

Reimagined Retail Environments:
Redefining Shopping in Contemporary Culture

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the practice of shopping and retail, but more specifically the role of retail environments in contemporary culture. Factors such as globalization and the rise of e-commerce have changed consumer behaviors and society's participation in the culture of shopping causing the physical store to be put into question. The practice of shopping and the physical space that defines it have historically played a significant role in defining public life thus emphasizing the value of these environments. This thesis looks to reimagine the shopping experience through celebrating and prioritizing the multi-faceted culture of retail and fashion. By considering basic architectural issues (such as spatial volume, spatial relationships, and sequence), program interactions, and both physical and perceptual boundaries between occupant and experience this new version of retail reimagines shopping in a physical environments to reassert its importance within culture today.

Executive Summary

Globalization has allowed for the spread of ideas and goods both economically and culturally, to be accessible to people worldwide; however while it has transformed modern culture, western society has gradually lost its identity and originality. This idea of global monoculture has been disseminated into many aspects of life including both the built environment and the cultures that exist within. It can be argued that modern consumer culture is among these cultures that is facing this global monoculture in which the experience of shopping lacks local distinction. The experience of shopping has become so similar around the world that there is hardly a uniqueness to the activity anymore. Shopping and the physical space that defines it has played a pivotal role in the development and evolution of society. From the early arcades and the department store to the shopping centers and main street, shopping has been an integral part of society. However, the 21st century has introduced new innovations and technologies that are drastically changing the way society participates in the culture of shopping.

With new e-commerce platforms transforming the way people shop, buying goods has never been so easy. The convenience and ease of online shopping allows people to shop at their fingertips or from the comfort of their home, though with this new convenience, the physical shop has become superfluous. The past decade has seen an influx of store closures and vacancies because brands are increasingly having difficulty competing with the online market. In an effort to maintain the success of their physical stores and continue to generate foot traffic, retailers have employed various tactics that include, but are not limited to, cross programming, interactive technology, and immersive environments. These methods demonstrate a widespread response to try to reinvigorate the physical retail environment. While these tactics have been successful in

introducing a new generation of retail models, they are proving to be only temporarily effective because of their heavy reliance on contemporary trends.

It has been argued that physical retail is dying and will eventually die. However, because the activity of shopping is so ingrained in daily life it will never truly disappear, but rather shift its role in society. This thesis focuses on the topic of retail, but more specifically the diminishing role of retail environments in contemporary culture. The ambition of this project is to design a shopping experience that ensures the relevance of spaces for retail in the future. By responding to the current attitude toward physical retail stores this project looks to create reasons for people to not only shop online.

In considering basic architectural issues (such as spatial volume, spatial relationships, and sequence), program interactions, and both physical and perceptual boundaries between occupant and experience this new version of retail reimagines shopping in a physical environments to reassert its importance within culture today.

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Chapter 1:

Global Monoculture

In the age of globalization, rapid urbanization and digital technology have shrunk the world and resulted in the standardization of many aspects of modern day culture. The fast-paced transformations of modern culture have created tensions between traditional values and imported ideas which is inflicting an unavoidable banality. From the built environment to cultural practices, globalized media and consumer culture have created a “sameness” that brings to light a generic universality. Globalization has allowed for the spread of ideas and goods, both economically and culturally, to be accessible to people worldwide. However, while it has its advantages, how long can society “facilitate encounters with global culture without losing [one’s] identity and originality?”¹ The global framework for cities has grown to be so uniform that both these things are becoming harder to identify and new ideas are becoming less surprising and distinctive. Berci Florian in *City as Trademark* argues that globalization might allow us to better understand other cultures worldwide, but suggests “that [markets worldwide] will gradually come to behave in the same manner and resemble one another more and more.”² While the ability to reach a wider audience is easier than ever before it has become increasingly harder to introduce new ideas and concepts that are not entirely based on the success of previous models. Moving ideas from one side of the globe to another can often change places and spaces, “rendering them identical, indistinct, and uniform, leaving one city to look like every other.”³ Cities are forced to find new ways to distinguish themselves from other cities, but when using the same basic building blocks that were “given each of them by the global monoculture” it is

¹ Florian, Berci. “The City as Trade Mark.” *Archis* #1 2001, 2001.

² Ibid.

³ Potvin, John. *The Places and Spaces of Fashion, 1800-2007*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.

not enough to generate a specific uniqueness or individuality.⁴ Society's rapid changing interests and innovations have and are posing a potential threat to the distinct activities that contribute to cultural richness.

This idea of global monoculture has been disseminated into so many other aspects of life that is not only limited to the built environment but also the cultures that exist within. Modern consumer culture, with the globalization of fashion trends and experiences, is currently facing a monoculture in which the social experience of shopping lacks a local distinction. The challenge to keep up with the most subtle changes in society often puts retail spaces in a constant crisis and the need to reinvent, reinterpret, and refashion. Even though shopping is "such an inherent part of daily life," it is also "the most unstable, most short lived, and vulnerable to the threat of decline and obsolescence."⁵ Society's attitude towards the social experience of shopping has drastically changed, and because it has expanded into practically every aspect of life, it is even harder to make it unique. Other places like museums, airports, and libraries are becoming "increasingly indistinguishable from shopping centers [because] their adoption of retail for survival has unleashed an enormous wave of commercial entrapment" turning all the people that occupy those spaces into customers.⁶ Additionally, because globalization and advanced technologies allowed for the expansion of international trade and the commerce of goods, shopping has become such a global phenomenon. While the accessibility to a global network has expanded a brand's influence, the means by which they communicate to the consumer often tends to be specific to brand standards rather than local ones. In an effort to respond to modern consumer culture, many stores are turning to the experience economy to introduce new social

⁴ Speaks, Michael. "Individuation without Identity." In *City Branding: Image Building and Building Images*. Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2002.

⁵ Koolhaas, Rem. *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*. Köln: Taschen, 2001.

⁶ Koolhaas, Rem. *Prada*. Milano: Fondazione Prada Edizioni, 2001.

experiences by emphasizing luxury, leisure, and the spectacle of display. The move towards the experience economy not only looks to redefine a brand's reputation, but also looks to revive and sustain consumer foot traffic. While the experience economy has been revolutionary in introducing a new culture for shopping, many brands have or are beginning to adopt this new approach to modern shop design, further emphasizing that shopping and the physical store are facing a perpetual monoculture.

Chapter 2: *History of Shopping*

Shopping has been an integral part of society for centuries and historically has developed alongside urbanization. From the arcade and the department store to the shopping centre and main street, the Industrial Revolution introduced new means of producing and accessing goods that ultimately enabled a new consumer culture worldwide. Society saw a major shift from a focus on the production of goods to the consumption of them, where consumption was no longer only based on necessity, but also on desire. With the construction of arcades and large scale department stores, the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a golden age of shopping. Both the arcade and the department store introduced new means of displaying, consuming, and purchasing goods.



Figure 1: The Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin



Figure 2: Wertheim Department Store, Berlin, built in 1896

The arcade became a primary destination for the emerging bourgeoisie and introduced the idea of the display of the shop. Although quickly surpassed by the success of the department store, the arcade “was a defining architecture of modernity” that “provided a vast choice of goods from around the globe to be compared and considered, if not at ones fingertips, then at least within

arms reach.”⁷ The department store, a concept first introduced by Aristide Boucicaut in his store, Le Bon Marché, played a pivotal role in the formation of a consumer society. The department store introduced a space that not only featured luxurious amenities but “functioned as a social condenser, attracting a wider range of social classes than any other type of shop.”⁸ The department store offered both a cornucopia of goods as well as leisure spaces that were meant to encourage spending more time in the store. From the street, window displays offered visual experiences that became a special attraction and didn’t require someone to physically enter. Department stores truly became the new “theaters of consumption” and society “became an audience for, and performers in, the drama.”⁹ Both the arcade and the department store were spaces that evolved in response to the expansion of mass transport and advancements in technology, which had enabled the increase of disposable income and leisure time. As pioneers of a modern consumer culture, the arcade and large-scale department store were only the beginning of the changing landscape of physical shopping spaces.

The arcade and department store were extremely influential models for the physical shop that eventually made their way into western culture. Following the success of the arcade and the department store during the mid-20th century, the development of the shopping center and main street took center stage and began transforming urban and suburban landscapes. The arcade and the department store evolved into the suburban shopping centre while main street transformed city streets into shopping corridors to accommodate the growing social experience.

⁷ Andrews, Deborah C., ed. *Shopping: Material Culture Perspectives*. University of Delaware Press, 2015, p. 76.

⁸ Ibid, 18.

⁹ Zukin, Sharon. “A Brief History of Shopping.” In *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture*, 11–34. New York, NY: Routledge, 2004.



Figure 3: The Mall at Rockingham Park
in Salem, NH



Figure 4: Main Street Shopping

In the city centers, main streets grew to be collections of boutique and one-off stores that occupied a commercial street in which passerby's could "gaze upon the artfully displayed goods and be lured inside."¹⁰ Storefront after storefront, main street quickly became synonymous with all things commercial, but more specifically all things retail. Window displays offered visual experiences that became a special attraction and didn't require someone to physically enter the store. Outside the city however, due to the rapid growth of suburban populations in the postwar years, the shopping mall became the new model for retail consumption. Developed in opposition to main street and city center shopping, the shopping mall was "premised on cheap land outside the city, but close to motorized shoppers and, with its moat of parking, dissociated even from its suburban context."¹¹ Though outside of city centers, the shopping mall was intended to act as a civic space similarly to its forebears like the Greek agora or the marketplace. The mall was such a success because it redefined the public shopping experience by combining the leisure and freedom of an arcade street with a cornucopia of goods like a department store all in one enclosed space. The mall enabled many new experiences for consumption and thrived in the

¹⁰ Andrews, *Shopping: Material Culture Perspectives*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 26.

suburban landscape. In the time after industrialism, the middle class rose to become global citizens and they did so through consumerism at the mall. The late 20th century was “the heyday of the mall as a cultural symbol and a commercial powerhouse” and “Americans loved malls, [but] then they loved to hate them.”¹² The age of the internet and online platforms changed physical retail landscapes forever, however, gradually displaced the importance of the physical store.

¹² Bogost, Ian. “When Malls Saved the Suburbs From Despair.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, February 26, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/02/when-malls-saved-cities-from-capitalism/553610/>.

Chapter 3:

Shopping in Contemporary Culture

The 21st century introduced online shopping into modern consumer culture where buying anything could be done online faster and easier than in a physical store. The malls and main streets of the mid-20th century suddenly found themselves competing with the convenience of typing a keyword into a search box and getting an infinite variety of a single item. Shopping has evolved into a significantly more leisurely activity than ever before. With the rise of e-commerce and the internet, society's attitude towards the social experience of shopping has drastically evolved. These changes in consumer behaviors have challenged contemporary retail spaces to redefine their meaning in both urban and suburban contexts. What used to be a public social activity has now been revolutionized causing brick and mortar stores to face unprecedented challenges. While there is certain ease and convenience associated with online shopping, there is an obvious lack of social and sensory aspects that comes with shopping in person. From being able to walk through a storefront, interact with employees, feel the material of the clothing, or physically purchase an item, going shopping in a store is meant to be “a place to learn about contemporary social values through channels of human enterprise.”¹³

E-commerce has been on the rise for the past few decades beginning as early as the 1990's, however in the 21st century, it gained even more popularity. With “companies like Amazon and Walmart [serving] as catalysts to the e-commerce boom,” buying things online has become the new normal and physical stores are facing the challenge of finding their way in this rapidly changing retail world.¹⁴ The traditional means of shopping no longer resonates with

¹³ Ibid, 29.

¹⁴ Biron, Bethany. “The Last Decade Was Devastating for the Retail Industry. Here's How the Retail Apocalypse Played out.” Business Insider. Business Insider, December 23, 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/retail-apocalypse-last-decade-timeline-2019-12>.

today's consumers and brands are struggling with that. City streets and shopping centers have seen unprecedented rates of vacancy in the past decade because, with the “advent of online shopping, a fixed and dedicated retail space has become superfluous.”¹⁵ Additionally, the introduction of a new types of retail business models are causing already struggling brick and mortar to lose appeal. 2019 saw an unprecedented amount of retail store closures and the same was predicted for 2020, with the rise of e-commerce and changing consumer behaviors being the key defining factors in this retail apocalypse.

Amid this ongoing ‘retail apocalypse’, there has been a widespread response by global brands to acknowledge and engage these new consumer behaviors. In attempts to continue to increase foot traffic, retailers have employed various tactics that include, but are not limited to, cross programming, interactive technology, and immersive environments.

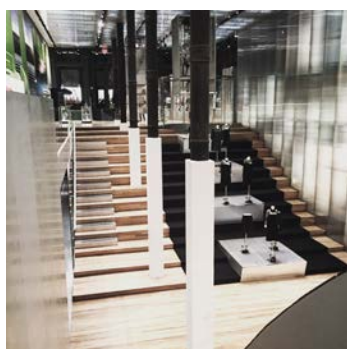


Figure 5: Prada Epicenter in Soho, NYC



Figure 6: Reformation in Soho, NYC



Figure 7: Dover Street Market in Midtown, NYC

For example, the Prada Epicenter in NYC, designed by OMA looks to introduce multiple programs by combining the exclusive boutique with public space, gallery, performance space, and laboratory in an effort to destabilize any ideas of what Prada does or will do. Stores like Reformation and Rebecca Minkoff are introducing a technology-based shopping experience to consumers which include digital screens for preparing a fitting room, mood-changing lighting

¹⁵ Andrews, *Shopping: Material Culture Perspectives*, 3.

while in fitting rooms etc. While concept stores like Dover Street Market, introduced by Rei Kawakubo of CDG, are introducing unique visual merchandising strategies and bi-annual interior changes. These methods demonstrate a clear attempt by global brands to reinvigorate the physical retail environment. And though these tactics have been successful in introducing a new generation of retail models, they are proving to be only temporarily effective because of their heavy reliance on contemporary trends. Ultimately this raises the question of how long a brand or retailer can capitalize on such tactics to sustain the success of their physical stores.

Chapter 4:

Redefining the Contemporary Shopping Experience

The activity of shopping and the physical environment that defines it have played a significant role in the development and evolution of public life. Today, most stores are primarily focused on the transaction and consumption of material goods. However, this thesis explores how the current retail paradigm could shift away from this and towards a focus on the transaction of social interaction and cultural exchange. By considering basic architectural issues (such as spatial volume, spatial relationships, and sequence), program interactions, and both physical and perceptual boundaries between occupant and experience, this new version of retail reimagines shopping in a physical environments to reassert its importance within culture today.

This thesis takes you through a series of constructed narratives that showcase the experience of various users through a repurposed vacant storefront along fifth avenue. These narratives offer an alternative response to enlivening physical retail environments through prioritizing and celebrating the multi-faceted culture of retail and fashion. Through the perspective of four different proposed users, the pedestrian, the shopper, the employee, and the designer, this new retail creates a space that fosters interaction, creativity, and the consumption of fashion.

The Pedestrian

A local who is walking along fifth avenue that finds himself intrigued by a new storefront condition. His curiosity ultimately allows him to immerse himself in a unique experience.



Figure 8

(Fig. 8) “They are walking down Fifth Avenue, towards 54th street when they notice a new storefront condition.” The storefront facade has been adapted to be more spatial than a typical window display extending the sidewalk through the building creating an interior-street like condition.



Figure 9

(Fig. 9) “They walk closer to the building to see what appears to be a stockroom through the storefront windows.” By pushing programs that are typically hidden from public view to the front of the storefront introduces a transparency of operations to the experience of the store.



Figure 10

(Fig. 10) “Walking through an arcaded pathway, they realize that they have yet to enter the building and are still on the sidewalk.” Carving a void through the existing ground floor to create an interior street that extends the sidewalk allows for visitors to engage with the building without having to physically enter if not desired.



Figure 11

(Fig. 11) “Reaching a point of various entrances, they decide to take the entrance up the stairs.” Conceptually, this space exists somewhere between interior and exterior and exaggerates the threshold between the two environments.



Figure 12

(Fig. 12) “Entering the store they are greeted by clothing racks moving upwards on their left that introduce even more store operations.” The thickened wall condition reveals clothing movements to blur the boundaries between spaces of display and spaces of storage.



Figure 13

(Fig. 13) “Wandering along, they pass windows to an additional storeroom and find people sitting and socializing with employees in the back.” Adapting the concept of the traditional storefront windows to create an interior-street like experience allows for interaction between the public and employees.



Figure 14

(Fig. 14) “Up another floor they find hanging racks with items to shop and discover that they actually push open to reveal additional shopping areas.” By adapting the idea of a traditional revolving door, new thresholds and openings are defined between the interior street and zones for shopping.

The Shopper

One who enjoys spending their time shopping and visiting stores, but who also has an appreciation for fashion and the culture that surrounds it.



Figure 15

(Fig. 15) “Entering through a main entrance that is not directly on the street, they are greeted by a mannequin-like display, clothing racks above, while to the left they see employees in the storeroom.” Reconfiguring the main entrance to be tucked into the building rather than existing directly on the street front curates the initial interaction.



Figure 16

(Fig. 16) “Finding a hanging display to shop they push it open to reveal a corridor that leads to another area.” Defining the connection between the main entrance and a primary shopping zone with a corridor that hosts secondary zones of shopping.



Figure 17

(Fig. 17) “Having found some items that they want to try on, they search for a fitting room only to realize the curtain in front of them moves to create a temporary space for a fitting room.” This new configuration of temporary and permanent walls informs that the conventional zones for fitting rooms have been deconstructed and replaced by the idea of temporary spaces.



Figure 18

(Fig. 18) “Going upstairs they get a glimpse of the unique configuration of all the wall partitions on the floor below them.” Creating a secondary means of circulation for individual occupant groups allows for a more direct path in certain program zones.



Figure 19

(Fig. 19) “While trying things on they are able to interact with other shoppers who seem to have an interest in similar products.” Similar to the configuration on the ground floor, these temporary and permanent wall partitions allows for new interactions between public and private areas.



Figure 20

(Fig. 20) “Exiting the shopping area they are greeted by common areas for employees and designers to sit and work/eat.” Having workspace overlooking the triple height atrium not only allows for additional engagement with the rest of the building, but spatially interlocks programs to foster interaction between different occupant groups.



Figure 21

(Fig. 21) “Going upstairs they find a runway show to be going on which they can either sit and watch or keep walking around.” Placing the runway above the atrium to create another double height space provides an unusual vantage point above the runway for emphasized interaction between pedestrian/shopper with the designer.



Figure 22

(Fig. 22) “Instead of watching the runway show, they go outside to the balcony to find themselves overlooking fifth avenue.” Opening up the existing facade to create an outdoor space allows for occupants to engage more with the surrounding contexts and introduce a zone that extends the duration of ones visit.

The Employee

Someone who works in the store, but also plays a role in the performance/experience by acting as a representative of both the brands and the culture of shopping.



Figure 23



Figure 24

(Fig. 23, 24) “They work in the storerooms, organizing, unpacking, and preparing items to stock the floors.” By placing the traditional storeroom in the front of the building and adjacent to shopping zones, it exposes store operations to the public eye. The open nature of the partitions between the employee and public areas allows for interaction between the different occupant groups.



Figure 25



Figure 26

(Fig. 25, 26) “They work in the side rooms to pack customers purchases and also work at the pickup counter to deliver items from checkout chute to the shopper.” Introducing adjacent programs for the employees to partake in that the shoppers and pedestrians can see in order to engage occupant groups.

The Designer

A creative who fabricates the art of everyday life from clothing to accessories, she utilizes this space to foster her full creative potential by surrounding herself with the culture of the fashion industry.



Figure 27



Figure 28

(Fig. 27, 28) “They work in the ateliers that overlook the store. They have access to a material library with an expansive range of materials, and a material laboratory so they can experiment with various fabrication techniques.” Adding programs to support occupants other than the pedestrians and shoppers allows for a collaboration between the two sides of the fashion industry.



Figure 29



Figure 30

(Fig. 29, 30) “Taking advantage of the proximity to consumers, they collaborate with shoppers to create custom looks and showcase their own designs.” The interlocking of programs introduces additional program interactions and overall engagement with occupant groups.

Conclusion

The way in which society participates in the culture of shopping is constantly evolving. Now more than ever, designers need to reimagine spaces and experiences to fit into the changing landscapes of the modern world. The retail store is one of the many physical environments that is struggling to find its place in contemporary society. The traditional shopping experience that once changed the meaning of public life is no longer resonating with contemporary consumers. This project looks at how physical retail environments can be reimaged to cater to new experiences in the fashion and shopping industry. By taking the traditional shopping experience that is focused on material transaction and reimagining it to become a place for cultural exchange begins to introduce new interactions and engagements that prioritize and celebrate the multi-faceted culture of shopping.

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