THE FUTURE OF SHOPPING

SHOPPING MALLS ARE CROPPING UP AROUND THE GLOBE – AND ARE CALLING CITY PLANNING INTO QUESTION.

TEXT RAHEL WILLHARDT
ILLUSTRATIONS LESLEY MOORE

SHOPPING MALLS HAVE NEVER proliferated as much as now. If the analyses of real estate advisers Cushman & Wakefields are correct, Europe will gain 11 million m2 of new consumerism by the end of 2008. Russia will get 4.6 million m2 of these malls-in-progress. Poland, Spain and Turkey will each gain a good million m2 of shopping area; Germany just under a million.

In Asia, 600 centres are under construction in China alone, adding to the 28 million m2 of shopping area that already exist there. India's present 1.8 million m2 will have tripled in about a year, according to real estate advisers Jones Lang Lasalle. And the rapid speed of construction is also going strong along the Arab Gulf States – according to real estate advisers Thomson, by 2010 the 4.6 million m2 (as of 2000) will have increased by 160%.

Malls are on the rise as a retail format, which is obvious in their rapidly increasing per capita sales surface area, at least beyond market-saturated countries like the USA, Japan and many Western-European countries. No one quite knows how many malls a country can absorb. The range in Europe alone is respectable: Norway takes a wide lead at 630 m2 per 1,000 inhabitants, followed by Sweden and the Netherlands at around 350 m2. The surface area drops rapidly towards the east, down to around 11 m2 in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. But Eastern Europe's economically emerging markets are working hard on expansion. And according to real-estate experts, the boom hasn't even begun in South American countries, or even in India.

International chain stores are very likely the most important driving force behind the expansion. Pressured by market prices to grow, they systematically stretch their brand presence over the globe. Whoever dares to tread upon a new sales floor with tried-and-true centre developers reduces risk because successful developers guarantee good locations, brand-compliant store standards and concepts that work. Therefore they are welcome entries into emerging markets. And in many places it is they who create an infrastructure that a premium retailer needs in the first place.

It is no different in saturated markets with developed urban infrastructures, like Germany. Enclosed malls have rapidly multiplied since the late 1990s, but they have long moved from outlying green fields to the centres of large and medium-size communities. Major retail chains create a desirable range of large shopping surfaces – otherwise lacking in urbanized zones. This systematic addition to modern trade zones is called 'structural shift'.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the thought of a shopping mall evoked the image of nondescript boxes in remote areas, ringed with cars. Since then, much has happened to revive European urban zones with artificial retail worlds. This evolution didn't happen completely involuntarily: its roots lie in the stiff competition between retailers as well as in the rising demands of consumers.

These factors both led to the fact that a certain shopping-mall decay has settled into the 'climate-controlled tubes with florescent light', which has pulled a wave of revitalization after it that still hasn't ebbed. 'According to our diagnosis, malls have a reduced complexity to them, have only one theme, and are not useful for change,' explains Eric Kahn from the Central Office of Architecture in Los Angeles, diagnosing the reasons for the deterioration.

In the 1980s, Californian architect Jon Jerde created an effective antidote to this situation with a roofless concept that would have pleased Hundertwasser, the Viennese architect whose fanciful, eclectic and light-hearted buildings seem to suit commercial purposes very well. Jerde's Horton Plaza united stores, cinemas, offices and restaurants into a colourful mini-community that revitalized San Diego's inner city, which had been left for dead. The mall's revolutionary concept drew 25 million visitors in its first year. Shrewd investors then pumped two and a half million dollars into the city, sealing San Diego's resurrection and Jerde's meteoric rise to mall developer.

It's pure speculation as to whether Jerde, an avowed anti-mall consumer, has influenced the way people shop more than anyone else in the world. But he definitely had a significant influence on theme- and lifestyle-style centres, having realized almost 100 projects across the continents. In America his fame is marked by woodcut-like productions, like the remake of an Italian maritime city in Las Vegas's Hotel Bellagio, the fun-fair western backdrop for the Universal City Walk in L.A., and the copies of famous boulevards that individualize the Mall of America's endless surface area. More abstract natural interpretations can be found in Jerde's Japanese works: the Canal City Hakate places stores and fountains in a canyon of buildings that snake along a newly built canal on the grounds of a former textile factory. Roppongi Hills is a horizontal city that winds into the sky like a snail, lending overpopulated Tokyo some space to meet in the name of culture and commerce. Namba Parks is reminiscent of a gently undulating hill of apartments, offices and retail units that rise into the heights as they shift into and over each other. Gardens crown all the roofs, making a recreational site out of the former area around the baseball stadium in Osaka's concrete jungle.

Western building's architectural language has difficulties with 'cinematic environments', 'collage of façade-ectomies' and 'synthetic jumble with an overlay of shopping mall glitz', which tend to merely destroy the urban landscape 'in favour of theme park jolly'. While Jerde, the master of malls, impresses such critics little, they overlook the essence of his work as a 'placemaker'. He turns the game of classical architecture around: it's not about the building but about the spaces. 'Experience makes the place,' is Jerde's credo. 'We don't design "things",' he says, 'don't focus our energies on advancing forms for forms' sake. What we do is design places and environments people really love.'

Where critics are disappointed by the commercialization and privatization of public space, Jerde counters that 'the public sector stopped making public space a long time ago'. He has described himself as an 'urban surgeon' who repairs what has fallen into disrepair and brings back the 'the authentic urban experience that has often been lost by modern planning' to the city.

In the Harvard Design School Guide to Shop-

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ping Rem Koolhaas paints a picture of Jerde as a pragmatist who uses commerce as a Trojan Horse to realize his own urban visions. With all his admiration for this strategy, Koolhaas has 'aesthetic and cultural reservations' about the actually bleak commerce-based planning.

Jerde tirelessly asserts that shopping is a coincidental side effect; the other things are more important. He champions the transformation of shopping malls from pure consumption machines to urban experiences. His argumentation is subtle and, however strange it may seem, less capitalist than one would think in light of his blatantly commercially successful cityscapes.

There are two reasons why Jerde bows to the depths of commerce to follow his vision (cultivated since he was a student) of bringing people together. One is born of his observation that shopping is the late 20th century's most common communal experience – the second touches on the question of financing. If the communities don't pay, someone else has to come up with the cash for attractive public spaces. But investors

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count in money, not in attractive experiences. Yet whoever, like Jerde, can translate such experiences into record visitor numbers, longer stays and even better rents, dissolves the opposing factors of investment greed and general well-being. 'Whoever wants to change the face of our cities has to be the best in shopping architecture,' says Jerde. 'Shopping is an industry like the automotive industry. If I came up with a miniseries of five small cars, no one would listen to me, but as a giant I'm perceived. These are the rules of the game.'

The more surface area malls have added, the more urban their floor plans have become. We've gone from the straight-lined 'strips' and 'bone structure' to stylized plaza situations and streetscapes. Instead of always only attractively interlocking more and more stores into a tight space, blocks have been increasingly set up with open-air gastronomy and events. With the rise of megamalls (100,000+ m2), entire villages formed under the climate-controlled roofs, which have increasingly tended to contain non-sales relevant surfaces.

This became especially apparent in the mid-1990s, when the urban entertainment centres emerged. They culminated in thematic street and village scenarios, which presented brand retailers in almost filmic thematic ambiences. Whoever is tired of shopping can amuse themselves in cinemas, on carousels, in infotainment museums or rock-climbing walls and the like. These centres are also usually connected to leisure-destination hotels tucked away in remote corners.

Las Vegas is among the most prominent crystallization points of this type of mall. In the middle of the Nevada desert, visitors can choose whether they want to glide in gondolas along the canals of the 50,000-m2 Venice (Grand Canal Shoppes) for shopping, indulge in the bazaar atmosphere in a simulated Arabian desert (Desert Passage), or acquire Italian luxury labels in Caesars Palace's antique Roman pomp.

In Europe, the developer Sonae Sierra has shown for almost 15 years that thematic ornamentations are consumer attractions. The company invests heavily in Spain, Portugal and Italy, in centres whose total surface area is well under 100,000 m2 and lie in part in the city.

Asian and Arab centres don't fall short of their American role models, but rather often trump them in terms of diversity and surface area. Dubai's IBN Batutta Mall, for example, is named after the Arabian Marco Polo and is arranged so that shoppers forage for their treasures in China, India, Persia and three additional 'countries'. The incumbent champion for size is the South China Mall in Dongguan at 660,000 m2, which the Mall of Arabia will top in 2008-2009. The longstanding leader, the Canadian West Edmonton Mall, only hits sixth place with 350,000 m2, and the King of Prussia, America's largest mall at 260,000 m2, has now tumbled out of the top ten.

The European apex is Istanbul's Cevahir Shopping Mall, which takes number seven in the world rankings. Because the catchment areas in densely populated countries are smaller and European administrative politics are stricter, the 100,000+ m2 shopping paradises are reserved for the suburbs or regions without developed retail structures. More and more it's about mammoth projects and mixed-use facilities that combine shopping and entertainment resources with apartments, offices, municipal administration or even educational facilities – and therefore become a city within a city disguised as a shopping mall (see Jerde's Japanese projects).

At the end of the 1990s, the reproduction of 'true' urbanity climbed to a new evolutionary level with lifestyle centres (town centres or town squares). 'The Grove' is a street arrangement dotted with picturesque places under the Californian sky in which lanterns, trees and outdoor restaurants inspire an urban quality. The brand-name retail stores are presented behind façades that evoke L.A.'s resplendent boulevards of the 1930s and 1940s; the highly modern cinema technology has the nostalgic look of a Grand Theatre, fountains dance to the beat of Frank Sinatra's music. A small street train carries anyone who still needs to shop for food from the open-air mall to the Farmer's Market, Los Angeles' oldest market hall (which is within walking distance).

Lifestyle malls want to authentically reconstruct urbanity (all the way up to issuing parking tickets) but don't need to necessarily be decorative-historical. There are neither anchor tenants nor climate-controlled environments or huge parking lots. The tenant mix appeals to the upper middle class. These streetscape remakes are often less frequented than traditional malls, but generate higher profits. Seen through European eyes, the lifestyle malls are pedestrian zones that can control the tenant mix, marketing and event organization more efficiently than a city administration.

There are already 150 malls of this type in the USA, and 90 were in planning as of 2005. The majority are revitalization projects, which reanimate the 'cookie-cutter suburban malls' threatened by decay and/or speed the very fashionable resurrection of downtown districts. In Europe, where the integration of shopping implants into the urban landscape is an oft-discussed topic, open-air concepts crop up individually as direct urban development measures. In Maastricht, outsiders strolling through the pedestrian zone to the Maas banks will hardly notice that they are wandering into the Mosae Forum. With a combination of landmark buildings and modern architecture and a path winding through the created stores, apartments and offices, it transitions seamlessly into the cityscape.