



Joining the Circle

When Zurich Airport decided to develop adjacent land they brought in Swiss consultancy *promaFox* to help plan the F&B offerings. Owner and CEO **Vinoo Mehera** FCSI tells *Jacquetta Picton* about the biggest project they've ever done – so far



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The first meeting between Zurich Airport authorities and Vinoo Mehera FCSI, owner and CEO of *promaFox* consultancy, about the massive development project took place before the ground had been turned, in fact, before they even had an architect.

Mehera and his team were asked to help come up with ideas for F&B formats to place throughout the proposed development.

The size of 30 football fields, the new building was to house two hotels, a conference center, an arts zone, an outpatients clinic as well as offices and shops.

“We were brought in to develop the food concept,” says Mehera. “At that time, they had only a vague idea of what it was going to be. We looked at the number of restaurants that would be needed, what sort of ideas, the number of hotels – building up the complete area.”

“The variety of the different restaurants is a crucial element for the success of the Circle,” says Stefan Feldmann, head The Circle, Flughafen Zurich AG.

A competition was held to find an architect to design the building and in 2010 it was announced that Japanese architect Riken Yamamoto had won. His winning design was a semi-circle backed by a hill. It was unusual in that the floors increase in size as you go up the building, making it appear to lean forward. This maximizes the floorspace for the footprint and Mehera reckons this was one of the reasons that Yamamoto's design won as it made the enterprise more worthwhile economically. “It was an expensive project and in order to make the business case viable they had to do something special,” he says.

The whole building, which for a long time was the biggest building site in Switzerland, cost about 1.2bn Swiss francs. It is all LEED Platinum. “This was an imperative from early in the project,” says Mehera.

Yamamoto took inspiration for his design from the winding lanes and alleys of Niederdorf, the old part of Zurich. There are lanes and alleys throughout the Circle.

This underlines the fact that *promaFox* was helping to design, in essence, a new neighborhood. “We planned the formats, how many and where they should be to create that ambiance of a little city neighborhood with cafes, restaurants, bars and a hotel” says Mehera.

The development is unusual in that it was so mixed, such a thing had not been done before. Heathrow Airport in London and Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport are looking at Zurich with interest, as they consider creating similar developments. With the Circle they've built a whole new district, which is connected to the airport. It is very well connected. There's lots of parking, train links are good and there are facilities for private planes.

The hotel and conference center were an integral part of the plan from the start. “We discussed should a hotel be four star plus, should it be complemented with a three-star hotel, and although it wasn't initially expected that both should be run by Hyatt, that is what happened in the end,” says Mehera. “In the beginning it was envisioned that one hotel would run the convention center, and there'd be one hotel on its own.”

It ended up with both hotels and conference center being run by Hyatt. One hotel being a Hyatt Regency, one being a Hyatt Place, with the large convention center in between. Delegates have a choice of hotel depending on their budget.

“The first meeting we had with *promaFox* was early in the process. We were looking at the plans, deciding on the available spaces required and how to lay them out,” says Max Burkhalter, executive chef, Hyatt International. “The brief was to come up with a very efficient BOH for the Convention Center. From the receiving, storage, production and finishing kitchens and dish out pantries, stewarding etc. After the first available draft, I spent a day in the *promaFox* office and finalized all details.”

In the convention center *promaFox* suggested that two lifts were installed instead of one. This would facilitate clearing and rearranging a room between events. >



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The consultancy also suggested taking some space from the largest banquet/conference room to create a back-of-house area to enable the caterers to serve and clear without interrupting proceedings in the room. Although initially resisted as it decreased the area, after Mehera explained the space wouldn’t function otherwise it was accepted. “We love doing this; working with the client to overcome these problems,” he says.

Another constraint imposed on Mehera came from Yamamoto’s insistence that nothing should be placed within 60cm of the façade. This made it complex to get optimal workflow. “The façade was the holy grail as far as Yamamoto was concerned,” says Mehera. “His team came and checked how the space was being used.”

From conception to construction permit phase promaFox was responsible for the technical concept and the technical fit out for all food formats. For the pizza place L’Oro di Napoli it also did the complete tenant fit out. “That’s another of the capabilities promaFox has, we have a small construction department that does tenant fit outs as general contractors,” says Mehera.

He then mentions the challenge of getting a four-tonne pizza oven (it can cook 12 pizzas simultaneously) into the kitchen of L’Oro di Napoli.

“It was a last minute-decision to add it and the base build had already been worked out, with everything, MEP, planned,” says Mehera. It can be wood-fired or gas powered so there were also challenges to overcome with the ventilation. Being next to the airport there are restrictions on chimneys. “There are safety issues, plus environmental considerations,” says Mehera. “Hyatt has a Jospier charcoal grill that gives its Lebanese restaurant Babel its special ambiance, so this and the pizza oven required special ventilation.”

All steps were taken to make the building as carbon neutral as possible. Earth from the digging of the foundations was added to the hill behind the site. This was planted with 14,000 trees to create a new park, complete

with its own funicular railway to make it accessible to all.

Mehera explains other measures taken to ensure the building gained LEED Platinum certification. “In Switzerland induction has been part of the game for many years so it’s nothing new here. We have also recommended equipment that is multi-functional,” he says. “We have brought in the right fridges and freezers for every type of food to ensure there’s no food waste. Also, we have optimized ventilation, so we didn’t waste energy by having a fryer next to a refrigerator. In the dishwash areas we specified equipment that doesn’t use too much water. These are things we want from our side, and the client wanted them too.”

Of course, with planning starting for this project 13 years ago, there was not the faintest glimmer of Covid-19 and a pandemic at the time. This has inevitably affected the way the space is used. According to operators once they were allowed to open up it went well. Although around 85% of the space is rented out, many workers are still working from home. However, with the number of visitors coming to look at the building, plus hotel guests exploring the site, food outlets are running at about 80% capacity.

In fact, with food running better they are tweaking the business model accordingly. It’s all part of the learning process. “A little town in Switzerland of 6,000 people would have about 10 restaurants,” says Mehera. “With the Circle having a potential population of 8,500 (office workers and hotel guests) you have to be able to provide food for up to 40% of them. A substantial amount.”

In summing up Mehera finds it hard to select a favorite part of so vast an undertaking.

“To be honest, each part has its own speciality,” he says. L’Oro di Napoli we did as constructor also. At the Hyatt Regency there were the complexities of how the kitchen is laid out and the part the Jospier grill plays in the interior design. Each place has its own nuances and in each one I find something unique. We as a team created something that is special to each particular format.” ■



Clockwise from above: Vinoo Mehera FCSI; Hyatt Regency executive lounge; the pizza oven in L’Oro di Napoli; Babel restaurant at Hyatt Regency; The Circle convention hall; the main kitchen at the convention center;