

Beyond buildings: What retail can learn from a hospitality mindset

With interests spanning shopping centres and luxury hospitality, New Africa Developments believes the disciplines have more in common than might first appear – and that putting people at the centre of property decisions can create places they value, remember and choose to return to.



At first glance, an everyday shopping centre and a luxury safari lodge might seem to have little in common. One serves people buying groceries, accessing services or meeting friends close to home. The other may welcome guests who have travelled across the world in search of an exceptional experience.

Yet both succeed or fail, ultimately, on how well they understand the people who use them.

For New Africa Developments (NAD), whose interests span a portfolio of shopping centres and Cheetah Plains Private Game Reserve within the Sabi Sand Nature Reserve, experience across both retail and hospitality has reinforced a shift in thinking from buildings to people.

That means looking beyond the physical asset and considering how people arrive, move through and interact with a place; whether they feel safe and comfortable; what encourages them to stay and, ultimately, what makes them want to return.



“Whether someone is visiting a shopping centre for groceries or travelling across the world for a luxury safari, they are looking for an experience that feels welcoming and effortless,” says Japie van Niekerk, CEO of NAD.

“The settings and expectations may be very different, but both require attention to detail, thoughtful design and a real understanding of how people behave and what they value.”

A hospitality mindset

Hospitality provides a particularly useful framework for thinking about customer experience because, at its best, very little is accidental. The guest experience is deliberately considered and curated, from arrival and service to the physical environment and the smaller details that shape how a place feels.

For NAD, however, adopting a hospitality mindset does not mean trying to make a shopping centre resemble a luxury resort. It means applying the same degree of intentional thinking to

the needs of the people a property serves.

“Hospitality is not limited to hotels or lodges. It is an attitude,” says van Niekerk. “It is about making people feel welcome, comfortable, safe and valued every time they interact with one of our properties.”



In retail, that can translate into considerations as practical as cleanliness, landscaping, signage and security, the quality of frontline interactions, how easily customers can navigate a centre and whether there are comfortable places to pause.

It can also change the questions property owners ask.

Traditional measures such as trading performance, footfall and tenant mix remain fundamental to successful retail property, but experience introduces another layer: How does someone feel when they arrive? Where do families naturally gather? Is the centre intuitive to navigate? What might encourage people to spend more time there rather than simply completing a transaction and leaving?

These questions matter increasingly as retail centres evolve beyond places of pure transaction. NAD points to the growing importance of community spaces, events, children's activities and other activations that give people additional reasons to visit and connect.

At Cheetah Plains, the expression is naturally very different. Personalised service and conservation storytelling form part of a carefully considered guest journey designed to provide far more than accommodation.

The scale, purpose and customer expectations differ significantly, but the underlying process is similar: understand who the place is for, then consider deliberately how each part of their experience can best serve them.

Learning works both ways

The exchange between the two sectors is not one-directional.

If hospitality encourages close attention to detail and emotional connection, NAD believes retail offers important lessons in agility.

Shopping centres operate in an environment of constantly shifting customer behaviour, seasonal patterns and evolving tenant mixes. Remaining relevant requires owners and managers to listen, respond and continually refine the offer.

That same mindset is valuable in hospitality, where expectations also change and yesterday's definition of excellence cannot simply be assumed to satisfy tomorrow's guest.



“Both businesses teach us that excellence is never static,” says van Niekerk. “You have to keep listening, observing and refining what you do. Hospitality has sharpened our thinking about the experience of a place, while retail continually reminds us how important it is to remain responsive to the people we serve.”

Listening, importantly, involves more than analysing data.

NAD draws on customer insights, retailer engagement, operational feedback and guest feedback across its assets, but says there is equal value in simply spending time on the ground and watching how people use a place.

Where do they naturally congregate? Which routes do they take? Where do they pause? What works differently in practice from the way it was envisaged on a plan?

Observing real behaviour can reveal opportunities that data alone may not and helps property owners tailor places to the people who actually use them rather than an assumed customer.

This becomes particularly important because there is no single formula for a successful experience. What creates value for an international guest at Cheetah Plains will not be identical to what matters to someone visiting a local shopping centre every week.

Understanding the audience is precisely the point.

What crosses those boundaries, NAD believes, are fundamentals such as convenience, safety, quality, authenticity and the feeling of being welcomed and understood.

From property to place

The relationship between retail and hospitality is likely to become increasingly relevant as the traditional boundaries between property sectors continue to blur.

Retail destinations are already incorporating more leisure, food, entertainment and social experiences, while customers increasingly expect interactions with physical places to be convenient and seamless. Technology will play an important role in enabling this, but NAD believes it should enhance rather than replace the human element of an experience.



For property owners, this places greater emphasis on understanding not only what a building provides, but how it fits into people's lives.

It also reinforces the importance of creating places that remain socially relevant and connected to the communities they serve. A property may provide the physical platform, but its lasting value depends in part on what happens there and the associations people build with it over time.

People may not remember every store they visited, every meal they ate or every design detail they encountered. They are more likely to remember whether they felt comfortable, welcomed, inspired or connected – and those impressions influence whether they choose to return.

For NAD, that may ultimately be the most important lesson from operating across two apparently contrasting sectors.

“The future of property lies as much in what we build as it does in how people experience what we build,” says van Niekerk.

“Whether someone visits one of our shopping centres every week or travels from another continent to stay at Cheetah Plains, our aspiration is the same: to create places that people remember, recommend and return to.”

.../ends

Image Captions:

- **Japie van Niekerk, CEO of NAD**
- **New Africa Developments' Jumbo Mall**
- **New Africa Developments' Cheetah Plains Private Game Reserve**
- **New Africa Developments' Cheetah Plains Private Game Reserve - Game Drive**
- **New Africa Developments' Cheetah Plains Private Game Reserve - Poolside**

Contact details

Angie Di Giovamapolo

PR and Portfolio Lead

angie@catchwords.co.za

[0834536668](tel:0834536668)

Copy link

<https://www.catchwords.co.za/273120-beyond-buildings-what-retail-can-learn-from-a-hospitality-mindset/>