

MALLIFICATION

A project by *Bureau for Cultural Analysis*

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Why still bother talking about shopping malls? Ever since the turn of the millennium, many¹ have proclaimed the death of this hallmark of postwar American culture. Following the demise of a suburbia to which the mall was always considered a symbiotic counterpart, the remaining 300,000m²-a-piece mastodons harbouring miles of air-condition shopping corridors (of which there are still 1500 throughout the US) seem an increasingly anachronistic phenomenon. Writers like Paco Underhill — a self-proclaimed “retail anthropologist” and author of bestsellers like *Why We Buy* and *The Call of the Mall* — have heralded our current ‘post-mall era’ over a decade ago, citing then-new trends of online shopping and ageing baby-boomers as its root cause.

The logic of a strategically developed enclosed space that functions — or camouflages — as a public environment, however, has not become as obsolete as seems to be implied by the decaying suburban brick-and-mortar boxes that introduced the concept (and subsequently cemented it in the collective cultural frame of reference of the 1980s and 90s). Much like the suspension of disbelief required by the zombie flicks that have benefitted most from the mall’s potential for post-apocalyptic scenes, it resembles a state of *undead*: the mall is rising from its alleged grave, more vengeful than ever. Its resilience evokes that other perfectly conditioned closed space: the white cube — famously characterised by Brian O’Doherty as “a curious piece of real estate [...] However roughly treated, [it] is like a straight man in a slapstick routine. No matter how repeatedly hit on the head, no matter how many pratfalls, up it springs, its seamless white smile unchanged, eager for more abuse. Brushed off, pampered, re-painted, it resumes in blankness.”²

Perhaps a ‘return’ of the mall is not a satisfactory analysis for those who look at the contemporary evidence of its resurrection. New developments seem to be characterised only by their disparity of forms and contexts, that moreover exhibit the very traits *opposite* to the familiar shopping malls. Take the ‘Oculus’-mall at the new World Trade Center complex in New York, designed by *starchitect* Santiago Calatrava: it is *hyper*-urban, rather than suburban, and the characteristic Calatrava-shapes are the ultimate antonym of a ‘bland box’. An even more urban, almost purely infrastructural character, can be found in the vast shopping centres of Hong Kong, which are more often than not sandwiched between subway stations and skyscraper complexes, assuring the shop window fronts of a constant stream of onlookers. Another opposition to the classical definition is found in Beijing’s Central Business District, where the San Li Tun area has an ‘open-air’ shopping mall that is purposefully made to resemble regular city streets and buildings, ridding itself of the ‘all under one roof’ paradigm altogether. The architect behind the complex repeated the formula near an ancient temple in Chengdu, introducing a building typology that resembled a traditional small village — but with high fashion brands as the building’s occupants and surrounded by large glass-and-steel towers instead of rugged mountains. The concept can seemingly be adapted to any given context with minimal effort.

¹ Chaihua Judy Chung et al.’s seminal *The Harvard Design Guide School to Shopping* (2001) is a relatively early example of a thorough discussion of mall architecture and ‘shopping’ as a global phenomenon, in which many analyses already precipitated the demise of the archetypical mall typology. Nowadays, “the death of the mall” is discussed in professional and popular literature alike (this year alone *Time magazine*, *Business Insider* and *the Guardian* have all devoted considerable amounts of copy to it); ‘Dead mall’ has its own dedicated Wikipedia entry in more than 10 languages.

² Brian O’Doherty, ‘Boxes, Cubes, Installation, Whiteness and Money’ in *A Manual for the 21st Century Art Institution*. (2009) London: Whitechapel, pp. 26-27

To a European observer, the mall's resurrection and/or endurance might seem of little concern due to the perceived conceptually, ideologically and culturally foreign nature of something so quintessentially American (though by no means confined to the American continent, as the above examples prove). It is true that pan-European (shopping) culture historically did not let mall-dwelling consumerism reign free, but offered a tradition of modernist malls that were architecturally visionary in the sense that they were often thought to be accommodating to notions of citizenship. A difference in architectural culture, no doubt, but also a political one due to governments' roles in funding and developing the often mixed-use downtown complexes in which the shopping centers emerged.³ Admittedly, this is quite different to what was happening in the United States at the time — a situation which Underhill charismatically described as “cowboy conditions”.

Europe might not have had cowboy conditions, but ‘Third Way’ politicians of the 1990s — each country picked their own nomenclature, usually achieved by simply prepositioning novelty (New Labour, New Democrats) to what was already there, though the Dutch were a bit more creative and picked the colour purple to designate their Third Way coalition — were happy to lay the groundworks for the expansion of shopping to all newly privatised environments: hospitals, train stations, museums, airports. A shift in emphasis of the goals of these typologies, which are presumed to be mainly concerned with healthcare, logistics or culture, suddenly acquired a much more commercial character. It's significant that The British Airport Authority, the company behind a number of large British airports including Heathrow, is listed on the London Stock Exchange under Retail rather than the transportations stock.⁴ In this sense, we could see places like theme parks and, perhaps to lesser extent, zoos — both environments that seek to create an environment of spectacle that lubricates the commercial function of said environment — as adhering to a similar logic to that of the modern shopping center, airport or even museum.

As architectural designer and author Mark Pimlott has observed, these kinds of “extensive interior environments [...] present themselves as continuous with the city [and] are nearly always, like the shopping malls that precede them, controlled: their security, their climates, and their representations are planned to ensure predictable use and performance. It is possible for their proprietors to effect atmospheres of normality, and with these exercise power over their users, who agree to be *participants*.”⁵ While Pimlott focuses on those kinds of workings for interior spaces, it has become clear that the formula can be taken to the street as well — or more precisely: it can *emulate* a street outside the confines of a large enclosed space just as it can create these inside a large building. This move confounds the convergence of shopping spaces towards the logic of a theme park, and resemble Disney's famous *imagineering*: re-creating something resembling an urban, collective space (sometimes even located within an actual urban fabric, like in the former example in Chengdu), but modelling it wholly according to an imaginary form. In the case of the Disney Lands and -Worlds, this didn't just mean pink castles and tree foliage trimmed into cubes. It also meant strip malls lined with pastel coloured houses that rarely had any other function than to sell either food or merchandise. Bizarrely, this appeal appears to be able to exist even without the allure of Disney trademarks, given the fact that the border between the Netherlands and Belgium in the south of Limburg has a ‘shopping village’ that is precisely working like this: Disneyland without the roller coasters and princesses: just designer outlet shops housed in quasi-pastoral architecture and a faux bell tower.

³ A point made to great extent in *Shopping Towns Europe*, a recent publication that investigates how European shopping centers took form in the 30 years following the Second World War. See Janina Gosseye & Tom Avermaete [eds], *Shopping Towns Europe: Commercial Collectivity and the Architecture of the Shopping Centre 1945-1975*. (2017) London: Bloomsbury

⁴ Sze Tsung Leong, ‘Captive’ in Chaihua Judy Chung et al., *The Harvard Design Guide School to Shopping / Project on the City 2* (2001). Köln: Taschen, p. 182

⁵ Mark Pimlott, ‘Only Within’ in: Mark Pimlott, *Without and within. Essays on territory and the interior*. (2007) Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, p. 271

Though the forms and appearances of the mall may change, its inherent danger to civic life remains. According to Pimlott, “rather than seeking to extend the city and its conditions, these developments have constituted aggressive attempts at replacing them.”⁶ The larger point at stake here is the difference between the general address of a public space — as mentioned in the early cases of European malls, this could have a civic goal — and the logic of the mall (or theme park, or train station, or museum...); to once more use the words of Pimlott: “The *individual* is the subject of the [shopping] environment’s address, as opposed to the *public*; as is the case of places.”⁷ With ‘places’, we ought to think in this context of ‘classic’ instances of public space: squares, streets, markets. Significantly, this analysis resembles one that has been made in relation to museums as well, if we think for instance of Thomas Crow’s work⁸ on museums that traditionally constituted the very premise of a nation state by addressing a ‘public’ (instead of a specific ‘audience’).

What to make of these developments? *Mallification* aims to do a number of different things. First, we feel it’s valuable to have a closer look at current iterations of the mall from not just a critical, but also a practical perspective: how do people experience these spaces, and what visual, spatial and psychological tools are employed to achieve those experiences? Second, it’s worth to link the former analysis to examples that are usually considered to be different from malls. How do the above tactics relate to those of the theme park, the zoo and the museum? Finally, we want to look ahead: how do the increasingly converging modalities of malls, airports or museums translate to the digital domain? E-commerce is here to stay, and by the looks of it augmented and virtual reality (or AR and VR, respectively) are on the verge of boldly steering both online and offline developments in a direction no one has gone before. How will this collude with increasingly commercialised and privatised ‘public’ spaces?

Set-up as a two-year research project, Mallification traces the physical and digital developments of the shopping mall. The project kicks off on 5 October 2017 at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam with a panel talk with Mark Pimlott, Natascha Meuser and Gesina Roters. The evening is coupled with a small exhibition running from 3 - 8 October that presents Harun Farocki’s The Creators of Shopping Worlds in an immersive installation.

Mallification is initiated by Janno Martens, Laurens Otto and Jacques Heinrich Toussaint of [Bureau for Cultural Analysis](#). In long-term projects, it investigates the theoretical and material ramifications of mass cultural phenomena.

⁶ Pimlott, *Without and Within*, p. 273

⁷ Idem, p. 275

⁸ Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, (1985) New Haven and London: Yale University Press