

The Promenade Principle

The shopping mall was designed to bring European city life to the world – but it became one of the most visible phenomena of American culture.

“I come here frequently to get some fresh air”, says the man on the small grey park bench. He quickly adjusts his worn ball cap and stares at the people passing by. The man obviously did not come here to shop; rather, he seems to have been washed ashore by the crowd.

The bench is located in the central hall of a shopping mall. The “Donauzentrum”, situated north of Vienna, encompasses 210 businesses, 2750 parking spaces, 225.000m² of retail space. The entire building complex is roofed over, fresh air flows out of an air conditioning system. While shopping windows abound in the interior of the building, signs are rare on the outside of the grey, windowless cube.

A shopping mall is a box that could be erected anywhere in the world. The fact that the “Donauzentrum” is located in Vienna seems at first insignificant. But it is not: The mall is to a large degree a Viennese invention. Victor Gruen, an architect who fled the Nazis in 1938, modeled his idea of an enclosed strolling area on the city of Vienna. His vision first materialized in 1954, when the “Northland Center” opened its doors north of Detroit: The complex sheltered 110 shops and offered customers park benches, fountains and a sculpture garden. At the time, nothing like it had been seen before. In the same year, foundations were laid for Gruen’s “Southdale Center” in Edina, near Minneapolis. The world’s first “enclosed mall” brought the idea to fruition: Fully roofed and air-conditioned, it created a space completely independent from outside influences that could virtually be expanded endlessly.

Gruen had a vision: The shopping center should give Americans the sense of urban coherence that had been lost in the sprawling suburbs of the postwar era. The concerts and exhibitions that soon began to attract hundreds of thousands of visitors to the “Southdale Center” were supposed to fill a cultural vacuum. With their artificial city squares and their car-free streets (which, ironically, could only be reached by car), malls should give their visitors the sense of urbanity that the emigrant had loved so much in his Austrian hometown, where the city center, encircled by a grand boulevard, the “Ringstrasse”, was dense and walkable. However, as M. Jeffrey Hardwick points out in his book “Mall Maker”, Gruen used another strategy to promote his idea when talking to contractors: he argued that the longer customers stay in a shopping center, the more money they spend. The concept proved to be lucrative indeed. Since its inception, the idea of a city in a box has circled the globe many times, and, it left a

clone of the box in almost every part of the world.

The Shopping Center's World Tour

The elderly lady with the trucker hat and the big T-Shirt who rests near a fountain in the central aisle of the Donauzentrum looks as if she had been picked up somewhere on the mall's crusades. It turns out that the lady moved from Southern California to Vienna with her husband 27 years ago; she has been a regular at the Donauzentrum since it first opened. When friends from Tennessee visited her recently, the lady says, she first showed them all shopping centers on the outskirts of town before taking them sightseeing to the city center. Vienna is indeed a good place to study malls. It is revealing to compare the roofed promenades with the city streets that originally inspired them.

In Vienna, shopping traditionally had a strong theatrical quality. For the better part of the last two centuries, the city streets were a stage for shoppers to show their status and wealth, and retailers displayed their goods as if they were important cultural objects. Gruen was not the only person who acknowledged this. Today, Dr. Christian Mikunda, a psychologist, draws heavily from his Viennese background when he talks about the secrets of the mall's worldwide success. His lectures, which he delivers with a heavy Viennese accent, are attended by marketing specialists and university students alike, and shopping mall managers and planners around the globe seek Mikunda's advice. "Every mall is a promenade on which similar goods appear in a constantly shifting perspective", he states in his book "Brand Lands, Hot Spots & Cool Places". The "principles of the promenade", which Mikunda also applies to museums and other exhibition spaces, are familiar to anyone who has brought home sweater from a holiday and felt very proud about it even though the same sweater was available in the store around the corner. It's the experience that counts, not the commodity itself. As a consequence, sportswear is being offered in an artificial jungle environment, and candy shops obtain the aura of jewellery stores. Still, it remains an open question if the stage for shopping is also suitable for public life.

The City Theater

"Of course, malls are primarily designed to make people stay longer and buy more", Dr. Mikunda said in an interview conducted for this article. "But they also create an environment that's good for people." Mall makers nowadays provide high-quality architectural designs for their customers, the psychologist explained. "Even world-renowned architects now build malls. Daniel Libeskind, for example, planned one for Bern." Dr. Mikunda was also involved in the planning process for the Swiss project called "Westside" which is slated for completion

in 2006. He recounted having had “all night talks” with Libeskind over the role of shopping malls today. “The architect is convinced that malls aren’t only machines for consumption, but new kinds of urban space”, Mikunda said.

The Westside mall, which will be built near Bern, is a crystalline sculpture intended to break the traditional box-like structure of typical malls and to interweave interior and exterior spaces in a variety of ways. Cutting-edge architecture is to become the main attraction, rather than the artificial lakes or indoor amusement parks found in the “Mall of America” or at Canada’s “West Edmonton Mall”. “Society has grown up”, Dr. Mikunda explained in our talk. “People are looking for real materials, for good design and for some meaning.”

An American Dream

At the Donauzentrum, a store called “Indian Dreams” is the only business that’s not afraid to create a themed environment for its customers: The shop is designed to imitate a saloon in a western movie; Harley-Davidson biker boots are on display next to a statue of an Indian chief, and the clerk looks a little bit like Elvis Presley. With its heavy use of cliché, the shop creates a diffuse image of America; however, it is reminiscent of the fact that the promise of the mall is closely linked to a central part of American ideology. The shopping center seeks to demonstrate that a space can become beautiful, orderly and beneficial for all when it is shaped by the forces of free enterprise. The mall is founded on consumerism, but strives to transcend it. It is no surprise that the mall developed at the same time when Elvis Presley inaugurated the age of Rock’n’Roll, both inventions becoming anchors for postwar consumer society. Rock music gave people who felt alienated within the masses a feeling of freedom and individuality; the mall gave them a sense of community.

While critics deride malls as places where city life is merely simulated to keep people in a consumer mindset, apologists stress the shopping center’s egalitarian nature: While in past centuries, palaces and churches were built for a small elite, the new “temples of commerce” are tailored to the needs of the masses. But it remains unclear if the democratization of space in a mall also results in a dissemination of power, if people can use the space and participate in shaping it. The air-conditioned box can only be a real urban space if it allows spontaneity, creativity and some forms of resistance.

Subversive Shopping

In Vienna’s Donauzentrum, the attempt to take some pictures for this article turns out to be enough of a revolt. As soon as I unpack the camera, two security guards in grey uniforms

approach me and advice me in a sharp tone to put the device back into my bag. At the information counter, I enquire why the most basic gesture of any city tourist is prohibited in a mall. “This is private property here”, the clerk answers curtly.

The stage upon which public life is acted out in the mall remains under constant surveillance: Video cameras, guards and detectives guarantee for a smooth performance and avoid the theft of props. The customers who flock to the promenade cafés of the shopping center appreciate the sense of security the mall gives them, but safety measures effectively reduce the liberty of action. People can move freely only if they don’t interfere with the flow of commodities.

The prospect of an urban space dominated by commercial interests sparked opposition long before the shopping mall was invented, says André Krammer, an author and architect based in Vienna. In an essay for the journal “Dérive”, he pointed out that the theorist Walter Benjamin already noticed the disappearance of what he called the urban “shock experience” in the late 19th century when bourgeois society first shifted its activities from the exterior to the interior of shopping passages. Benjamin also suggested a model for a different view on the city when he characterized the *flâneur* as a person who, in the act of strolling, assumed a more distant viewpoint and acknowledged the discontinuities of urban life.

The Mall...

If Benjamin was to the mall what Elvis was to music, the “situationists” led by Guy Debord have to be called the first punks of the shopping era. In 1956, Debord’s “theory of the dérive” took the idea of an alternative urban experience one step further. Debord encouraged *flâneurs* to roam the city intuitively, to free themselves of outside influences and to cut new and unexpected ways through urban space. A stroll unaffected by commodities and existing shopping routes was regarded as a form of social criticism. And it can still be perceived that way today.

Unfortunately, the mall lends itself to more than just criticism. As box-sized models of space dominated by the forces of capitalism, malls are also targets for hostile feelings towards American culture. In recent months, shopping centers have been listed frequently as potential targets for terrorist attacks. This is not only because malls attract many people, they also provide an opportunity to exploit the vulnerability in the consumer driven system that terrorists despise.

...has left the building

It may be a strategy of survival for the mall to leave the confines of its box. In Europe, where

malls on the outskirts of a city were always seen as a threat to the historical center, developers now tend to integrate shopping centers into the city core. The floor plan of the “Bullring Mall” in Birmingham, England, even recreated the ancient street pattern, including street names, of the area on which the shopping arcade was built. In America, “dead malls” are an increasingly common feature seen in suburban areas. Sometimes, they are adapted to become actual public buildings. For example, the “Willingboro Plaza” in New Jersey now houses a town hall.

Libeskind’s deconstructed box near Bern may be the architectural sign for the mall’s departure from its traditional form - but as an idea, the mall continues to shape cities and our lives. City streets that integrate different shops into one smooth shopping experience are, in a way, unconfined malls – but nobody seems to take notice. If you stroll along the Kohlmarkt in Vienna’s city center, it is easy to believe that not much has changed since the days when the shops housed merchants who supplied the imperial court. But in fact, the street only became a pedestrian zone after Victor Gruen returned from America in 1968 and worked out a master plan for a car-free city. Today, there are Prada and Gucci flagship stores behind the ancient façades, and the building that once housed the city’s oldest department store is now home to a H&M branch store. Vienna has become very much like a shopping mall. Only the roof is missing.

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