Mall Myths

by

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[Sidebar] A pioneering developer and operator of regional shopping centers reflects on the industry.

As the millennium approaches, urban historians reviewing the twentieth century are sure to assign a major role to the phenomenon we call "the mall." Chances are good, however, that the reporting will be distorted by several persistent myths that cloud our understanding of the forces that have shaped retail real estate development in America.

The first myth maintains that the mall-type shopping center is a revolutionary architectural concept, introduced in America in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Actually, the enclosed retail development is a contemporary version of the nineteenth-century European arcade, a building type and retailing system with historic roots stretching back centuries to medieval marketplaces and, even earlier, to the bazaars of Persia, Egypt, and Asia. These roots become clear when one considers an account written in 1784 by a European traveler who described the bazaars of 18th-century Istanbul as "superb buildings, filled with beautiful covered passages. They are all well maintained. Each business has its own hall, where the merchandise is presented . . . Visitors come for entertainment as well as business."

Following Europe's industrial, political, and social upheaval of the late 1700s, Paris became the scene of dramatic refinements to the arcade. The Galeries de Bois of the Palais Royal, built in 1786, was perhaps the earliest example. Consider this 1849 commentary on Paris street life:

So that the inner city could compete with the boulevards, speculation hit upon the arcades, which immediately found a favorable response... It was not enough to save the pedestrian from the distress and anxiety of the street; one had to attract him positively to the arcade so that once he entered he would feel himself caught by its magic and forget everything else. It all depended on the ability to build an arcade as bright as an open space . . . warm in winter, and cool in summer, always dry and never dirty and dusty.

The arcade came to the United States in 1828, when the English architect John Haviland built the Philadelphia Arcade. Landmark projects followed in Providence, New York, and Cleveland. By the late 1800s, the European shopping arcade began to reach its grandest scale in such buildings as the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan. This example has striking similarities with today's most successful urban retail projects. First, the Galleria's corridors, which intersect at a domed grand court, served as busy pedestrian passageways, connecting two vital activity centers . . . in this case, two public piazzas. The Galleria was adjacent to the city's most active commercial and residential districts, and was anchored by--the Duomo, a cathedral. In those days, the cathedral acted as a daily "people pump," as potent as any modern major department store. Interestingly, even in the late 1800s deals were made that involved the private sector contributing land on a favorable basis to encourage the developer who constructed, leased, and operated the arcade--a nineteenth-century version of Urban Development Action Grants.

One can compare the Milan Galleria with urban shopping malls such as Columbus City Center in Columbus, Ohio. The downtown location is across the street from Ohio's Capitol building (another people pump). With its many direct pedestrian connections (a mall extension over High Street to a Lazarus flagship store), one can see that recent development of the enclosed shopping center are refinements rather than inventions.

CORNFIELDS AND CITIES

The second myth holds that regional shopping centers of post-World War II America sprang up in cornfields, creating suburbia and ultimately destroying the nation's once-prosperous cities. Here, again, history adds clarity.

From the beginning of our nation's history, American settlers established unique patterns of urban development, far different from the Old World cities which they had fled. For example, an urban study in the 1890s revealed that the population density of American cities averaged 22 persons per acre, compared to 157 persons per acre in German cities. Americans' preference for suburban living is by no means a new aspiration, in fact, historians have discovered the following inscription on a clay tablet dating back to the sixth century B.C.: "Our property seems to me the most beautiful in the world. It is so close to Babylon that we enjoy all the advantages of the city, and yet when we come home we are away from all the noise and dust."

One tends to focus on the years following World War II as the "dawn of America's suburbs" and the "decline of America's cities." Yet by 1920, immigration, the industrial revolution, advances in mechanized farming, as well as the aspirations of many returning servicemen from World War I, already had combined to cause a tidal wave of metropolitan population growth. The traditional cities just did not have the capacity to accommodate these newcomers, and growth migrated to the urban fringe.

In response, retailing moved cautiously from the downtown to the areas of strongest population growth. In the first half of this century, established downtown department stores, powerful corporate citizens in most cities, exercised significant control of land use and the political process. Because of this control, they were able to forestall competition from new retailers and make it difficult, if not impossible, for national chains such as Sears and Wards (as well as variety and specialty stores) to secure adequate and competitive downtown locations.

However, with strong markets available beyond the central business district, the outcast stores found locations--called "hot spots"--two, four, or even six miles from downtown. These street-front properties, anchored by chain, variety, or specialty stores, were serviced primarily by foot traffic, busses, and street cars, and an evolving American technology--the automobile. New developments began to accommodate car traffic by providing adjacent parking lots, giving shoppers an additional incentive. It is important to understand that from only 8,000 registered automobiles in 1900, car ownership grew to 468,000 by 1910, eight million by 1920, and over twenty-three million by 1930. With increasing automobile traffic and narrow boulevards designed for horse-drawn carriages, many downtown retail locations began losing their luster long before World War II. A 1926 urban engineering report concluded that "growing traffic congestion in cities is making it increasingly difficult for the suburban customers of city stores to shop in leisure and comfort," and "a larger and larger proportion of their buying is being done in stores within their own suburban areas."

Mobility continued to be a compelling and appealing social force. Suburban migration after World War II was further encouraged by federal programs offering affordable financing to new home buyers. Historic expenditures on highway construction subsidized the departure of the "1-1/2 car family" from the city.

People primarily shop where they live, and cities tried to stay competitive. But far too often experiments in the 1950s and 1960s to build affordable housing in the inner city were disasters. These highly subsidized projects were not competitive alternatives to the abundant opportunities in the suburbs. At the same time, new suburban housing sent appealing and promising signals to quality retailers who began to look away from the already decaying central business districts. Grudgingly, major downtown merchants joined the outcast family of chain department stores in major new suburban centers. Post-war suburban shopping centers were simply following demand, and cannot be held responsible for the decline of the American city.

MARKETPLACES

The third and final myth suggests that Americans are in the middle of a dramatic, late-century urban experiment: the introduction of the *downtown* regional shopping center. The good news is that centers are being built in downtown locations. But, again, a reality check is in order.

For centuries the "marketplace" has served as a focal point, a connector, and a magnet in towns and cities. After the eighteenth century, the enclosed arcade, a predecessor of the downtown department store, fulfilled this role. The first downtown department stores could be described as arcades with single owners operating all the shops (departments). Today, Macy's two-million-square-foot department store on 34th Street in New York is the equivalent of a shopping center, offering the customer a range of merchandise and level of excitement equal to those of most regional retail developments. Thus, in the most fundamental sense, downtown retail developments are neither new nor experimental. Rather, they are yesterday's arcades, adapted to today's urban needs and opportunities. Today, as in the past, the mall-type shopping center functions best in its historic urban setting.

In conclusion, it is important, as we approach the millennium, to understand clearly the complex forces that shaped retail development in the United States. If one ignores the genesis of the arcade, one risks designing downtown projects that don't function as successful retailing systems. If the long and complex history of American suburbanization is distorted, we may fail to achieve lasting cures for our urban ills.

What role will retail developers play in the next century? Like those who created successful arcades in the 1800s, or responded to suburban "hot spots" in the 1920s, or conceived the enclosed suburban centers in the 1950s, imaginative retail developers will continue to serve their communities best by creating competitive, functional space for merchants, and exciting environments for customers.

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