

Malls adjust to their aging clientele

BY MICHELLE LALONDE, GAZETTE ENVIRONMENT REPORTER JANUARY 6, 2012 7:23 AM



Alexis Nihon Plaza's owners enthusiastically accepted a proposal to allow researchers to use the mall as a living laboratory.
Photograph by: John Kenney, THE GAZETTE

MONTREAL - For people who have trouble walking, seeing, hearing or making themselves understood, a shopping mall can be a frustrating and even a terrifying place. For many, going to the mall is simply out of the question.

But for researchers at the Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire en réadaptation du Montréal (CRIR), a shopping mall is the perfect real-life laboratory in which to test all kinds of technologies and innovations designed for the physically and cognitively challenged.

So when Bonnie Swaine and Eva Kehayia, research directors at the CRIR, got word that Alexis Nihon Plaza in downtown Montreal was planning major renovations, they contacted the mall owners with an unusual request.

"We wondered if we could turn Alexis Nihon Plaza into a living laboratory where we could conduct our experiments," said Swaine, who is also a professor in the Université de Montréal's medical faculty.

Not only did the mall owner, Canmarc Real Estate Investment Trust, agree to co-operate fully, but the institute got a \$350,000 grant from the Quebec government's Fonds de recherche du Québec/Santé to

conduct a dozen multidisciplinary projects this year.

Swaine and Kehayia hope to extend the research over four years with a possible \$1.4 million in grants. So over the next few months and years, Alexis Nihon shoppers may notice researchers and their clients testing dozens of procedures, devices and policies, including:

Smart wheelchairs that can be programmed to take a person from one specific shop to another while avoiding obstacles.

Thermal cameras that can detect human traffic patterns so researchers can pinpoint problem areas.

The efficacy of software designed to help the cognitively-impaired navigate a virtual grocery store.

Transmitters and receptors that tell visually impaired people what stores and services are nearby and how to get to them.

The CRIR links dozens of researchers from seven universities and various disciplines. The centre is operated by six rehabilitation establishments in the Montreal area: the Jewish Rehabilitation Hospital, the Institut de réadaptation Gingras-Lindsay de Montréal, the Constance Lethbridge Rehabilitation Centre, the Centre de réadaptation Lucie Bruneau, the Institut Nazareth et Louis Braille, and the Institute Raymond-Dewar.

Kehayia and Swaine note that 17 per cent of Quebecers deal with some kind of physical handicap (48 per cent of those over age 65), so public spaces need to be better designed to accommodate them.

Some of the research involves assessing the awareness of retail workers and developing training kits.

“Things can change in the physical environment, but if these people don’t feel welcome, not much will have really changed,” said Kehayia, a neuro-linguist and associate professor at McGill University’s School of Physical and Occupational Therapy.

The researchers said they were pleased that the company that owns the mall was willing to devote time and effort to the research. Architects, designers and company representatives have been meeting regularly with the CRIR teams to keep abreast of problems and to come up with solutions.

Guy Charron, executive vice-president the mall’s owner, said his company owns several sites, including Centre Laval, Place Longueuil, and the CN Central Station Complex, and he said input from the researchers on how to better serve an significant segment of the public is valuable.

“We have to pay attention to demographics and, let’s face it, the population is aging, but also we want to be proactive to accommodate people (of all ages) who may have problems related to vision, mobility, hearing, etc.,” he said.

Major renovations were planned at Alexis Nihon Plaza and other Canmarc malls, partly to accommodate the arrival of Target Stores, which have bought out Zellers. (The Zellers at Alexis Nihon will close after Christmas 2012, and Target is expected to open in the fall of 2013, Charron said). Common areas like

food courts need to be updated to accommodate the new clients Target is expected to attract, Charron said, so it is a good time to conduct research and ensure renovations are done with accessibility in mind.

New elevators for example, may include voice instructions to let visually impaired people know what floor they are on, he said. Or certain paints and floor coverings can be selected or avoided to improve visibility or reduce the likelihood of falls, he said.

“Sometimes it is the smallest things that make a big difference,” he said.

mlalonde@montrealgazette.com

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette

Previous

Next



Alexis Nihon Plaza's owners enthusiastically accepted a proposal to allow researchers to use the mall as a living laboratory.

Photograph by: John Kenney, THE GAZETTE

