

Bold temple-within-a-mall move pays off for Mid Valley

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PETALING JAYA: Nestled in the centre of the sprawling Mid Valley Megamall in Kuala Lumpur is an unexpected piece of serenity among a madness of commercial activities – the Sri Maha Sakthi Mohambigai Amman Temple.

The story of which came first – the temple or the mall – is a beloved part of the city's story, one that has spurred urban legends of how the temple had 'protected' the mall during the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Former Mid Valley City managing director M.K. Sen, who led the development of the mall, said while most of the urban legends were nonsense, the temple's role in its breathtaking multi-billion dollar success was no mere rumour.

"Till this day, if you ask the Mid Valley owners what is the reason for their success, they would point to the construction of the temple," he said in an interview.

On Thursday, Klang MP Charles Santiago said the Selangor government had proposed the "Mid Valley solution" of a peaceful co-existence for the Seafeld Sri Maha Mariaman Temple, which dispute with a developer had led to riots.

According to Sen, building a temple within a mall was the most challenging and heart-wrenching project but also the most fulfilling.

When developer IGB Corp Bhd acquired the land to build Mid Valley City in the late 1980s, they faced three major challenges – to rehouse over 600 impoverished families, the acquisition of around 10 units of private homes and what to do with the Sri Maha Sakthi Mohambigai Amman Temple.

IGB Corp successfully relocated the families and acquired the homes but Sen would not take the easy route by demolishing the temple and its holy Bodhi tree.

"We could have just cut down the



Good move: The Sri Maha Sakthi Mohambigai Amman Temple standing tall at the Mid Valley Megamall. Inset: Sen



tree but that was not something I was able to accept without understanding the consequences and the importance of it," Sen said.

The temple initially had two Bodhi trees.

Sen described the fate of the City Hall contractors who chopped down the first tree to make way for the construction of Jalan Hishamuddin as a tale "too sad to print".

He then engaged the temple's board of trustees.

"They made a plea for us to help them stay where they are, given the fact that this was a very spiritual tree," he said.

It is believed that the tree possesses a spiritual power in the form of the white *naga* (snake) which manifests itself once a year.

A born Hindu who converted to Buddhism, Sen has a deep interest in spiritual entities and conducted a long and intensive study of every item in temple.

"It was pointed out to us that the Bodhi tree was the main spiritual item that we needed to protect," he said.

"We knew there was something with the temple destined for us to keep, I personally felt that this temple is really a part of Mid Valley and we shouldn't allow it to be separated."

With the engineers and consultants on board, the next challenge was to convince the mall's board of directors – some of whom were not Hindus – to build the world's first temple-within-a mall.

"They had concerns, especially since the temple had to be located at the east entrance, the prized entry point of any mall," he said.

Sen managed to convince them that the intrinsic value of keeping the temple could not be judged immediately.

He said the board, including now IGB Group CEO Datuk Robert Tan and Mid Valley City CEO Anthony

Barragay, agreed to support the idea and pay for the initial cost.

IGB Corp offered the temple trustees a 30,000 sq ft space, almost double of their original size of only 16,000 sq ft, and a generous 90-year lease.

They also provided carparks for devotees and a small accommodation for the late priestess and her family.

Sen said while development of the 80 million sq ft Mid Valley City cost a whopping RM3mil a day, the expenditure to rebuild the temple and space it needed was "negligible".

In return, IGB Corp asked for the height and size of the temple to blend into the mall and a monthly token sum of RM10 for rental of the space.

Meanwhile, the trustees raised funds to commission the intricate carvings required for the temple.

Mid Valley opened in 2000 with the temple opening a year later. Even as the mall continues to grow into the mammoth mixed-use development it is today, the temple remains at the heart of Mid Valley City.

Many of the world's developers had thought they were fools for embarking on this project, Sen said.

"To say that 'I cannot have a temple within a megamall' is a statement made by people who have never done it.

"Mid Valley has proven that it is possible and it is now one of the most successful malls in Asia.

"The success of our story shows that there is nothing wrong in providing a spiritual space for people going to a mall.

"Some may want to go shopping (or) eating but there may be a few who just want to sit down somewhere, enjoy the serenity of the place (and) receive some spiritual blessing," he said.

What both the temple and the developers have showed is that heritage and development can be integrated and co-exist peacefully.