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Socialisation, Community, and Shopping Malls:
An Empirical Study at Auckland's St Lukes Mall -
Examining the Role the Mall Plays for its Patrons

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Abstract

With the steady growth in the number of shopping malls being constructed, and the high level of media attention they have been receiving, this exploratory study investigated the role shopping centres play for their patrons and conceptualized the findings via both modernist and postmodernist analyses. A variety of methods were used: surveys, structured interviews, extended open interviews, and photographic observation. The survey and interview information was analysed for regularities and themes. The St Lukes mall, for over half of its patrons, did serve a social role as a site for meeting people and “hanging out”. However, St Lukes is a very middle class mall - therefore questions were raised as to whether the poor are able to relate the same way to ‘their’ malls. Cultural, social and economic factors all appeared to underlie mall patronage.

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Introduction

The principal objective of this thesis is to investigate and assess the sociality and community that have developed in and around shopping malls.

The sociality of malls has been studied before. Hanson and Clark (1995) discussed the mall as a privately owned big-business community area; others such as Shields (1992) discuss the mall as a surrogate town square supporting new forms of urban “tribalism”: “Consumption, an ambivalent and multi-faceted activity, takes on more and more social functions as a form of sociality. This serves in the reconstruction and realignment of community around the tactility of the crowd practices and tribal ethos of the new urban spaces of consumption” (p. 111). But little attention has been given to the subjective aspect of the consumer’s experience of the mall. I aim to correct this shortcoming.

The information was gathered from Auckland’s St Lukes mall. My research was undertaken with the cooperation of the St Lukes Group. The St Lukes Group is New Zealand’s largest mall company (at the time of this study), and the St Lukes mall is the largest mall in New Zealand. For this reason it was my preferred choice as a site for my research. I wanted to try to come as close as possible to capturing what has been happening in the USA with the growth of the supermalls - which will inevitably arrive here: “Greame and Richard Farr, of ProMall Shopping Centres, have announced plans for 16 out-of-town ‘supermalls’ all over New Zealand, offering dozens of chain stores, cafes, cinemas, and thousands upon thousands of car parks” (Wilson, 1996).

Such shifts in consumption and the public use of space do threaten the ‘traditional’ forms of community, leaving many town squares, once a hive of activity, resembling a Wild West ghost town. Acknowledging that, I nevertheless debate whether or not the shopping mall will cause the extinction of localized sociality: will it not simply be transformed, surviving in a new guise?

Chapter 1 includes a broad review of the literature in the field of consumption. This task reveals how current writings in the field of consumption ignore the individual subjectivities at work in sites of consumption, and the social influences consumption has in shaping community. The use of fieldwork in this thesis serves to correct this bias. Chapter 2 details the methods used. Fieldwork was the central tool. This chapter discusses the problems and the overall process. The chapter is the story of my three weeks' fieldwork in the mall. Chapter 3 then details my findings. These are then listed in preparation for discussion and analysis, which is undertaken in Chapters 4 and 5.

The analysis begins in Chapter 4 by examining 'the role the mall plays for its patrons'. The purpose of this is to deduce whether the term 'community' still has relevance in the contemporary setting. The chapter also examines the level of enjoyment and sense of value mall users are deriving from their visits, and then sets this against some of the malls competitors for the public's time and money. This is useful as it allows for an assessment of 'what is drawing people into the malls'. Finally, in the light of my fieldwork information, I come to an assessment of the future of mall development.

Chapter 5, 'Modernity or postmodernity, alienation or liberation within the shopping mall?', debates the extent of modernity and postmodernity in the mall and how this affects the individual and shapes community. I believe that this is a topic deserving of attention, as it is disputed whether mall development is the "death knell for personalized shopping, community and the small business person" (Legat, 1988); or if "Shopping malls are the real postmodern sites of happy consciousness. Not in the old Hegalian sense of a reconciled dialectic of reason, but happy consciousness, now in the sense of the virtual self. A whole seductive moment, therefore, between a willed abandonment of life and a restless search for satisfaction in the seduction of holograms" (Kroker and Cook, 1989. Cited, Langman, 1992:64-5). This thesis will, I hope, go some way towards settling such contentions.

There are gaps which I am aware of and acknowledge. Perhaps the most obvious criticism could be directed at my basing my argument on a sample consisting exclusively of mall shoppers. However, malls with their huge anchor stores are a shopping destination now hard to avoid, and I feel it is reasonable to say that a representative sample of mall users is nowadays effectively equivalent to a representative sample of the population as a whole.

I wish to thank those who have assisted me, particularly Mr. Henry Barnard, the St Lukes Group, and my department.