek Polytechnic's retail management diploma programme, says: "Robinsons is very strong in its household and bed linen department, and Centrepoint can continue to strengthen that positioning by bringing brands such as Francfranc and G.O.D."

He adds that both brands do not have a retail presence in Orchard Road yet.

To keep the profile of The Centrepoint's tenants current, Mr Tan also suggests using the large retail space that will be vacated by Robinsons for flagship stores of new-to-market brands such as United States youth label Hollister, or work with fashion retailers such as FJ Benjamin to create a multi-label concept store featuring brands that it distributes such as Banana Republic. The concept store can also introduce new lines such as American clothing chain Old Navy.

The Centrepoint could also tap the seniors market. Mr Tan says: "The silver population will serve as an affordable and sustainable target market for a mall. In addition, no mall in Singapore has yet to cater to their needs."

Shops offering healthcare and agility products, as well as travel packages for seniors, can be considered as part of the tenant mix, he adds.

Bringing in another department store as an anchor tenant could also work in The Centrepoint's favour, but only if it introduces a new-to-market name such as South Korea's Lotte Department Store, says Ms Sarah Lim, senior lecturer in the marketing and retail management section of the Singapore Polytechnic Business School.

"Robinsons has been so established in The Centrepoint that shoppers identify them together. It is going to be very difficult for it to look for a department store as renowned as Robinsons unless it looks overseas for one that differentiates itself from existing ones such as Metro, Tangs and Isetan," she says.

The experts also agree that it is time for The Centrepoint to undergo a physical makeover.

One major change could be to make the facade more "transparent" such as that of Paragon Shopping Centre and Wisma Atria so that shoppers at the street level can look into the shops in The Centrepoint.

Says Ms Lim: "The use of windows increases the visibility of the shops and attract shoppers to step inside."

Besides sprucing up the facade, the layout is another area some reckon could be looked at. Mr Tan laments that he often loses his way around the mall's confusing alleys which lead to various sections of the mall.

Short of reconfiguring the layout into a U-shaped one, Ms Lim suggests using better signs and hanging more banners bearing logos of the shops that are tucked away in corners.

Whatever changes The Centrepoint makes, Mr Tan stresses that it should not shift from its family-friendly positioning, as this is a more sustainable approach for malls to appeal to all segments instead of just a niche market.

"Centrepoint has always drawn a profile of shoppers that is older and from the middle-income group. So the mall should continue to appeal to this market, yet stay fresh by introducing hip brands for the young too.

After all, no one wants to be seen as a mall for the old folks."

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Newer malls in the Somerset area have made the 30-year-old shopping institution (above) less popular with the younger crowd. -- PHOTO: SAM CHIN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

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