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## The cultural role of the malls

### Abstract

The author attempts to examine the cultural and charitable events which increasingly take place in malls instead of old towns or squares and considerably widen the function of such places. In her opinion, we can observe a transfer of social life from customary space to shopping centers. Providing an examples from Toruń the author presents the main cultural functions of malls as a practice of satisfying all potential clients' needs under one roof.

**Keywords:** malls, shopping, mass culture, consumerism, amusement parks, entertainment, free time, recreation, leisure

Shopping centres have an increasingly important position in our society nowadays. Our visits in malls do not limit to only buying things any more. Now we can leave our coats in the cloakroom and let the children play in the watched playground while we spent all day walking through elegant alleys equipped with benches, flowers and even palms. Today, most shopping malls have many restaurants, bars, cafes or even hairdressers, beauty salons, gyms, cinemas and entertainment parks which enables us to fulfil a lot of different needs in the area of a single building.

The cultural and charitable events increasingly take place in malls instead of old towns or town/city squares. It can be said that the social life is gradually transferring from the areas of old towns and main streets to shopping centres which are trying to fulfil all (material and cultural) needs under one roof.

In my work I would like to present the main (cultural?) functions of malls in the present day, except for/excluding selling. I am going to analyse four shopping centres located in Toruń as an example: Toruń Plaza, Atrium Copernicus, CH Kometa and Arkady Kupieckie.

## The history of shopping malls and consumer society

The trade has accompanied humanity from the beginning of time. There were open markets in places where people came to exchange goods, previously without, than using money. Additionally, while trading people were also chatting, eating and praying. Many times they had to travel many kilometers to get to the market in order to obtain an opportunity to see new places and meet new people. The technical knowledge and culture also spread during the exchange of goods. According to Richard A. Feinberg and Jennifer Meoli, the history of shopping centers begins in the 1920s in the United States, in 1907 in Baltimore and in the 1920s in California. In Baltimore a group of small sellers decided to join their forces and occupy a car park to create one huge open market. In California the merchants who traded with Europe and other states were becoming more and more powerful and gradually eliminated smaller sellers and opened their huge shops offering a whole variety of products from different countries all over the world. In 1922 in Kansas City a group of shops accessed only by car were build. In 1931 in Dallas the first group of shops with its own car park were opened. The stores were facing away from the access road. In the year 1956 in the suburban area of Minneapolis the first enclosed shopping center was developed. We may say that it was the first mall corresponding to our contemporary concept. It was designed to make people happy, to entertain them by shopping like the malls do nowadays. It was not only a place for shopping, but a lot more. In the shop alleys and among the beautiful shop windows and cafes visitors could run away from bad weather and problems of everyday life. The inside was so colorful and magical for the people living in the 50' in the same way as it is now (Feinberg, Meoli 1991: 426–427).

The 50s and 60s are considered to be the beginning of the “consumer society”, which considers constant buying and collecting goods as the new, most important goal and value. Its source is seen in the increase in the entertainment industry as a reaction to the loss of World War II and the overall rapid growth of the industry during this period. Not without significance is the emergence of mass society and mass culture, which is the starting point for creating the consumer society (Storey 2003: 107–108).

According to Dwight Macdonald, the beginning of mass culture and society has its place in the nineteenth century and the associated industrial revolution. Machines and the organized mass production of goods in factories significantly reduced prices, so that more and more people could afford to buy an increasing amount of things that were of lower quality but were available for almost everyone. Additionally, there has been a significant migration of people from rural to urban areas, where they formed new, eclectic communities. The people, single families separated from their villages and traditions, started to need something to bond, a common homogeneous (mixed and simplified) culture to create a new society. At this point mass culture was born as a simple way to satisfy many different tastes and fill free time, which has also been “invented” during this period. Macdonald points out that people living in the country did not know the concept

of “free time”. When they had finished the harvest they had to work at home, there was always something to do. Working in factories took a certain amount of hours for six days a week. Sundays have always been free from work and in that way “leisure culture” was born that allowed for the development of mass culture to fill the time and consumer culture to spend the financial resources earned in factories. In addition, the credit offered developed at that time and it is still developing. You can buy whatever you want without money, on credit, which you can pay off later on more or less favourable terms (Macdonald 2002: 14–20).

## Examples of shopping malls placed in Toruń:

1. **Toruń Plaza** – is the largest shopping and entertainment center in Toruń. It was opened in November 2011. It is located at Broniewskiego Street and houses more than 120 shops, cafes and dining options. An important element of the mall is a well-known amusement park resembling the network, open until late at night, where people can go bowling, play billiards, video games, and watch movies in 5D. There is also a playground for children what is needed when parents want to take part in karaoke, go to the bar, to the dance floor or one of several rooms dedicated to birthday parties and conferences. In Plaza there is also a large chain cinema, smart supermarket, playground, called “Academia Plazusia” and the track with mechanical pets for children who can be left under the care of the employees. The building also has an Aquarium of 1000 square meters; where you can see extraordinary animals like for example a small shark. In winter they open a cloakroom to leave outerwear. The designers wanted to create a sense of moving along the paths of the park and gave the name of each “square” in the building. Therefore we can find there ginger, hazelnut and cinnamon squares. At every crossroads of the store alleys there are comfortable benches and maps. Along the alleys there are also placed wooden and upholstered in leather (advertising a particular brand) seats and palm trees. Cafes and restaurants are open; the seats face the alleys like gardens in outdoor cafes. The entire facility is designed to create the feeling of being in an open area. The gallery is located on the site of the old speedway stadium, which is commemorated by placing sports photos from speedway on the inside and outside of the building.
2. **Atrium Copernicus** – the name of the gallery refers to Nicolaus Copernicus, who has become almost a brand name of the town. The gallery was opened in 2005 and is located at Żółkiewskiego Street. The mall houses a variety of shops and dining options, a large chain supermarket, ice cream parlors, cafes and bowling – leisure center. Along the alleys there also are wooden benches and leafy trees, not palms this time. The ceiling has holes covered with glass. Here we can also see people walking in the gallery like in the alleys of a park and eating ice cream on the shop benches. Note the

walls of the corridors leading for example to the toilets, where the solar system is painted on the walls, as a reference to the name and the “patron” of the store.

3. **Galeria Bielawy** – is located at Olsztyńska Street. Similarly to the previous galleries, there are clothes stores, shoe, pet or drugstores, a large supermarket and restaurants, mostly fast food and Asian. Inside, there are plans of the store, paths and benches. Worthy of note is the fact that the security guards are moving on Segways, two-wheeled, electric vehicles popular among tourists who spend the entire day exploring the old city.
4. **Arkady Kupieckie** – this shopping center, opened in 2012, is located at Circular Road in the old fort, which is one of 200 defensive, military buildings built in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The decaying fort was restored and adapted for business. The idea of adopting historic sites to commercial needs is not new. The Investors from Toruń followed the concept of their colleges from Poznań or Kaunas. The mall called Old Brewery in Poznań is located in a former brewery area, which was further expanded. In the Acropolis Center in Kaunas the glass roof of the gallery covers several historical buildings, which matched the rest of the space. There are cafes and boutiques opened in the old houses.

## New measures of consumption

George Ritzer uses the term “new means of consumption” to name the area (the virtual as well) which allows, encourages or even forces us to buy a lot of goods. “These measures of consumption” in his opinion are relevant to the present and appeared in the second half of the twentieth century, after World War II. For example, the precursor of such institutions may use a network of Disney Theme Parks, the first of which was opened in 1955 in California. All the institutions of this type are characterized by:

- **The mass** – manifested for example, by a large, often spectacular (loud, colorful) and easy to transfer, and thus brought to the different types of customers (of all ages, from the education) show;
- **Commercialization** – everything that is available in both, theme parks such as Disneyland, as well as shopping centers and popular restaurant chains oriented towards a profit. Consumers should spend their money with joy, and believe that they benefit from doing it rather than the owners of chain stores and theme parks.
- **The image of the brand** – the most famous companies consistently promoted their image for a long time, so that they become recognizable. This requires activity on many levels as well as monitoring the market in a way thought to adapt to change without losing the image. The example is McDonald’s, which provides the majority of the same products in various countries. However, the modern trend of promoting local specialties was

also introduced, and even in McDonald's there are special dishes available only in a specific country. Corporations are very predictable. Consumers know for example what type of clothes or accessories are produced for a particular brand or restaurant chain.

- **Using technology in consumption rather than production** – technology previously was the domain of manufacturing plants. Now (from the second half of the twentieth century) it has changed as shown by the term “entertainment industry” which means literally the production of entertainment on a massive scale.
- **Strict control** – Ritzer also determined a “safety valve” of shopping centers. All elements of the commercial places of entertainment must be checked regularly to ensure that consumers can feel safe there and can be able to unload energy without harm to their health or social security (especially for children). An accident at an amusement park or a mall can simply ruin a good and recognizable image of the company (Ritzer 2004: 15–21).

In 1989, John Fiske called trading galleries the “cathedrals of consumption”. Nevertheless, the term quickly withdrew as a religious metaphor to imply the passive devotion and ritual consumption and the consumer realizes his or her own tastes and needs during the act of buying. I must admit that the continuous persuasion, advertising and promoting strongly influence our decisions even that no one is forcing us to do anything (Storey 2003: 124). Later, the new meaning has been given to the words of George Ritzer. According to him, consumption centers have to continuously attract new “followers” and keep up the impression that they offer something magical, like a fairytale, something you cannot see anywhere else. An example of such space turned into a magical place is the Aquarium or 5D cinema in Toruń Plaza. It can even be done by inserting escalators, futuristic appearance of the building and the availability of well-known, iconic and even magical fashion brands and catering on site. It may be noted that when such a school trip comes to the cinema located in the gallery, the main attraction is not a movie, (I think that in 5 or even 3D) but the escalators or just the great, new space (Ritzer 2004: 23–26).

## The social role of shopping malls

1. **The trade function** – the most obvious one. The galleries are mainly shops offering products which are well known, made by popular brands. Some researchers point out the fact that the current love for a particular brand is sometimes even regarded by consumers as a religion. There are fan clubs, Facebook groups and even subcultures which would wear glasses or clothes made by well-known brands only (only one of the known brands or sweat-shirts of a specific company as their hallmarks; Włodarski 2013).
2. **Catering** – in shopping malls one can mainly find fast food restaurants, which clearly underlines the nature of a typical consumer in those ar-

eas. Fast food is prepared quickly and easily, it enables us to eat and walk at the same time in order to quickly return to shopping. In all the restaurants of the same chain, the same kind of food is available so the taste of the dishes never surprises the consumer, and with the large quantities of preservatives and flavor the dishes are tasty for nearly everyone. A well-known beverage company has been building its brand and its reputation for years and it has masses of the faithful devotees who, regardless of where they will go on holiday or where the market is, always opt for a meal with this drink in the same, well-known restaurant instead of tasting some local specialties (Ritzer 2009: 20–24).

3. **Social** – large shops have increasingly become a place where we can not only do shopping or eat but also spend our free time. Firstly, shopping alleys, with plants and benches like a park, are located under the roof, which allows us to freely wander around them, even in adverse weather conditions. Secondly, more and more activities like shopping, dining, entertainment, cultural events are gradually moving from old towns to galleries. More and more people, especially young people dating do not meet in front of some monument in the old town but just before the entrance to one of the shops in the mall to eat something, to do window-shopping and hang around the gallery. The car parks outside some shopping centers, such as C.H. Alfa in Olsztyn, are used by young people to ride on skateboards or scooters. John Storey emphasizes that shopping space is used in different ways by different groups. Other activities in this area are relevant to teenagers (meetings, skateboarding, movies, bowling, dating), and others such as young mothers (shopping, gym, hairdresser's, meeting with friends in a cafe). You can even tell in this case that the concept of "space consuming" is a determination to remain in the gallery for the sake of staying in it, as a way of spending free time, excluding purely consumerist feature (buying) (Storey 2003: 123–127).
4. **Recreational** – in most modern shopping malls there are large chain gyms open, hairdressers, beauty salons, or even spa, where in addition to the previously mentioned social roles of malls, you can also walk with shopping and dining opportunities, work on your appearance. Entertainment – in the many galleries multiplex cinemas, clubs, entertainment centers, bowling alleys and even pubs are located. More and more galleries organize concerts, such as a concert in Toruń, where a well-known rapper Mezo performed in Plaza gallery in 2012 on the anniversary of the opening. Other events are also organized like fashion shows, night sales, exhibitions, such as an exhibition of 3D Street Art organized in 2011 in CH Cometa in Toruń, or charity, for example, the action "Change jeans", which took place in Plaza in Toruń in 2012. Anyone who gave jeans to the charity in selected stores got a 20% discount for another one. Some shopping centers, such as the Old Brewery in Poznań, put on constant displays of works of art, and images of archaeological exhibits (exhibit "Arche (a) types"), which blurs the



distinction between commercial and cultural space. A Gallery presents the exhibition halls for their photographs, natural or historical (museum) and even organizes workshops and public education. For example, the Karolinka center in Opole organizes regular exhibitions and workshops such as “Mysteries of Egypt” and “Leonardo da Vinci’s inventions”. The shopping centers are also implemented as pro-health and pro-social initiatives. For example, the center Arkadia Warsaw in cooperation with the police organized several times the actions called “Safe Zone Services” and “Don’t get robbed”, in which many information sessions and competitions were organized (Posytek 2010: 44-46).

5. **Religious** – in addition to the fact that people are more likely to visit shopping malls on Sundays or at the time of holidays (when shops are open of course), and even some brands are presented as true holly relics. An example can be C.H. Silesia located at Chorzowska Street in Katowice, where the Catholic Church was opened. Consumers can now really spend all Sunday in the gallery, starting with a morning Mass followed by the possibility of doing shopping, visiting a hairdresser or a beautician, having dinner with the family or going to the cinema (Ritzer 2004: 23–26).

## Conclusion

The term consumption should be nowadays replaced by hyper consumption. We live in a world where consuming does not consist of only fulfilling our needs. We literally “Consume for (the sake of) consumption”. We can even say that our needs are constantly stimulated by the ever-growing advertising industry, showing us every day how many more items we need. And as it was mentioned before, there is a huge credit card industry. Even if we do not have enough money to buy an item, we can take it home anyway and pay it off later (Ogonowska 2004: 29–30).

Consumption has turned into entertainment which is available for long hours, seven days a week. Just go to one of the many shopping malls to satisfy most of your needs, through the purchase of food, drinking coffee, wellness and evening entertainment after all, by contact with high or low culture available in the mall.

Everything has its pros and cons. On one hand, social life and culture moves from the picturesque areas of old towns, the elegant flats in city centers or parks to modern, glass and dripping shopping consumerism. On the other hand, it must be admitted that such complexes may make our contemporary life style easier. The opportunity to fulfill many different needs in one building may be controversial and may seem not elegant but it is comfortable and it allows us to save some time. In addition, it should be noted that those who have casual contact with culture will not give up their regular visits to the theater or museum. While exhibitions displayed in shopping malls as well as any events organized there are available for the people who normally would not choose to participate in them,

the dissemination of culture in public spaces is a great form of consumption and its popularization among young people who may be encouraged by, say, part of an archaeological exhibition accidentally seen while walking through the store and they may want to know more about it.

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