

# The Mall in Urban Landscape Are they Structural or Deconstructing Equipment?

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**Abstract** | Today, Shopping centers are considered as significant urban amenities whose most important feature is to provide a "place" that are used for production purpose in some societies and with consumption purpose in some others. A deep scrutiny in the history of these shopping centers reveals their cultural origins of their formation during modernity; a course that configured different segments of urban life in isolation. The first shopping centers were built in suburban areas which attracted citizens not only for leisure and shopping purposes, but also for dwelling in suburbs. Gradually, with the advent technology, the second generation of these buildings acquired their own style of architecture and became design subjects for architects.

As a result of suburbanization, the government and the urban managers were made to locate the third generation of these shopping centers into central city districts. This solution aimed at solving the problems of suburbanization with certain mechanisms; and consequently the shopping centers were relocated in central parts of the cities. However, with their modernist origins, the shopping centers were influenced by technological advancements, and influenced their surroundings at the same time. These centers are criticized due to distortion of local businesses, the abolishment of indigenous identities and various subcultures as a result of modernity.

Although the advancement and development of shopping centers are considered as a process of globalization in the international community, it should be noted that commercial centers did not initiate the international business in the world. Trading has been long practiced in big urban markets, the routes of international convoys and chain stores, from ancient Greece and Middle East to the modern era. Today, commercial centers are considered as important means of urbanization due to their various social and cultural aspects. The transformation of the public shopping area into a closed private space, the creation of social and cultural events, the formation of social norms and the configuration of modernism symbol are the various aspects of these centers. Hence, it should be noted that not only are shopping centers a part of urban landscape, but also they configure urban landscape; presenting a new style of architecture, changing the consumption and society norms and becoming an integral amenity of the city.

**Keywords** | Shopping center, Urban amenity, Modernity, International business.

**Introduction** | Nowadays, the mall is often referred to as an equipment downgrading the city and, as such, it is often associated with what Augé (1992) called a “no-place” (non-lieu), a sort of characterless place where people are for a certain time, doing certain things without no real connections to the surrounding. For some, it is a sort of urban symbol of globalization, seen as a process which destroys local meaningful landscapes to produce a standard meaningless landscape. However, as we know, shopping malls are not a new urban equipment; whatever forms they have been taking recently, we can consider them simply as being an avatars of the multiple forms urban retail places have taken throughout the years.

To understand better the function, usages and representations of shopping malls, we thus need, first, to analyze the characteristics of the newest shopping centers in light of the historical and geographical perspective of commercial places, and the criticism that accompanied them. Second, we need to focus on the criticism of the malls as a direct contributor to the increase of a general commodification of society. However, by reversing the latter proposition, and consider that the merchant exchange is a social exchange, I question the phenomenological dimension of the shopping center in the urban landscape.

### The newest shopping malls: the place to be

Globalization is accompanied by the proliferation of urban equipment: the shopping center is one of them. For decades, essentially in the Western World, the regional shopping mall was organized around two models: a department store, or a large food store. To make themselves attractive, they took care of their surroundings, making them to look as a scene, which is a nice place to be: the most common example is the recreation of a familiar urban landscape, like a shopping street with bench, a park and fountain. Another one would be to recreate a “symbolic landscape”, one that speaks to the local people; note here that its artificial character does not diminish people’s identification. Today’s malls have been taking on this long establish process, where the act of buying moves from being a drudgery to enter the realm of pleasure. In recent years, this conception has lead designers and promoters, to build a new generation of malls where retail and leisure are combined. For example, in today’s new mall, one can go to boutiques, go to see a movie or play bowling with family and friends.

We could consider that the most important features of newest shopping malls is to be “a place”, that is a place to consume, and a place to be consumed. Indeed, aren’t we seeing many shopping mall “visitors” posting on their web site, pictures and videos of themselves, inside or outside the malls? We can also find many forums where discussions on the best malls, praising their design, their

fashion shops, their seasonal theming’s, or all types of events. Some malls are also described as good places to visit for tourists, while others figure on tourism forums, such as “tripadvisors”. No doubt, shopping malls can be said to constitute the “shrines” of consumption.

The purpose of shopping malls in a society of production was to be a place to display and sell goods, in a society of consumption, it is a place for entertainment or, as it is now referred to, *retailtainment*. In this way, the new shopping malls are often felt as being public space, and they participate to a new way of relating to places and space: These shopping malls, with their brands, the windows, the furniture, the attractions and activities, create a scene, or scenes, to which the consumers and visitors identify with, not as an identity, but as an identification to... signs that have or suggest meanings. It is an identification beyond identity. In the era of retailtainment, even in some stores, there are a new ways to consume and to be part of something for sometimes, like in the café-bookstores.

These newest shopping malls are for sure a place to be, in its parts as well as a whole, and, socially speaking, as “a place to be” it is also a discourse. A modernist discourse, that is, to affirm and offer the possibility, event temporarily, to enjoy the products of modernization (the material world) coupled with the possibility of being one among others, freed from the norms of tradition (modernity). Making a return on the development of shopping centers, we can see that modernity is at the center of the cultural branding of shopping mall (as a place to be and be consumed).

### The shopping mall and the spatio-cultural branding of modernity

The shopping center or mall is primarily an equipment born in the suburbs in the United States (Borchert, 1997). Said to be the first ever, Market Square was built in 1916 in Lake Forest, Illinois, a chic suburb of Chicago. It was built as an open commercial district with a row of shops in front a parking lot. Market Square was built by a single developer and emphasize the association of shopping centers with the suburbs, themselves associated with cars.

### First generation

Suburbs, or at least the idea of being away from the “urbs”, the city, came a solution to relocate soldiers after the First World War. They were said to need a calmer and safer place to live than what the cities had to offer then. But this idea of being not far from the city but not in, became a reality after the Second World War, encouraged by the construction of single family homes (the so-called middle class) and the growth of the automobile industry. These two elements, associated with new material and technologies, such as roads, cost-efficient sewing systems and electrification, air conditioning, favored the birth of

the suburbs and, with it, the shopping centers. So very quickly dissociate the place where you work and when you live which promotes major automobile travel from one to the other, and leads expressways construction along which open up strip malls. This produces an urban morphology adapted to this way of life and a specific landscape. At its peaks, in the 1980's, 2 American out of 3 live in such an urban environment. The first generations of shopping malls are thus set up along expressways and highways, taking advantage of these empty spaces between housing and work areas. This is still the case today everywhere in the world, the extension of the city is accompanied by the opening of new shopping centers, but the newborns now produce a landscape different architectural (Lemarchand, 2001, Harroud, 2015).

### Second generation

It was in 1956 that the first closed, air-conditioned shopping center was built in Edina, near Minneapolis, Minnesota: *Southdale Center Mall*. Air conditioning made it possible to pass to a new generation of shopping centers. In the closed space, architects or designers would be free to create different landscapes, made of the combination of technology with a thematic scenes, of which the stores can be part. The mall becomes the theater, but the play is played in each shop. Since then they evolve towards the re-creation of an "ideal" place, by a closed and safe space; open to all, it is public with the reassuring regulation of a private space. The interior, or the scene, is made of an array of delocalized signs and markers, mixing local and regional references with others from faraway places and worlds. The modernity is in the assemblage, not in the signs and markers themselves. People know they are not real, but what is real is being there and recognize the place, as an universe of consumption and modernity.

In France, shopping centers started to be built at the time there were two "models": one around the idea of a department store, the other around the French "hypermarket", a large food store selling also all types of usual goods. In 1969, in the suburbs of Nice (Cap-3000) and Paris (Parly2), the first regional shopping malls, identical to those of North America's second wave, were built (model 1: department store). Both were thought of, however, as more than a place to buy commodities: Nice modern shopping center brought together more than fifty shops, and on the roof of the two-story New Galleries there was a swimming pool with an open-sky view. In Paris, the shopping center has 150 shops, two department stores (Le Printemps and BHV) and a cinema. The second "model", hypermarket, is inaugurated in the suburbs of a northern France city, Lille, and it is built around the giant food store. The first generations are small galleries with businesses that complement the food hypermarkets.

Today, the galleries have been transformed and enlarged, but has kept the same spirit.

### Third move: back to the city center

The shopping centers are gradually going to settle in the central areas of the agglomerations. This movement is initially done at the request of the public actors. Indeed, the success of shopping centers at the periphery, added to the economic shift (to service economy and information age), urban problems (housing decay), transport (pollution), at the heart of the city, weakens its commercial appeals. It no longer seduces the consumer who lives and increasingly works in the suburbs, and perceives the center of the city as an aging area, without parking and whose businesses are identical to those of peripheral centers. Seeking to upgrade their centers, the public actors then carry out an urban rehabilitation policy and call on the promoters of shopping centers to take part in the overall revaluation of the image of the center. In North America, the first such centers opened in 1976, the *Market Place Festival* in Boston (USA), and the *Eaton Center* in Montreal (Canada); in France, the *Part-Dieu*, in Lyon, opened in 1975.

As we can see, shopping center constitutes a commercial and urban equipment punctuating the suburb landscapes, as well as city center. One finds them in all the types of space, asserting their omnipresence by varied sizes according to the localizations, from the basic district shopping to the flamboyant center designed by a star of architect.

While it is spreading more and more widely around the world, the shopping center will host new functions that occupy an increasingly visible area within the center: games, restaurants, cinema are activities now common to new generations of shopping centers, all in a better architecture. The competition between the shopping centers, but also the reduction in attendance of an increasing number of them in the Western countries encourage the promoters to integrate recreational or sports activities in the shopping center. The games can be small playgrounds for children, but also fun activities for adults or the whole family. With the same will, private sports facilities are gradually associated with malls, within it or juxtaposed, always for reinforce the association of shopping and entertainment. Finally, the most recent projects in Asia, for example in South Korea (Cho, Lemarchand, 2016) or in the West are real multifunctional districts elaborated by a shopping center developer from a mall.

More and more, the mall seems contested, showed as an emblematic equipment of modernity, characterized with the modernization and globalization and by this way destroying the local retail. It is important now to see how and why this association has occurred.

## Modernity: a value associated with modernization and globalization

Taking its roots in Europe at the time of the Renaissance, and affirming itself with the "social contract", Modernity claims "progress" as the cardinal value and as the engine of its realization in its social, political and economic dimensions. Ideologically, in spirit and in discourse, modernity asserts itself in opposition to tradition: "*The spirit of Modernity is a spirit of emancipation, of liberation, of empowerment*" (Citot, 2005).

With modernity goes the affirmation of human being as individual, and therefore the recognition of a unique individuality that will be able to express itself in different ways in society. Since the 1950's, this includes consumption, redefines as an economic activity that includes but goes beyond satisfying basic needs. The shopping center became the emblematic place of this change in retail economy and trade. Because it offers a choice of expanded and renewed products, the consumer can, more than elsewhere, select the stores and products that correspond to his individuality, which is in phase with a social and cultural identity (or identities). Moreover, the shopping center, as a place, must be able to count on attractive signs and activities, which encourage its frequentation and consumption. Indeed, the shopping center is organized as a sort of scene; it puts itself on stage with elements of scenery, theming that promotes the interaction of the consumer with the place. It is a privileged place of hedonistic consumption in a recreational environment.

## Modernization

The values of modernity are at the origin of the modernization, that is, the transformation of the material world through an industrial mode of production of goods. This corresponds in a way to the concrete realization of modernity through its materiality: art, architecture, and technicality. The shopping center combines these "ingredients": it integrates technological progress and somehow puts it at the service of everyone, because the shopping center is a private area, but open to the public. So everyone is invited to take advantage of these advances, and to wander in the middle of modernity: we have already mentioned the air conditioning, let's add the escalator. Through these two advances, the shopping center becomes a comfortable and easy-to-use place. In addition, the materials used, glass, aluminum, with which a neat, clear environment is built, further favors the perception of modernity.

The shopping center combines the ingredients of modernity and modernization and becomes an emblem thereof. That is the reason why it becomes the object of criticism by opponents, who are very antagonistic in the name of Tradition or in the name of the overconsumption

it entails, or both. For others, it is responsible for the local trade decline, often associated with traditional goods and ways of consuming; it is responsible for an excessive and selective consumption. Ultimately, those critics say, it leads to individualization into a selective socialization through the frequentation of a place devoted to an open identification, which is different but can include a specific and traditional identity.

## Globalization

Globalization is not a recent phenomenon. Theorized from the 20th, it was then the subject of many debates about its nature and its chronology. First of all, it must be remembered that, although the market exchanges are several millennia old, the term for using this internationalization goes back to 1961. It first appears in the English-speaking world with "globalization", and refers above all to economic exchanges (Levitt, 1983). In French, the translation of globalization by the word "mondialisation" has led to a debate about the nature of globalization, and has finally led to the use of two terms, either globalization (commerce) or "mondialisation" (discussion), a term that does not exist in English.

*Mondialisation* is a term used to emphasize that today we live in a period where the world, or the planet, is the scale of reference; we live in a "world-territory", of which our region or country is a part of. It also has historical value to name the international exchanges that have been formalized in the course of history between several regions of the world. The main trade routes were often the visible expression of these: the Silk Road, the Hanseatic League associating large trading towns, etc. This reference to these networks of commercial exchanges, as "precursors" of globalization, will gradually assert itself with contemporary "modernisation", ie globalization. In the 1980s, economist Kenichi Ohmae highlighted the role of big firms as the main agents of globalization. This economic and financial dimension is more specifically associated with globalization (Ghorra-Gobin, 2017). Through their restructuring and extension beyond their borders, these large firms have become transnational corporations benefiting from a new global trade organization promoting free trade. Among these large firms, there are those of the large distribution which by the game of mergers-associations extend horizontally and vertically, sometimes combining the financing, the production and the distribution of the commercial spaces and commodities. These "globalized companies" are somehow the most visible to citizens, urban or rural consumers, because they are present in their familiar landscape, in the daily territory of mobility and purchases. They thus become the expression of globalization.

Yet, international trade did not start with the shopping

center. Somehow, the shopping center is the last avatar of a merchant space common to trading companies.

### A brief reminder of familiar and international merchant spaces

As the geographer Jacqueline Beaujeu-Garnier (1984) reminds us: *Trade is closely linked to all forms of human society. It reflects its characteristics as well as helps shape its evolution*<sup>1</sup>. However, beyond these characteristics, whether a market or a souk, whether the shopping streets of the Northern or Southern countries, it is a place of retail. And from a country to the other in the course of history they will share many similarities.

### Markets and stalls

From Antiquity, the market settled in places: in Greece, the archaeologist Martine Hélène Fourmont (2017) tells us that at the beginning of the fifth century BC., the Agora, the public square, became the trading place before the commercial spaces multiply in the city. In the Roman Empire, the forum also hosts these merchants, forming a clearly identified trading area in the city. Later, in Medieval Europe, from the eleventh century and over to the thirteenth, many markets are formed, some of them inside *bastides*, the new fortified towns. At the same time, the historical streets of shops were born with workshops, the first fixed places of sale.

Elsewhere, in the Middle East and the Maghreb, the souk refers to annual fairs, weekly rural markets or even permanent urban souks (Elisséeff, 2018). The bazaar, its Persian equivalent, is established in the cities of Iran. The markets, the souks, the bazaars seem today to be the mark of authenticity, of tradition. Yet, over time, they change and adapt gradually to the societies' transformations in which they are. Thus the markets are modified by the addition of new categories of products, are transformed by successive renovations and, finally, change without necessarily giving up what allows them to claim their specificity, sometimes folklorized.

### Department stores

Let's continue with the first store to be called "modern"; department stores in the Nineteenth century that quickly surpass their precursors, novelty stores. First built in the Western world, in Paris, London, New York or Montreal etc., they spread in many part of the world at the end of the nineteenth century. The department stores are remarkable for their architecture, the use of modern materials such as industrial glass and steel beams, their interior design and the new sale techniques used. The department store inaugurates the non-commercial activity such as art exhibitions or concerts, but also the food court, all aimed at keeping customers as long as possible in the

premises. And these department stores, like today's shopping centers, have also been accused of making shops disappear, encouraging spending and "devouring" *the city*. Thus Weill (1891), quoted by Madry (2016: 38): *"Since the existence of these department stores that are growing every day and will eventually form cities in the city, as they already form, by the power of their capital increasing every day and won over the people, a state in the state.."*

Thus, going up the wire of time and following the trade routes, we can only note that at all times, the movement of merchants was accompanied by a sale of commodities in merchant places that, without being similar, all have common characteristics.

### The shopping center: an area of social and cultural exchange, local and global

The trade has places and space in which the exchange takes place: the shopping center is one of them. By its dimensions, and by the concentration of shops, it seems to be in the *territory* category like a commercial street. The shopping center is indeed a meaningful space –call in French *territoire*- in the sense that the French geographer Debarbieux defines it, as a concept having "objective, subjective and conventional characteristics". Shopping centers as much as commercial streets are of an objective nature, by their materiality. They also unquestionably produce an individual experience that can, however, be shared with other customers. They are therefore subjective but significant for all kinds of people: from the stroller who walks around and practices a sociability to the consumer. This sociability is observed by common practices which reinforce a feeling of knowledge, of familiarity: often it is a place of an appointment for a group of young people, for friends. In a number of them, social and cultural events are organized: presentation of the season's fashion or presentation of a local cultural action, or an exhibition. It is often also associated with the important moments of the society in which it is built; feasts and rites. Thus the range of exchanges from the most banal and daily to the most exceptional takes place in it, in a relatively conventional way.

However, this sociability frequently leads to criticisms related to the private nature of the center, which would change the nature of its social and cultural acts by "merchandising" them. The shopping center is a private space for public use, and by its private and commercial nature, it would not be possible to have the same sociability's quality to that which occurs in the municipal public space. The latter would be by nature freer and more democratic. However, many works have already shown that the urban public space itself is not a place of free expression, be it parks, squares or streets. The most fanciful behavior will be tolerated if it does not appear to



be threatening, dangerous or contrary to the good morals of the society in which they take place. In both, therefore, there is normative behavior, social behavior adapted and accepted. Both have many points in common even

though they are not alike. The commercial center by its nature, its innovative dimension can be a place in which transformations societal already in progress will be made more visible.

**Conclusion | The shopping center: a restructuring element of the urban landscape?:** In many ways, we could consider the shopping center as a deconstructing object of the urban landscape. It seems to arise, burst into a familiar environment, even daily and upsets by what it leads in morphological terms but also in the usual practices, those of a reassuring and compliant ritual. It jostles normed consumption, by the emergence and the confrontation with

another, visible and significant by its mass. It brings with its existence, attendance, sharing a global experience that may seem threatening to local trade. However, it cannot establish itself and be successful only in a moving urban, social and cultural landscape. It is inserted gradually in an environment that is restructuring itself; it is not the only component but it is a marker.

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