HESE days, shoppers are flocking to malls for more than just the stores—they're headed for the space in the middle that the shoppers refer to as the atrium.

From pushcarts to temporary displays to roadshows of computers and massage chairs, that space in the middle is filling up with all sorts of new activities to pep up the mall-milling.

“Shoppers come to a mall’s ambience and draws shoppers in.”

Tiong Bahru resident May Lim lives two streets away from Lot 1 Shopper’s Mall and goes there faithfully every weekend, even though the 105 shops in the six-storey building do not change.

“I go there to check out the events that are happening at the atrium. There are roadshows and sales held there and these change weekly, which makes shopping exciting,” says the housewife.

The idea of adding excitement to your mall-browsing cropped up repeatedly when LifeStyle spoke to retail experts.

Weekly activities at the atrium add excitement to the whole shopping experience, especially for regular visitors of suburban malls, notes Ms Helina Low, group marketing communications manager at Capitaland Retail, the retail business unit of listed Capitaland which manages malls such as Junction 8, Tampines Mall and Lot 1 Shopper’s Mall.

Dr Seshan Ramaswami, practice associate professor of marketing from the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at the Singapore Management University, says: “Modern retailing is about competition for consumer time and attention. Holding sales and roadshows at the atrium adds excitement to a mall’s ambience and draws shoppers in.”

Mr Tong Khek Wing, a council member of The Association of Shopping Centres (TASC), says atrium sales are “garish”—they spice up, add colour and interest to the “dish” that is the mall’s tenants.

“They should never overwhelm the main dish,” he adds.

Atriums also come in handy for retailers who want to hold sales or launch new products, says Ms Stephanie Ho, assistant general manager of AsiaMalls which manages malls such as Tiong Bahru Plaza, Century Square and White Sands.

Osim, famous for its massage chairs, is sitting pretty in atriums. Its business development manager James Huang says they hold about 12 roadshows a month across various malls. He says: “The open space and the central location of atriums make it easier for shoppers to try our products.”

Depending on the mall and its location, it can cost from $50 to $3,000 daily for retailers to rent the atrium space. Retailers usually rent the space for about a week but the spaces are usually booked months in advance, especially in the more popular malls and during peak periods such as Chinese New Year and Christmas, say mall landlords.

Retailers who are also tenants of the mall get priority. To give shoppers variety, landlords limit how often a retailer can hold atrium events.

There are house rules to follow, too. Ms Jesslyn Ong, assistant manager from Midpoint Properties which manages Great World City, says fixtures in the atrium space must not block shopfronts and products must not conflict with those sold at the mall.

Dr Ramaswami acknowledges that malls risk turning off shoppers with a messy atrium but says: “So long as malls constantly change atrium events and keep the area neat, shoppers will still come.”