

Reverberations from underground

avenueK



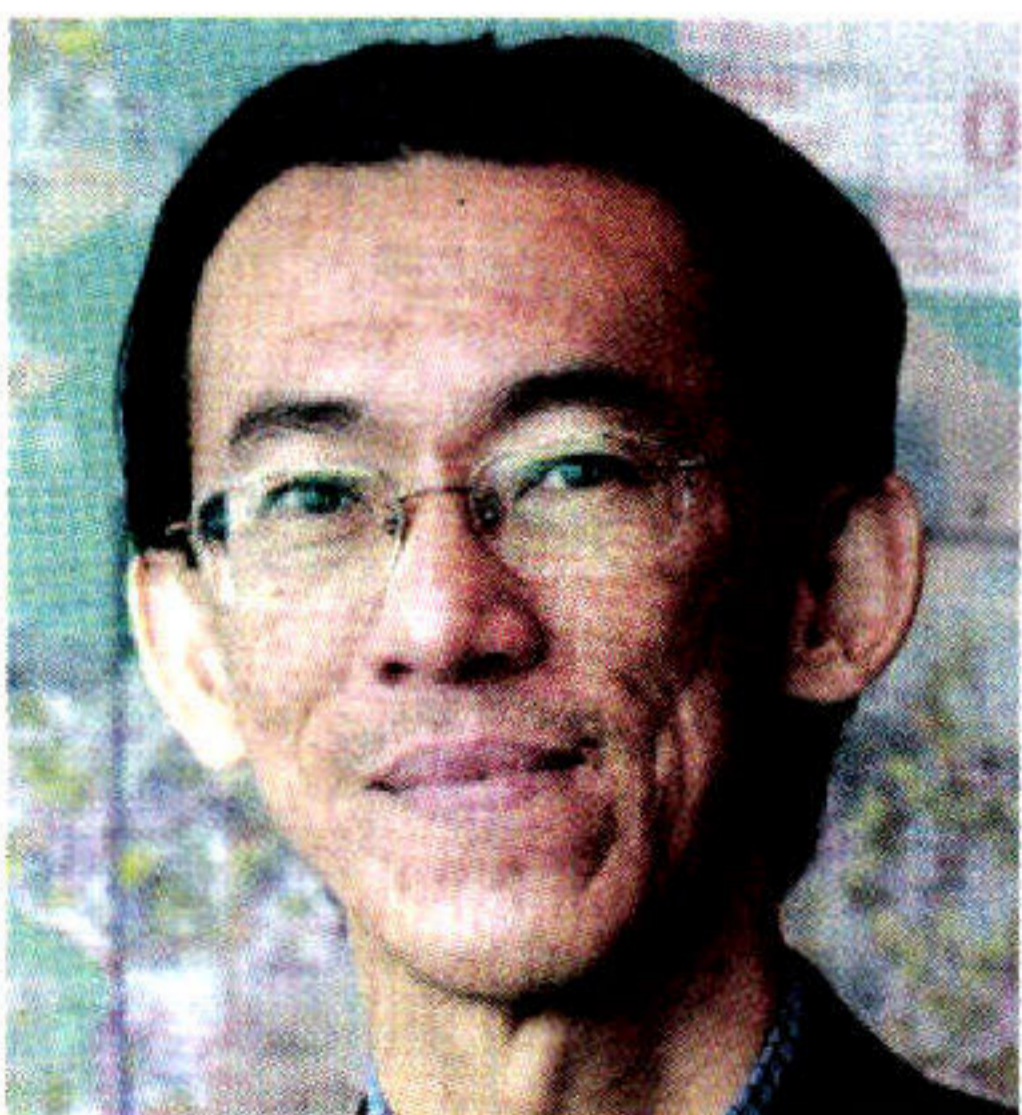
GROUND-SHAKING: With the proposed 150km of MRT in the works in the Klang Valley, expect more underground and interconnected shopping malls to emerge



Avenue K street mall

JAN YONG

Going underground is not something we Malaysians are used to unless you are referring to basement parking or the SMART (Stormwater Management and Road Tunnel) along the KL-Seremban highway, amongst others. There are two other underground phenomena that most Malaysians especially those in the Klang Valley experience on occasions or for some regularly, that is, the LRT (Light Rail Transit) ride that goes



Ho ... "Travelling underground would become so normal"

underground and the underground shopping mall.

Underground shopping malls are nothing new. Overseas, they have been around since they first built the underground train stations. The most well-known is of course the Montreal Underground City (RESO) located in Downtown Montreal in the Quebec province in Canada. It is one of the largest underground complexes in the

world.

The interconnected areas include shopping malls, apartments, hotels, condominiums, banks, offices, museums, universities and 32 kms of tunnels spread over 12 km sq area. Since it opened in 1962, the Montreal Underground is still marvelled at for its sheer size and impressive urban planning achievement.

Though its original vision was to create an underground city to avoid the harsh Canadian east coast weather, nowadays, it's being promoted as a tourist attraction. Not that any Montrealer cares as they have gotten so used to it, seeing it more as a large mall complex linking metro stations. Sometimes, one does not even know that one is in it.

With our many kilometres of MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) due to connect us within this decade, should we or will we be headed that way too? For a start, we already have many, some say, too many above ground shopping malls. An underground shopping mall is something that's an afterthought, an incidental use arising from the need to utilise vacant space near an underground station, for example.

This fact is borne out by the rather lukewarm response to Avenue K's underground street mall that's next to the KLCC station which provides rail access via the Putra LRT line. Though housing popular restaurants, the mall failed to attract hordes of shoppers, as observed by us on a visit during peak hours recently.

It's not surprising since most commuters who use the LRT are in a rush and even if they think about stopping to shop, the first thing on their minds would be to go to KLCC for their shop-

ping needs due to the wider variety of shops there. Perhaps the fact that they could dine al fresco with the outdoor park and fountain in sight also made it a far superior choice. Hence lies the challenge for some so-called underground malls in Malaysia.

Competing with the above ground shoptots is perhaps their biggest challenge. The exceptions are few, such as the lower ground link between the Gardens and Mid Valley Megamall which houses many eateries. Another example is the below ground link between the new and old sections of One Utama. Both shopping malls are incredibly popular during weekends and during weekday lunchtimes and their underground eateries are doing booming business.

F & B shines: This is something to be expected as water related businesses such as food and beverage, groceries, and entertainment automatically do better if located underground, revealed Feng Shui consultant Joey Yap. He continued: "Water produces wood, so bookshops and gift shops should also do well."

Conversely, metal type businesses such as financial planning and legal firms won't do so well if located underground.

Apart from these two booming malls and the Curve's underground interconnecting link with Ikano Power (shopping) centre, there is no stand alone underground shopping mall in Malaysia as it is. Perhaps Malaysia is not ready for it yet as we still have an abundance of vacant land to build shopping malls above ground.

Cost is a prime consideration. No one builds a standalone underground

shopping mall as the costs would be prohibitive, says an analyst with a local research house. "They could only exist currently as a shopping 'street' next to an underground LRT station, as a below ground link between two shopping malls or as a basement shopping area. It's more a necessity as those spaces need to be utilised in the most profitable way and nothing beats placing shops there and collecting rentals from them."

"It's true that eating outlets are the ones doing the best at underground locations, but I suspect it's more to do with the fact that if you have a collection of good restaurants and stalls in an area that's convenient for everyone, then it would attract the crowd looking to stop by just for an hour or so for meals. Imagine if you had placed this same collection of good eateries at an upper floor, I believe you would still attract the same crowd. By the same token, some restaurants and stalls located below ground are not exactly doing a booming business, for example, the one in Low Yat Plaza."

Natural progression: So, is Malaysia ready yet for underground shopping? Says confirmed shopaholic Anita Abu Talib: "I will only do window-shopping underground as I perceive goods sold there as being of inferior quality. Otherwise, why sell it underground? There is a negative connotation to the word 'underground'."

However, another regular weekend shopper says that it makes no difference to her whether the goods are sold above or underground. "If I walk past a shop and like something there, I would buy it regardless of which floor it's sold. Then again, I am an impulse buyer."

Does the word 'underground' carry such a negative perception? Not quite, according to property research consultant, Ho Chin Soon. "Our tropical climate makes it not very conducive to walk longer than 10 minutes, so in time to come, shop lots located underground would gain more acceptance as more of the populace take the trains. Travelling underground would become so normal that people would not even notice that the shops are underground, just like in Montreal or London."

Apart from our heat-fatigued populace, tourists may also find our future underground malls a great tourist attraction, just like in Montreal. The popularity of our fully air-conditioned malls is beyond question, judging from the packed shopping malls every weekend.

So, with the proposed 3-line 150km MRT in the works, expect many more kilometres of underground malls to emerge. It's a natural progression. The underground shopping mall is as much a necessity as it is a reflection of our society where retail therapy has become many families' weekend pastime. On a more positive note, people are at least walking more and leaving less carbon footprint.

Whether these shopping malls will evolve into underground cities complete with apartments, universities, and hospitals, is another story altogether given the propensity of our underground structures to be inundated with water whenever it rains heavily. Recent tremors felt in the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia whenever earthquakes strike Indonesia may also be a cause for concern for underground buildings.