Shopping Malls: The Advent of Modernity?

Call for papers

A conference and publication organized by the Centre for Ethnology and Comparative Sociology (Laboratoire d’ethnologie et de sociologie comparative – LESC), Paris West University.

Contacts:
Laure Assaf (laure.assaf@gmail.com)
Sylvaine Camelin (sylvainecamelin@gmail.com)

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Abstract

This conference aims to bring together scholars from across the social sciences in order to undertake an inter-disciplinary approach to the specific space of shopping malls. It will examine their design and evolutions, as well as the uses, consumption practices and the forms of sociability that they create. Should shopping malls be considered an element of the urban space continuum, or do they bring about a breach within the city space? What are the social dynamics that shape the traffic of heterogeneous populations in shopping malls? Visitation patterns and uses of these places revolve around wider urban issues, calling into question differences in social status, ethnicity and generation, as well as gender segregation. Often perceived as embodiments of modernity in terms of the spaces, services and the commodities they offer, what aesthetic dimensions do shopping malls encompass? Starting with these questions, this conference aims to reflect on the undeniable worldwide success of the concept of shopping malls, and to question it through a comparative lens.

Rationale

While Parisian department stores first introduced, at the end of the 19th century, the idea of a marketplace offering seemingly unlimited amount of merchandise, with fixed prices and a theatrical display, thereby introducing the passive customer to the pleasures of modern mass consumption (Crawford, 1992), the concept of shopping malls, as we know it today, finds its roots in the United States during the post-war years. The first objective of shopping malls was to take into account a fully transforming urban reality, partly due to the expansion of urban space and the changing nature of the population. Thus, developers introduced the model of the shopping mall in urban peripheries because of the transformation which took place in urban demographics in North America: members of the white middle-class left the city centers to settle in the suburbs, and the poorer black population moved to the older urban zones (Cohen, 1996). This relocation outside of urban centralities demonstrates how the shopping mall recreates a unique and new space conceived as an aggregate of the department store and the city center.

The success of this concept is undeniable, as shopping malls have spread around the world. Their consistent rise follows an ever-identical general structure, but their specific shape is adapted according to specific contexts.
Designed in a concomitant fashion with urban development, these marketplaces constitute a particularly accurate object to understand consumption practices, patterns of sociability and uses of urban space around the world. Reading through the existing work in social sciences (anthropology, geography, history, sociology), one can note that shopping malls are often studied as public spaces. This analogy is based on three main criteria: the question of the heterogeneity or homogeneity of the populations visiting the mall, the plurality of uses they offer, beyond the commercial, and the modes of interactions developed in the malls.

**Continuities and discontinuities between the shopping mall and the city**

Access to the shopping mall is most often allowed by urban development itself: it is almost always associated with the use of the car and large motorways connect the mall to very scattered zones in the city, particularly suburban spaces (Crawford, 1992; Capron, 2000; Cohen, 1996; Stillerman and Salcedo, 2012; etc.). As a mirror, the internal infrastructure of the mall refers to an ideal of the pedestrian city center; including walkways such as streets and alleys (some pushing the analogy to the point of providing street names), squares, fountains, benches and coffee shops with “outside” tables. These contribute to shaping an artificial city, erasing a certain amount of exterior contingencies. Moreover, the mall environment escapes climatic and environmental constraints. Its visitors are protected not only from the cold, the rain or the heat, but also from dirt and pollution. It gives access to a preserved, comfortable and entirely predictable space, including the atmosphere and the sound level. This stability of environment quality is largely maintained through a surveillance, visible signs of which disappear behind the scenery (Sorkin, 1992).

**Visitation patterns and uses of the mall: integrations and exclusions**

This environment ensures the exclusion of a certain number of social groups perceived as potential disturbances, such as young men, *shabîb*, in Cairo (Abaza, 2006), lower classes, beggars, prostitutes and certain ethnic minorities. These groups are sometimes physically present inside the mall, but as employees in service of other users: cleaners, clerks, security agents. The traffic in the mall thus refers immediately to the urban context, while the segregation that occurs in other public spaces according to gender, social status, ethnicity or age is due to the cultural or socio-economic structures of the particular country. The presence of certain social groups in the mall is often explained by the absence of other public spaces available to these groups, and specifically other safe spaces. For example, for the young Saudi women in Riyadh (Le Renard, 2009) and the middle- and upper-classes of Buenos Aires (Capron, 2000), the streets are dangerous and urban practices are therefore transferred to the mall. The situation is similar for North-American suburban youth, whose preferred place of gathering is the shopping mall as opposed to the home.

The surveillance and security of the mall, moreover, paradoxically allow a relative heterogeneity of the population, and makes possible behavior which could not take place in the street – for example romantic encounters (Abaza, 2011; Wilson, 2004). The “entrance” in the mall of the certain social groups who seize this space, can then be read either in terms of a “crisis” of pre-existing urban spaces (Capron, 2000), or in terms of the emergence of these groups in a public space to which they did not have access previously. This is the case not only for women in Saudi Arabia (Le Renard, 2009), but also for black middle-classes in South Africa (Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo, 2009).

**The shopping mall as a total space**

The shopping mall thus offers a specific frame of interactions. According to the various authors, it can be interpreted as a commercial frame promoting social relations between heterogeneous populations, a “cosmopolitan canopy” (Anderson, 2004); a reflection of the interactions and relationships between communities and classes in the city (Stillerman and Salcedo, 2012); or as a potential for shaping new types of relationships (Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo,
Beyond issues of access, security and comfort, the success of these places probably lies within the fact that they can be considered as “total” spaces. Everything is present, available and accessible in one location. First presented as marketplaces (the term “shopping mall” itself is used in most parts of the world), their main characteristic is the accumulation of a number of other types of activities and services. Artistic exhibitions, charitable events, educational activities, as well as religious, national or community festivals are regularly organized on the places or in the alleyways of the malls. Finally, this “total” character can be found in the specific times and rhythms of the shopping malls, which stay open late at night and for a maximum number of days throughout the year. In order to allow this intensive use of the shopping mall, it has been necessary to develop a series of services such as restaurants, child care, prayer rooms, toilets, post offices and banks.

This conference aims to bring together scholars from across the social sciences in order to undertake an inter-disciplinary approach to the specific space of shopping malls, looking at their design and evolutions, as well as the uses, consumption practices and the forms of sociability they create. Should shopping malls be considered an element of the urban space continuum, or do they bring about a breach within the city space? What are the social dynamics that shape the traffic of heterogeneous populations in shopping malls? Visitation patterns and uses of these places revolve around wider urban issues, questioning in particular differences in social status, ethnicity and generation, as well as gender segregation. Often perceived as embodiments of modernity, in terms of the spaces, services and commodities they offer, what aesthetic dimensions do shopping malls encompass? Starting with these questions, this conference aims to reflect on the undeniable worldwide success of the concept of shopping malls, and to question it through a comparative lens.

Cited references: