

# Simulated Cities, Sedated Living

## Robert Misik

Übersetzung ins Englische: Simon Garnet

This is a brief outline of the first two chapters of my forthcoming book about "culture capitalism", which will be published in fall 2007 in the Aufbau-Verlag, Berlin

Whatever we do, we shop. Our emotional world bears the stamp of images that all somehow resemble advertisements. Even romance can be consumed, as the Jerusalem-based sociologist Eva Illouz has demonstrated so convincingly: no love without the consumption of romantic commodities – to the cinema as a couple, the candlelit dinner in a restaurant, the weekend trip to destinations widely held to be connected with romance. Paris is still a popular choice here. Every experience is modelled on pre-fabricated images. We know from films what "love" is supposed to look like. In the same way that experience is produced from commodities, so are all practices "pervaded by a consumption-oriented mentality".[1] Therefore, it is completely correct to say that we "consume", or "purchase", our emotions, our experiences, and our identity. In view of this, it's no surprise that shopping has become a category of social science – and that the question immediately arises as to "what kind of categorization this entails", as Frederic Jameson has remarked.[2] At any rate, shopping long ago stopped being primarily about purchasing things – if people want to own things that a short while before they never even knew about, then that's not such a simple process. Whether or not we end up with a commodity, we consume images, opt for one of the lifestyles that have all long been available off the peg, we buy passions, perhaps we treat ourselves to something nice from the marketplace of experience – even if we don't expressly buy anything. We purchase ourselves, in other words. Thus the ubiquity of branding, the strategy of connecting commodities, services, districts, nations, or persons with an image that the person who buys this commodity or visits that district has a stake in. Shopping, then, is a category that is productive precisely because it is blurred: it refers to both economic and psychological aspects, to the urban and to the technological. And it colours all areas of life. "It is not only that shopping merges with everything, everything merges with shopping", writes Sze Tsung Leong in his now almost canonical title, Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping.[3] As a finely tuned cultural technique, shopping generates consumption as disposition, as "relationship to a market-shaped world" (Dominik Schrage),[4] with its growth calculus and strategies for "pleasure profit". From Rem Koolhaas we have the phrase, "Shopping is perhaps the last remaining form of public activity."

In short: in lifestyle or cultural capitalism, in which commodities differ far less with respect to their practical utility value and far more with respect to their "cultural" features, shopping is simply the way to purchase an identity. "Brands represent identity", as the British marketing guru Wally Olins has put it.[5] A bit overstated? Slightly exaggerated? Be that as it may, the discrepancy is amazing: bearing in mind the significance that shopping undoubtedly has for the formation of our (inner) selves and our (outer) worlds, shopping is somewhat under-theorized. Shopping is like a blank space in the global cartography of knowledge. A kind of taboo that isn't touched. Theorizing about shopping is held to be a minor art best left to the user manuals, the consultants who specialize in shop window design or researchers who compile practical knowledge. People like Paco Underhill, the author of *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*, who knows that buyers stay in a shop for an average of 11.27 minutes while non-buyers only stay for 2.36 minutes and who discovered the rule that on

entering a shop, shoppers first turn to the right (whence interior designers and retailers draw their conclusions).

However, little light has been shed on what the rise of a "consumerist mentality" really means. In the globalization discourse, for example, all the talk has been about the international division of labour, about the fact that cars are designed in Germany, assembled in Spain, sold in China, with the company accounts perhaps being done in Calcutta, and that company shareholders are globally active investment funds that accumulate deposits from Arkansas to Asunción and hurtle through virtual space and real time via some or other fibre-optic cable. Far fewer words, however, are expended on the fact that a global "power brand" is only successful when its brand image is considered something to aim for in Ulan Bator as well as Ulm, when purchasing a lifestyle along with it is also desirable. In other words, little is said about the fact that something like a globalization of emotion and desire must exist, as well as a global understanding of the language of symbols through which a commodity communicates with the consumer (which doesn't, of course, rule out that a globally extending language of symbols is not an invitation to misunderstanding).

To theorize about shopping, then, whiffs strongly of the fleet-footedness peculiar to cultural studies that is sometimes hard to distinguish from the kind of vacuous randomness capable of coming up with a social history of the toilet seat. Better not waste too many words on shopping, then, otherwise there's a danger of being taken for a banal theorist from the pop-lit corner. Something similar goes for shopping malls, the paradigmatic sites of global capitalism par excellence, which look pretty much alike from New Jersey to Shanghai. They are taken for granted. They are everywhere and no one talks about them. Having said that, the mall, descendant of the arcades of the nineteenth century and the department stores of the early twentieth century, is not simply a collection of shops in a complex erected outside the big cities or in the suburbs, not simply, in other words, an effective and economical concentration of opportunities for the purchase of commodities. The mall also isn't simply the child of air-conditioning, escalators, and plasterboard. Nevertheless, it shouldn't be forgotten that the refinement of technical possibilities for creating a large space containing other large, windowless spaces, through which, despite longer distances, one can move comfortably without asphyxiating, was an important prerequisite for the genesis of shopping malls. But the shopping mall is by no means exhausted by the technology that enables it. It is all these things and much more besides: a self-contained space of experience with place-effects extending beyond the actual parameters of the mall. If the imperative of consumer capitalism is "lead us into temptation", then the shopping mall is its cathedral.

Today, the original form of the mall has long been superseded. The new big thing is the Urban Entertainment Centre (UEC): shopping mall, meeting point, multiplex cinema, and gastro-experience all in one. Huge clusters of shops, offices, restaurants, and cinemas that form a "mini-city". Growths at the edges of cities, but also at their centre, which insert themselves into the landscape like a carcinoma into an organism. Public places that are only pseudo-cities, backdrops of the social in which one can indeed be active, but only in a peculiarly passive way.

"I take on architectonic trash", says Jon Adams Jerde, "in order to re-create places for communities".<sup>[6]</sup> Jerde is, if you like, the most important architect in the world, even if practically no one has heard of him, even those familiar with the names of the genuine celebrity architects – Gehry, Hadid, Eisenman, and the rest. "Other architects dream of so much importance and opportunities", says Rem Koolhaas. Jerde's buildings are visited by

more than 500 million people annually; his projects include the Mall of Egypt in Cairo, the West End City Centre in Budapest, City Walk in Los Angeles, and the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, America's largest covered shopping centre. The latter, according to the German business magazine Brand Eins, is "a place where apart from being born and dying you can easily spend your whole life". What makes the mall paradigmatic is that it organizes social life around the imperative "Buy!" The Mall of America, for example, has "its own educational facility, a joint venture with the Bloomington Schools Authority. The Mall offers levels from nursery school to university and even has its own MBA programme." [7]

In the mall, one can simulate normal social life around the commodity-form, to which the place owes its existence in the first place. People like Jerde focus their attention on interim-spaces: the places between the shops that used to be empty spaces. These wastelands in the classical shopping centre have been turned into places where time can be whiled away in cafés, cinemas, and themed restaurants. The shopping malls have thus mutated into Urban Entertainment Centres, they have taken on characteristics that belong to city centres: apparently buzzing, apparently lively, apparently public spaces. The urban experience is embedded in a politics of branding. The experiences offered for consumption must be reconcilable with the images of the brands represented and with the image of the mall as brand zone. The mall, then, is a pseudo-public space or a gigantic private space. It is a private space because it is privately owned and is only the backdrop of the social, although in all practical respects, of course, it is a public space. This has meanwhile been taken into account in a number of court decisions. The high court of New Jersey, for example, decided, after the owners of the local mall had prevented a civil rights group from handing out flyers, that the former had "deliberately transformed their property into a public place of congregation", and that the right to free expression and congregation was also justified on these "high streets of our times". [8] In short: demonstrating in a mall is just as legal as, say, demonstrating on the square outside the train station.

In Austria, demonstrations in shopping malls are still banned. In Vienna, the Green Party, for example, are demanding that the laws adapt to the reality – in other words, to the fact that malls have essentially become public places. The shop owners and mall operators reject that. Perhaps, though, it is precisely this "difference of opinion" that points towards something symptomatic. In their own way, both sides are right. Shopping malls are zones with the effects of city life – but by no means does that make them urban spaces. In these mock public spaces, "regulations are imposed. That which is perceived as public space is in fact private space that has been opened up, so as to enable – while simulating public space – traffic back and forth. This traffic is controlled by the owners in order to allow access only to certain people, or in the case of a violation of the rules, to give a ticking off. At the same time, an atmosphere conducive to lingering must be created that suits the aims of the owners: music and so on should create a pleasant, relaxed, or stimulating atmosphere appropriate for consuming. That's why whiling away the time pleasantly is only desirable in commercial zones. Everything is planned in advanced and controlled. Appropriation or adaptation of the space by passers-by is both impossible and forbidden. One may not sit on steps. Every thing has its place." [9]

In many of these Urban Entertainment Centres, not only is "congregating in larger groups" banned, but also "unnecessary staring"; anyone who wears a baseball cap back to front, for example, is immediately ejected from the Plaza of City Walks. That's why the urban theoretician Mike Davis has called the entertainment malls the "architectural equivalent of the neutron bomb" – "a city lacking all living experiences". Another architect has remarked

that [malls] have as much to do with real experience as "a zoo has to do with life in the wild". A formulation that also shows how unsteady the ground is upon which criticism rests. Because where is it bindingly set out which experiences are "more genuine" than others? Why exactly is a visit to the theatre more genuine than a tour through the Sony Center in Berlin? Why is getting drunk at the local pub a more "genuine experience" than doing so in the Millennium Tower in Vienna? Whatever: it is incontestable that social life in malls is defined by the wish for controllability and mastery, as well as by the commercial character of the entire facility and the powerful drive towards homogenization. Because a characteristic of malls is that they look, feel, and taste more or less similar everywhere.[10]

The effects of all this shouldn't be underestimated. Places leave their mark. They are a school of seeing, they have effects on the habitus, even on the physiognomy of those who habitually move about within them. We orient ourselves in places through sign systems. And while sign systems serve us, we also serve them: the mediocre and the cheap, coupled with the mall's luridness, the shiny surfaces that overstep the thresholds of perception, only to drive them even higher. It goes without saying that all this can't fail to have an impact on the senses of the subject. Seen thus, even the most exquisite mall is always also a school of stupefaction. The mall is not the paradigmatic global site because it is found everywhere, but because it has become the model for all globalized spaces – a paradigm, in other words, for all transitory zones in which one doesn't really linger, the axis for a permanent change of place. If you like: the place of placelessness par excellence. Nowadays, airports and train stations are practically indistinguishable from malls. The same goes for the entrances of large hospital complexes, and, *mutatis mutandis*, the large cultural complexes and museums that attract international tourism, whose shops, sometimes as large as department stores, make up a large part of their income. What's more, the colonization of public space through privatized shopping zones as a rule follows a simple logic: because for budgetary reasons public finances are being withdrawn from the public space, the operators of airports, train stations, hospitals, and museums are seeking their salvation in shops. There was some astonishment recently that in the US even the largest and most influential church parishes are orienting themselves towards the shopping centre – these mega-churches offer seating for several thousand worshippers, sufficient parking space is also provided, as well as the guarantee of all-round support from psychotherapists to hairdressers and gyms. Ultimately, the capitalist principle has asserted itself in matters of faith as well: only the biggest survive and even priests must keep an eye on quotas.

The glass-cube aesthetic of malls is the stage of the social upon which the residents and through-travellers move, and because they learned young, they soon possess a virtuosity, whose dark side, of course, is spiritless routine. However, the resident of the modern consumer-capitalist universe is as much at home in the mall system as one is at home in a syntax one learned as a child. The mall, then, is a dead language like Latin – as John McMorrough writes appealingly, "It becomes a basic system of expression for various modes of expression".[11]

Like the revenge of history, this rebounds on the city centre. If the phenomenon of the shopping mall once marked the city centre's loss of significance and a migration of shopping to the periphery, today the transformation of city centres into zones for consumption and magnets for international tourism bears the stamp of adjustment to the mall aesthetic. They are correspondingly prettified, scrubbed, and tidied – "clean, safe, and fun" is the principle, as the Viennese theorist Anette Baldauf has put it.[12] City centres are where the global power brands position their "flagship stores", which are not only the temples of the brand

image, but also their site of production. The global luxury brands must be present in the most expensive districts, since that's precisely what makes them global luxury brands. No main street without the ubiquitous Kenzo, Louis Vuitton, Prada, and Dior boutiques. Not only are city centres the areas where brands are present, they themselves become brand zones – competing internationally for tourists and investors, the cities must themselves become brands with an unmistakable brand image, brand statements of steel, glass, concrete, or stone – and sometimes also flesh and blood. Of course, people are only tolerated in so far as they are paying visitors or local extras that harmonize with the image of the brand zone. Loiterers are moved on.

Buskers are tolerated only in so far as they conform to the local ambience. Nowadays, equally obligatory is a sprinkling of subculture, mostly at the peripheries of the central urban area – it belongs to city life and therefore is a strict requirement of city marketing. In any case, cities also always sell themselves to themselves and must take care to be "an experience", where one feels good, where consumption can be consumed. The values of the shopping malls, their sedation of experience and their controllability, are also becoming the values of the city. In short: city centres define themselves as centres of consumption. "The street can now be decoded as an open-air mall" (John McMorrough). With this move into "urban experimental retailing", the "city centre – as corporate theme park with its apparently perfect social harmony – has become the interface of the middle class. It functions as an extended entertainment and shopping zone that primarily serves young urban professionals. The centres, regardless of their concrete location, increasingly constitute themselves from a standard set of franchises: McDonalds, KFC, GAP, Virgin Megastore, Tower Music, Barnes & Noble, and Starbucks transform city centres into brandscapes, where 'going downtown' is synonymous with going shopping" (Baldauf).[13]

In a complex process of osmosis, the history and image of a city must merge into the brand zone. Unlike the shopping mall, inner cities have a site-specific advantage – their aura. That's precisely why homeopathic doses of urbanity must be cultivated, since visitors to the city want to purchase, with the commodities that they buy in it, a part of the image of the city as brand zone.

Seen thus, shopping in the city centre is just one of many variants of themed shopping. In this case: shopping in the city as "experience", as entertaining as a visit to a water park. In a final paradox, the transformation of the city into theme park as shopping environment, the revenge of the shopping mall on the urban, returns to haunt the shopping mall itself. Lately, a number of mall-operators have been erecting city backdrops in their shopping centres and building theme parks in the shape of cities. "We're building real streets", reports a mall operator in San José, California. "We're doing nothing less than building copies of city centres".[14]

If, as Stuart Hall says, "the material world of goods and technologies is deeply cultural",[15] then the shopping mall really is the paradigmatic place of a "culturally capitalized" world, in which ultimately social life and communication can't be imagined without the mediation of commodities. Seen thus, the "mallification" of cities is itself only consistent – and precisely for this reason not to be taken lightly. "Junk space" is what Rem Koolhaas has called it in a furious manifesto entitled, "The sum total of our current architecture": "Junk space is the result of the conjunction of escalator and air conditioning, conceived in an incubator made of plasterboard [...] the beauty of airports, especially after every new extension! The gleam of renovation! The variety of shopping malls! Let's research public space, discover casinos, analyze theme parks. [...] Junk space is cumulative, organized in levels, lightweight,

fragmented [...] designed to carry brand names [...] it consists only of subsystems without a concept, of orphaned particles searching for a plan or a model [...] completely chaotic or frighteningly still and perfect, under-determined and at the same time over-determined." [16]

The shopping mall could probably be called the DNA of our times.

- [1] Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Berkeley, University of California Press 1997.
- [2] Frederic Jameson, "Reading Junkspace", *Archplus* 175, December 2005.
- [3] Sze Tsung Leong, "...And Then There Was Shopping", in: Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong (eds.), *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, Cologne: Taschen 2002, 129.
- [4] Dominik Schrage, "Integration durch Attraktion. Konsumismus als massenkulturelles Weltverhältnis", *Mittelweg* 36, 6/2003.
- [5] Wally Olins, *On Brands*, New York: Thames & Hudson 2003, 27.
- [6] Cited in Harald Willenbrock, "Allgemein-Plätze", *Brand Eins*, 1/2003.
- [7] *New York Times*, 2 May 1994.
- [8] *New York Times*, 21 December 1994.
- [9] Guido Brendgens, "Vom Verlust des öffentlichen Raums. Simulierte Öffentlichkeit in Zeiten des Neoliberalismus", *Utopie-Kreativ* 182, 12/2005.
- [10] Of course, that shouldn't mean one falls into the old prejudice of cultural critique that says that capitalism makes everything alike, that it leads to conformity. Capitalism is also a powerful force for heterogeneity. Even its basic unit, the commodity, can only be brought to the customer if it is distinct from other commodities. As Wally Olins correctly described it in his book *On Brands*, capitalism has a "powerful homogenizing effect" but "heterogeneity is just as influential in global brand development". Olins, *ibid.* 103.
- [11] John McMorrough: "City of Shopping", in: *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, 196.
- [12] Anette Baldauf, "Sauber, sicher, lustig", in: *WOZ*, 27 May 2004.
- [13] Baldauf, *ibid.*
- [14] Cited in: *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, 154.
- [15] Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies*, Ausgewählte Schriften Band 3. Hamburg: Argument Verlag 2000, 91.
- [16] Rem Koolhaas, "Junk-Space", *Archplus* 149, April 2000.

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