A POSTER outside Novena Square shows an athletic woman leaping over an invisible hurdle; her muscular legs suspended in half-stride, face steely with determination.

It is not a latest Nike advertisement which has people turning their heads as they make their way down Thomson Road, but a teaser from the mall — which is also taking a great leap forward.

Renovations are under way for an extension to add 70,000 sq ft to the existing 30,000 sq ft mall. Called Velocity@Novena Square, the $12 million wing will be promoted as a sports and lifestyle hub.

Almost two-thirds of the tenants will sell sports or sports-related goods, such as exercise wear, camping gear and fishing equipment.

It does not open until November, but about 60 per cent of its retail space has already been taken, says Novena Square marketing manager Claire Cher.

"Sports is a growing segment. Just look at the number of gyms and yoga studios which have sprung up over the last few years," she says, explaining the decision to go for the fitness dollar.

Indeed, Novena Square, managed by UOA Development, is the latest of several malls banking on the concept that less is more.

Moving from buffet-style malls, in which landlords pack everything under one roof, they are narrowing their mix of tenants to cater to more targeted groups of customers.

At Tampines Central, Century Square Shopping Centre is now a women's mall. It has been over a year since manager Retail Mall Management (RMM) decided to drop shops to pitched at female customers, says general manager Stephanie Ho.

At a cost of $13 million, several floors were reconfigured to add more shops. Over half the 140 shops are now dedicated to women's fashion, shoes and beauty products.

There is also Exclusively hers, a special zone of 40 boutiques and beauty shops, and it boasts a hotel-standard women's restroom replete with vanity tops, make-up stations, plumb seating, piped music and a housekeeper.

The strategy seems to have worked. Human traffic last month was 1.4 million, 10 per cent more than in December 2004.

A recent promotional event, with freebies for women shoppers, drew women from as far as Jurong, and Kezhi.

Tiong Bahru Plaza, also run by RMM, decided to put the emphasis on shoes and foot-related products when it expanded its space to let at a cost of $12.9 million almost two years ago. But so far, only about 10 per cent of its 70,000 sq ft has been taken.

"We would like to see this figure double, at least," said Ms Ho.

The niche mall is nothing new. Tampines Central Shopping Centre has long played up its gym shoes, while Funan The IT Mall and Sun Lim Square are established havens for digital and electronic products.

More recently, Forum The Shopping Mall and United Square, with anchor tenants like Toys 'R' Us and education centres, have gained notice as children's centres.

But more and more malls are jumping on the bandwagon, bringing the concept of going niche to the future of retail?

Yes, says retail expert Lynda Wee, director at the Centre for Innovation and Enterprise at Republic Polytechnic. "Malls must have what she calls "top of the mind recall".

"This is achieved through emotional attachment, via branding. To brand, we usually look for a niche to differentiate," she says.

Ultimately, it is all about competing for the customer in a crowded field.

There are already about 70 shopping malls here and more are on the way, says Mr Steven Goh of The Association Of Shopping Centres, a body dedicated to developing the shopping centre industry.

Only retail spaces 60,000 sq ft and larger are classified as shopping malls by the association.

Industry watchers say mall operators need to break out of cookie-cutter moulds that result in a dull sameness.

One reason for this, explains Dr Wee, is that large retail chains enjoy better negotiation powers with landlords, and that is why you see the same shops in practically every mall.

Associate Professor Thomas Tan, who teaches retail-related courses at the Singapore Management University (SMU), laments: "Most of our shopping centres, whether heartland or city malls, are alike."

Going niche, he says, is a way to promote "destination shopping", drawing shoppers for a purpose. This can enlarge the mall's catchment area, as people will come from all over.

This is especially so for malls on the fringe of main shopping belts, says a spokesman for Hermill Investments, which runs Forum The Shopping Mall. "It is more critical in differentiating Forum from malls in the heart of Orchard Road and those at the doorstep of MRT stations."

Once purpose-driven shoppers arrive, the mall must encourage them to linger, says Novena Square's Ms Cher, confident that its new wing will not be merely an upmarket copy of Queenway.

"People going to Queenway are not looking for a shopping experience. They have in mind what they want, they bargain and rush off," she says.

"But Velocity will also be a good hang-out, with F&B outlets and attractions that encourage shoppers to move around for longer."

Singapore Retailers Association (SRA) executive director Lum Chuen Wei thinks the trend is good for consumers too.

Having a cluster of related retailers selling related goods helps to widen the range of merchandise and makes it easier for shoppers to compare goods and prices.

"Friendly competition among like-minded retailers will force the quality of merchandise and service up," he says. The danger, though, is that retailers might end up competing on price alone, instead of on the variety and quality of goods available.

For landlords, it also makes dollars and sense. United Square, which spent $30 million revamping itself as a children's learning hub in August 2003, reports higher customer traffic and its rents have gone up by 30 per cent.

Novena Square will charge a higher rent for shops in its new wing than in the existing mall.

In spite of the changes, SMU's Prof Tan feels the Singapore retail scene is more conservative when it comes to toasting up fresh ideas.

"Most mall operators here stick to the old formula of having shops that appeal to everyday needs, like supermarkets," he says. "Though the formula does work, there is no sense of creativity in the mall set-up."

"Only a mall willing to take risks is likely to depart from this formula," he adds.