

# SOCIALIZING AT THE SHOPPING MALL: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE TO REASSESS THE SOCIAL VALUE OF THE AMERICAN MALL

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## \* ABSTRACT

The shopping mall was not just a monument to consumption, as it is often framed, but also a place where American suburbanites could find community. The American shopping mall was pioneered in the 1950s, partially as a way to fix the social gaps that are present in a suburban environment and rose to its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s. During this time, the mall became a place for suburban residents to socialize, as illustrated by the phenomena of “mall rats” and mall walkers. Despite this social significance, the mall was typically only seen as a place to fulfill consumer needs rather than social needs. I will survey the literature surrounding the social legacy of malls in an effort to reframe the legacy of the institution, in light of the benefits provided by hindsight. Shopping malls should be recognized for their ability to facilitate social connections and community during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in a space as atomized as the suburbs.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The shopping mall looms large in the American historical imagination. In many ways, it emblemizes the prosperity and optimism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century; the mall was a place with all the modern conveniences, serving the citizens of the newly

exploded suburbs and their ever-growing consumer appetites. At the same time though, its image has been used as a shorthand for the vapidness of consumerism; the public often saw mall shoppers as mindless consumer zombies. These critiques, however, have not all stood the test of time. In hindsight, shoppers can see malls for what they really are – a public space that serves social needs as much as it serves consumer demand. Fond memories of the evocative sensory experience of mall shopping, combined with the sense of community found in many of these spaces, has outweighed moral panics about the mall and its denizens. I will be arguing for the deeper social significance of the shopping mall through an exploration of the literature and philosophy surrounding the institution as the American shopping mall was an important space for socializing, particularly during the mall’s heyday in the 1980s and 1990s.

## 2 BACKGROUND

The introduction of the mall made the acquisition of goods, and lots of them, easier at an unprecedented level. No longer did suburban consumers have to contend with the inconveniences of downtown like bad weather, short hours, or, worst of all, parallel parking. The enclosed shopping mall – which usually features one to four “anchor stores” as well as various other tenants for retail, service, and dining – was initially developed in the early 1950s in the Midwestern suburbs before spreading across America followed by the rest of the world in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This piece will focus on American shopping malls, which became a major social and cultural force, reaching its height of power in the 1980s and 1990s. The American shopping mall, while often seen as artificial and shallow, in fact provided many citizens, and especially American suburban teenagers, with a place to gather and socialize. For these mall-frequenters, the mall was not simply a place to fulfill consumer desires – it was also a place to fulfill social desires.

Malls were not always seen as social spaces. For much of their history they were denigrated as no more than shrines to consumerism. The word “con-



sumerism" was first used in 1915, although its theoretical underpinnings were established in economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen's 1899 treatise, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, which introduced the concept of "conspicuous consumption." In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen argues that members of the upper class, particularly the nouveau riche, will buy items excessive in quality and/or quantity to signal their elevated economic status.<sup>9</sup> Consumerism springs from this idea of "conspicuous consumption" though consumerism transcends class in some ways, especially in America. America is widely known for our robust consumer culture, with consumption being inextricably tied to identity and status, and the individualism pervading American culture rendering that tie even tighter. Though people buy different tiers of items based on their class, Americans, from blue collar laborers to the elite, are united by their voracious appetites for consumption. Sociologists and economists, among other scholars, have taken issue with Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption in the light of new developments in corporate power, the growing importance of consumerism to personal identity, and the moralistic nature of his arguments.<sup>4</sup> Consumerism can refer to policies that encourage consumption, but for the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing more on consumerism as a cultural rather than an economic phenomenon. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, consumption has taken on deeper meaning in American culture; not only can it elevate social status, but it can also serve as a confidence boost or a representation of patriotic citizenship for many Americans.

The mall was both a symbol of and a vector for the consumerism that characterizes postwar America in the nation's historical memory. In her highly influential 2003 book *A Consumer's Republic*, historian Lizabeth Cohen argues that American society was socially, economically, and physically restructured around mass-consumption in the aftermath of World War II. She devotes an entire chapter to shopping malls, which "promoted themselves as the new civic centers of booming suburban towns," as the process of suburbanization shifted the popu-

lation from urban centers into these new neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup> Cohen convincingly argues that there was a direct link between suburbanization, the rising tide of consumerism, and the birth of the shopping mall. She points to the feelings of suburbanites – that there were not enough retail options in their new communities, that urban downtowns were not easily accessible by car – and retailers' response to these feelings as the major reasons behind the growth of the shopping mall. In fact, Cohen positions the regional shopping center as a direct result of the growing American consumer appetite, an appetite that was flourishing under the prosperity and security of the postwar era. The regional shopping center served a purpose beyond fulfilling the desire for consumption; it was borne of a desire to forge a community from the atomized residents of the suburbs. Despite the flaws in its execution (such as the fact that many malls were de facto segregated due to the discriminatory housing practices of the suburbs in which the malls were situated) the mall was designed with idealistic intentions and in many cases was able to reach some of those lofty goals.

Architect Victor Gruen, the "father of the mall," pioneered the idealized image of the mall. In 1952, in a seminal article written for *Progressive Architecture*, Gruen outlines his vision for the mall:

A shopping center must be more than a mere collection of stores and shops. A shopping center must be even more than its name implies – a center for shopping. The regional shopping center must, besides performing its commercial function, fill the vacuum created by the absence of social, cultural, and civic crystallization points in our vast suburban areas."<sup>17</sup>

Gruen would go on to design the first enclosed shopping mall in the United States, the Southdale Mall of Edina, Minnesota, which opened in 1956. Over the course of the next twenty years, his firm designed over fifty more shopping malls across the United States, intending to provide "a new outlet for that primary human instinct to mingle with other humans – to have social meetings, to relax

together, to enjoy art, music, activities, the theater, films, good food, and entertainment in the company of others."<sup>18</sup> Unlike the downtown area of cities, which had performance venues, shopping options galore, restaurants, as well as other social and cultural pleasures, the suburbs at this early juncture generally only had houses and highways. To Gruen, the mall was a panacea to the problems of the American suburbs, which he felt were lacking in culture and, what we now might call a "third place."

### 3 THE MALL AS A THIRD PLACE?

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg popularized the idea of a "third place" in the late 1980s in his influential book, *The Great Good Place*. Oldenburg describes the term "third place" as the "generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work," and writes that there is a dearth of them in "newer American communities" like the suburbs or the recently-drained inner cities.<sup>10</sup> Oldenburg rejects the notion that the mall could serve as a third place in the introduction, pointing out that Gruen felt the same way: "[Gruen] came to reject the designation 'father of malling' because his plan was stripped down to commercialism only. He had envisioned a true community center."<sup>11</sup> *The Great Good Place* contains many such indictments of the mall such as: "merchandizing, not socializing, [which] marks the character of the mall" and that the mall is "a drifting amalgam of nonpersons; there are no 'characters' there," with a specific eye towards the 80s teen obsession with the institution.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the fond memories of so many Gen-Xers, of long days spent by the mall fountain or in the food courts, contradicts his conclusions about the shallowness of the mall experience: the shopping mall was the center of the social world for most American suburbanites who came of age in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even the first bit of the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Despite the positive glow of hindsight, this sort of handwringing about shopping malls is not unique to Oldenburg, nor unique to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The early aughts saw the coining of the term "mall rats" to describe these teens that frequented

the shopping mall, although the trend of the mall as a teen social space goes back to the 1980s, if not earlier. The term "mall rat" is derisive and implies bad behavior on the part of the teenagers. For example, the *Youth Cultures in America* encyclopedia, published in 2016, defines mall rats as "shopping center patrons, usually teenagers who frequent the mall not simply for shopping, but as a space for social interaction and illicit behavior."<sup>15</sup> These so-called "mall rats" should not be demonized but rather grudgingly admired for their ability to carve out a third place for themselves in a world that was chipping away at their access to such spaces due to trends such as lack of public funding for parks, community centers or transportation, a rising drinking age, and moral panic over crime or stranger danger. Were mall rats majoring in "consumership and passivity," as Oldenburg phrases it, or were they simply victims to the escalation of capitalism and government austerity? Where some may see these mallrats as vapid, troublemaking teen consumers, I see them as young people creating a community of their own, repurposing the commercial space for their own social needs. The linked phenomena of stranger danger, satanic panic, and worries about the illicit or unsavory activities of unsupervised teens in time wore away at the perception of the mall as a safe space for adolescents. Authority figures such as mall operators, law enforcement, and parents began to push for stricter regulation of teenagers in shopping malls, which changed the nature of teen movement in the mall space.<sup>7</sup>

Teens were not the only age group that used the mall as a place for socialization, however, as evidenced by the lasting popularity of mall walking groups among the elderly. "Mall walking" is a term used to describe the phenomenon of people, typically senior citizens (although it also can include mothers of young children), who use the mall as a place to walk in a temperature-controlled environment. Many times, mall walkers will go in groups, both formal and informal. Mall walking can provide a sense of camaraderie, as it tends to be a frequent and regular activity with the same people participating every week.<sup>2</sup> Like the mall rats, mall walkers may

shop, but the mall's function is more social than financial for them.

#### 4 COMMUNITY CREATION IN THE CONSUMER SPACE

There has been some pushback on the mall's portrayal as no more than a shrine to consumerism, though I would argue certainly not enough pushback. In his 1996 book *Main Street Revisited*, Richard V. Francaviglia, a scholar of religion, positions the mall as a more evolved, almost utopic version of main street.<sup>13</sup> Main street was the heart of the American small town, with the main purpose of providing retail options, though it also was a place to foster a sense of community. Francaviglia argues that on top of the trappings of main street, the mall has the additional benefits of temperature control, a "flourishing social life," and evolution into a cultural icon of sorts.<sup>13</sup> Francaviglia was ahead of his time in this opinion; even though the social community of the mall is currently in a state of decline, nostalgia for this particular social world has never been higher. This is especially notable because there was a massive lack of the appreciation for the social culture of the mall back in the mid 90s when he was writing. Despite the mall's prominence as a social space, it was mainly recognized only for its usage as a site of consumption.

Others have pointed out that the maligned phenomena of mall walkers and mall rats can be seen as a social good, creating thriving subcultures within the world of the mall.<sup>6</sup> In his 1986 book, *The New Religious Image of Urban America: Shopping Mall as Ceremonial Center*, religious scholar Ira G. Zepp, Jr. even argues that the mall is a sacred space, providing meaning, community, and ritual for many Americans. In an even bolder claim made ten years later, American historian Kenneth T. Jackson, despite his misgivings about the resources that they devour, claimed shopping malls are "the common denominator of our national life, the best symbols of our abundance," and that they are "at the core of a worldwide transformation of distribution and consumption. They represent, along with music, computers, suburbs, and skyscrapers, one of America's

major contributions to twentieth-century culture and life."<sup>5</sup> Notable is the fact that these claims were made in the mid-90s when malls were still seen as thriving. Francaviglia, Zepp, Jackson, and to a certain extent Cohen were some of the few scholars who grasped the full social significance of the shopping mall. Many scholars did not grasp the full meaning of the shopping mall until its current state of decline provided clarity. In this case, absence has truly made the heart grow fonder.

#### 5 DECLINE OF THE MALL

Shopping malls were not built to last, literally or figuratively. Shoddy building materials, rushed plans, online shopping's meteoric rise, and oversaturation have all combined to the mall's current state of decline. The suburban shopping mall is becoming a thing of the past; dozens of malls have closed in the past 10 years with even more predicted to follow. Though countless business newspapers have breathlessly reported on the "retail apocalypse" and the "death of retail" that these mall closures symbolize, the relationship between a declining retail and the death of the mall is not as clean as that framing would have you believe. For example, sociologist Zofia Bednarowska argues in her 2018 paper entitled "The Consumption Space Paradox: Over-Retailed Areas Next to Dead Malls" that "over-retailed areas, full of stores of retail chains, such as Walmart, Macy's etc. that are usually concentrated in American suburbs, also host dead malls - shopping malls that used to be vital and prosperous, now are just left unused and abandoned."<sup>19</sup> Notable as well is the atmospheric rise of online shopping with Amazon and its competitors being branded as the malls of the internet. Somewhat ironic is the fact that the internet, while causing the death of the community found in many malls, has simultaneously given rise to a virtual third space of sorts: online forums, YouTube channels, and blogs dedicated to dead malls. Though the rise of online shopping was a major factor in the decline of the shopping mall, leading to the destruction of the communities found there, the internet also serves as a place to build communities to honor the memory

of the malls of the past. This trend is likely to continue, given that Simon Malls, the nation's largest mall operator, and Amazon have been in talks to convert old Sears and JCPenney's stores into distribution hubs.<sup>1</sup> There is an irony in the fact that the same behemoth that is destroying the financial viability of the mall could also be the entity that preserves the physical space at least a bit longer. Even though these transformations preserve the buildings, they do not maintain the malls' social or sensory significance.

There is something to be said for the physical experience of shopping at the mall, with its abundance of sensory input, which in turn contributes to the strong sense of nostalgia associated with the act. In the mall, one could smell the fried snacks from the food court, hear the sounds of Muzak and gossip, and feel the coolness of central air – all experiences lost on the internet. In this increasingly digital age, where one can just click “buy” and get the item the next day, people long for the frictionalized shopping experience and surprising sense of community that the mall provides, not just those that lived through the height of the mall but also the young people with a rosy-eyed view of this era.<sup>16</sup> The adolescents of the 2020s, dealing with the isolation of the pandemic and the struggles of socializing on line, see the social culture and sensory experience of the shopping mall as something worth envying. In this way, mall nostalgia is not just felt by those who lived through its heyday but also those who never got the chance to experience that historical moment.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The American shopping mall is an institution that has gone through a lot of changes, both in terms of its reputation and of its function, during its fascinating history. In the 1980s and 1990s in particular, the mall served an important social role for suburbanites. This social role was perhaps most important for suburban teenagers, who were at first encouraged and later demonized as “mall rats” for spending time there. Mall walkers, while not as heavily critiqued as their adolescent counterparts, also use the mall as a place to socialize. The mall's

initial purpose, of being a cultural and social panacea to the suburbs, never aligned with its reputation as a shrine to consumerism. Despite this disconnect, the American shopping mall should be honored for its role as a place for atomized suburbanites to connect with their community. It is time to reassess the mall's legacy, and perhaps even revive and repurpose the crumbling behemoths that define the suburban skyline. I think malls could capitalize on the nostalgia for the sensory experience and community aspects of that era. The future of malls may very well be in providing a nostalgic experience or spaces for community events like birthday parties or exercise classes. Though nothing can return the shopping mall to its former state of glory (economic decline and online shopping have made sure of that), malls can still serve a social function in American society.

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