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Shopping Towns, Megamalls and the Future of the City

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Archeology of the Shopping Mall

In 1943, the US-American journal *Architectural Forum* invited Victor Gruen and his partner Elsie Krummeck to take part in an exchange of grand visions for postwar city planning. The editors of the issue "Architecture 194X" called upon acclaimed modernists like Mies van der Rohe and Charles Eames to design parts of a model modernist city for the year 194x, the unknown year, when WW II would end.¹ They asked Gruen and Krummeck to develop the prototype for a regional shopping center, which they located at the periphery of an unidentified city. Situated in between two major highways, it was meant to complement the downtown shopping street. "How can shopping be made more inviting," the editors asked Gruen and Krummeck, who, at the time of the competition, were mainly known for the design of spectacular boutiques on Fifth Avenue and the much praised design a national chain store.²

With Elsie Krummeck focusing on design and Victor Gruen on writing, the couple responded to the initial call by proposing a shopping center that by far exceeded the scheme laid out by the editors. The proposal, Gruen later argued, reflected their own frustration with Los Angeles' shopping landscape, where long distances in between stores, traffic jams, and a lack of pedestrian spaces turned shopping into a painful chore. While convinced that Los Angeles was the blueprint for "an automotive-rich postwar America"³, Gruen and Krummeck modelled their proposal after the old, European market square. With this reference in mind, they suggested to introduce two significant innovations: They proposed to separate the parking space from the shopping area and to combine commercial and civic functions.⁴ Their design was organized around a green plaza that allowed visitors to stroll and relax in garden

¹ M. Jeffrey Hardwick, *Mall Maker. Victor Gruen, Architect of the American Dream*, Philadelphia 2004, 125

² Victor Gruen, *Centers of the Urban Environment. Survival of the Cities*. Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York 1973, 15

³ Hardwick 2004, 82.

⁴ Gruen (1971), LoCVGC, box 77.

restaurants, milk-bars and in front of music stands. The complex encompassed 28 stores and 13 public facilities; the public facilities included a library, nursing school, post office, game-room, theatre, clubhouse, auditorium and stables for ponies.⁵

When the editors insisted on the concept of a small, neighborhood shopping center, Gruen and Krummeck responded with what later would be recognized as a significant adjustment: They discarded the idea of the court yard and proposed a circular building made out of glass. The fully enclosed complex was surrounded first by a pedestrian path and then by a parking ring. The editors of *Architectural Forum* hated this idea; they claimed that without a courtyard shoppers would have no place to linger and stroll.⁶ In the end, Gruen and Krummeck submitted the design of a conventional shopping center that was organized around a green courtyard in a U-shaped form. Obviously, the forces that led to the enthusiastic appraisal of the self-contained shopping environment a few years later were not in place yet. It was not until the mid fifties that Gruen was able to convince a leading department store to invest in a fully enclosed shopping space. The overall evaluation of Gruen's architecture of enclosure drastically changed – but what exactly enabled this turn towards introversion?

Postwar US-America

The transformation of shopping spaces designed by Gruen and Krummeck can today be interpreted as part of the tectonic shift that reorganized the political and cultural landscape of postwar US-America. Between the mid-1940s and 1957, in the course of the emergence of a radically bi-polar world, the collective morale of the American nation turned from a self-affirming celebration of the end of the WWII to an anxious expectation of total war. The common fear of the Third World War was often compared with a "low-grade fever that the nation could not shake".⁷ In a context so thoroughly saturated by fear, the so-called "philosophy of containment" provided a powerful framework that allowed to control as much as to feed these collective fears. And the hermetically enclosed shopping centre offered a concrete symbol for this philosophy, combining two central functions: inwardly, in other

⁵ Victor Gruen, *Shopping Towns USA, The Planning of Shopping Centers*, with Larry Smith. Reinhold Publishing: New York 1960.

⁶ Hardwick 2004, 82.

⁷ Philip Taubman, *Secret Empire: Eisenhower, the CIA, and the Hidden Story of America's Space Espionage*, New York 2003. This quotation and all subsequent quotations from English language sources have been translated back into English from German -- trans.

words towards the shoppers, the centre signalled safety, shelter, and retreat. It provided the uprooted residents of the developments built from scratch with a meaningful, affective anchor. Outwardly, i.e., towards the rival Soviet Union and communist sympathizers, the centre signalled the superiority of capitalism; it was understood as the material proof of the principles of social egalitarianism and the freedom of choice considered inherent in consumerism.

With its iconography of a bunker, the shopping center translated the political strategy of containment into space, and thereby established the material condition for further, subtler forms of social and cultural containment. The shopping centre underpinned for example the "containment" of women, who after the return of the male soldiers after the WWII retreated from the labor market and invested their labour force in reproductive work, housework, and consumption. In addition, it offered white suburbanites a controlled safety zone that, while simulating urbanity, also guaranteed homogeneity. Because of this constellation, the history of the shopping centre is inevitably linked to the history of racial segregation.

Northland Center, Detroit

According to Gruen, he first made contact with the leading department store, J. L. Hudson, in 1948 during an emergency landing in the city of Detroit. After paying a brief visit to the Downtown Hudson department store, Gruen wrote a letter to the company's president, urging him to take seriously the migration to Detroit's outskirts and to open outlets in the expanding suburbs.⁸ Three years later, Gruen and his partners presented Hudson with a 20-year programme that proposed to build four regional shopping centres: According to Gruen, Eastland, Northland, Southland, and Westland Centre were "crystallization points for suburbia's community life".⁹ The masterplan, Gruen argued, showed how four regional shopping centers, "can be located away from the industrial targets to serve peacetime needs and, if necessary, act as emergency 'defense welfare' centers for rehabilitation, relocation, first-aid."¹⁰

The shopping centre and, subsequently, the shopping mall were conceived at the intersection between Cold War politics and capitalist industrial culture. They are the children of postwar

⁸ Hardwick, *Mall Maker*, 106.

⁹ Gruen/Smith, *Shopping Towns*.

¹⁰ "The Architect and Civil Defense," in: *Progressive Architecture*, Sept. 1951.

anxieties and consumerist dreams and, as such, illustrate the tension between the fear of total annihilation and the euphoria of the consumer utopia.¹¹ It is no coincidence that in the US the first shopping centre was built at the moment, when the nation reached its economic climax and citizens debated passionately the pros and cons of bunkers versus evacuation zones. In 1953, 145.000 Americans had a new telephone installed, 600.000 Americans purchased a new television set, and half a million a new car.¹²

Already during the WWII, president Roosevelt had repeatedly mobilized the consumer home front for military ends. In Europe, many US-American soldiers fought not only against the National Socialist regime, but also for the "American way of life", in other words for television sets, washing machines, and cars. After the war, the ideology of consumerism formed the central ingredient of the American lifestyle. The postwar ideal of the US citizen, or to be more precise, that of the female US citizen, was born in this context: consumption was considered a private pleasure as well as a civic duty.¹³

This specific nexus of forces inspired Gruen to think big. Northland Centre was the first of the four centres to be realized in the outskirts of Detroit. The 30 million dollar complex arranged five buildings in a U-form shape around a courtyard that was fitted with fountains, benches, sculptures, and colonnades. At Northland Centre, Gruen was finally able to realize some of the architectonic elements that he had designed with his previous wife and partner Elsie Krummeck for the project "Architecture 194x". Surrounded by an extensive parking lot and a private highway, the complex encompassed a department store, up to one hundred stores and numerous civic facilities including a nursery, conference rooms, and a zoo. It was, Gruen enthused at the opening on March 22, 1954, the "first shopping centre of the future".¹⁴

It was hardly by coincidence that Gruen first realized his grand vision in the city of Detroit. With two million residents, Detroit hosted the "Big Three" of the automobile industry: The presence of Chrysler, Ford and General Motors had, over the years, given rise to an affluent

¹¹ Timothy Mennel, "Victor Gruen and the Construction of Cold War Utopias", in: *Journal of Planning History*, 3, 2 (2004), 116-150.

¹² Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways. Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life*, New York 1997.

¹³ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic. The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, New York 2003, 119.

¹⁴ Northland Center, VG's Speech at press preview, Speech Nr. 9, Northland, March 15, 1954, LoCVGC, box 81, Vol. A, 1943-1956.

middle class. Motown was known as an economic paradise, and it was also considered a likely target of a nuclear attack. The Ford Company provided employees with shelters, Detroit's Civil Defense wardens trained volunteers on emergency treatment, and the city promoted an aggressive decentralization plan.¹⁵

In effect, Detroit was regarded as a US-wide model for suburbanization. In 1941, congress had passed the Serviceman Readjustment Act (SRA) casually called G.I. Bill. In anticipation of a postwar housing crisis, the bill offered soldiers discharged from military service a federal mortgage guarantee, which enabled them to buy houses without down payment. Making use of this program, five million veterans become private homeowners. But in contrast to the prevalent rhetoric, the so-called democratization of home-ownership was based on distinct limitations: Until the late fifties, it was virtually impossible for Blacks to buy into suburban developments. In addition, following the philosophy of urban renewal, the streets that created access to the suburban projects were often built straight through Afro-American working class districts – city planning aimed at creating new living space and at the same time wiping out longstanding problem zones. In 1953, President Eisenhower nominated Charles E. Wilson, the president of GM, as his defence secretary. In 1955, GM was the first US American company whose turnover exceeded the one billion dollar mark; in the same year, GM proudly announced the destruction of some public tram networks, introducing a decisive step towards the privatization of the transportation industry.¹⁶ During the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Northland Centre in 2004, the *Detroit Free Press* recalled mayors and real estate agents that had obstructed Afro-Americans and other ethnic minorities from settling in the new suburban areas. If African-Americans did make an attempt to move into Detroit's suburbs, their houses were often attacked by the neighbours.¹⁷

Situated in these anxiously protected communities, the first regional shopping centres provided white suburbanites with a safe and clean microcosm that permitted them to withdraw completely from downtown shopping streets. Gruen had correctly diagnosed suburbia's need for sociability, but he had underestimated its racial underpinning. While the shopping centres were indeed designed against the backdrop of Cold War fears and the euphoria of the consumer utopia, their expansion was fuelled by the need for geographic

¹⁵ *The Detroit News*, April 17, 1951.

¹⁶ Shrinking Cities, www.shrinkingcities.com/detroit.0.html, accessed: 28. 7. 2005.

¹⁷ Sheryl James, "Frenzy of Change. How Northland, now 50, jumpstarted suburbs' growth", in: *Detroit Free Press*, March 18, 2004.

insulation and the attendant need for the strategic "containment" of Afro-Americans in the inner cities.

Public subsidies blatantly supported these trends. When in 1954 the nationwide desegregation of schools triggered massive white flight and a subsequent wave of suburban development, the Eisenhower government rewarded the owners of shopping centres with a promising bonus: A federal program called "accelerated depreciation" allowed now developers nationwide to write off construction costs of new business buildings and even claim losses against unrelated income. Since the program was only available for new construction, it prompted an unprecedented mushrooming of shopping centers. Immediately after this programme was approved, 25 new regional shopping centres were built in the USA.¹⁸

¹⁸ Thomas W. Hanchett, "U. S. Tax Policy and the Shopping-Center Boom of the 1950s and 1960s", in: *American Historical Review*, 101 (1996), 1082-1110.

Southdale Center, Minnesota

In 1952, while Gruen was still working on the total reconstruction of Detroit's suburbs, the owner of the Dayton department store in Minnesota commissioned Gruen to develop a department store that would finally comply with the new, suburban lifestyle. Gruen subsequently suggested building "a completely new community", a whole city in other words. He designed a project consisting of several apartment blocks, private houses, a park, medical centre, lake, street network, and a unique shopping centre.¹⁹ Modelled after the "Galeria" in Milan, Gruen developed what would go down in history as the world's first completely enclosed and air-conditioned shopping mall. The complex was organized around a covered, brightly light, two-storey atrium that combined two department stores, 72 shops and a series of non-commercial places.

When the Southdale Center opened in 1956, the press celebrated the 20 million dollar complex as a world success. The local press celebrated the creation of a "complete living environment," *Architectural Record* praised the "Better Outdoors Indoors."²⁰ But only one year after the opening, the local press *Minneapolis Minn. Tribune* published an article, hinting at a potential flaw in Gruen's premise: Entitled "Suburb or Loop? Which direction is Mrs. Shopper going?" the newspaper observed that with the introduction of the shopping center "Mrs. Minneapolis Housewife" had more retail choices. She could dress up and go downtown, or, in case she was in a hurry, she could just "pile the children in the car and go shopping – with her hair still in curlers". Because suburbia's shopping centers were "conventional, casual", the magazine concluded, the "future belongs to the shopping center."²¹

Gruen finally enabled suburbia's housewives to turn their backs on downtown shopping areas. The shopping mall offered "Mrs Shopper" as well as all those other people positioned outside of the labor market – children, pensioners, and youths – a place to stay. However, embedded in the fifties' distinct interlocking of gender politics and cold war agendas, the shopping mall ultimately provided women with shelter as well as with "containment". It offered literal shelter to those afraid of an attack; and it promised emotional shelter to those suffering from suburban loneliness, displacement, and boredom. There is no doubt that the

¹⁹ Hardwick, *Mall Maker*.

²⁰ Minneapolis Morning Tribune, June 18, 1952. "Design for a Better Putdoors Indoors", *Architectural Record*, June 1962.

²¹ "Suburb or Loop? Which direction is Mrs. Shopper going?", in: *Minneapolis Minn. Tribune*, Jan. 6, 1957. Victor Gruen, VGB OV 5.

shopping mall eased the lives of women as the nation's reproductive labourers, but it also reaffirmed the traditional definition of women as housewives and car-takers as much as it confirmed their ascription to consumer spaces. Gruen's diagnosis of suburbia's growing isolation had been correct, but once again had underestimated the political pull that drove suburbia's compartmentalization. In 1960, in his book *Shopping Towns USA. The Planning of Shopping Centres*, Gruen realized: "Suburbia had become an arid land inhabited during the day almost entirely by women and children and strictly compartmentalized by family income, social, religious, and racial background."²²

The Malling of America

In 1957, one year after the opening of the Southdale Centre and three years after the passing of the program called accelerated depreciation, 940 shopping centres opened across the USA. By 1960, the number had doubled and continued to do so annually until 1963. By now, many critics of suburbanization, including Gruen, had long recognized that the ideal type mall-matrix had failed with respect to two originally proposed goals: Rather than supplementing, as predicted, the economy of the inner city, it siphoned off valuable resources. In addition, its contribution to civic activities in the suburbs was limited. Over the course of ten years, all the civic spaces that Gruen had inscribed into his shopping centers and malls had been transformed into commercial spaces.

In the early forties, Gruen had argued that all major European cities were built upon a solid combination of commercial and social space. Facing the extensive mono-functional agglomerations in US-America, he proposed to transpose the concept of the European market square into the sprawling suburbscape. But when Gruen was able to realize his architectural vision, the shopping center now resembled something that was much larger than originally anticipated. Between Gruen's first design from the year 1943 and the mushrooming of shopping centres in the late fifties, the role of consumerism changed fundamentally: Consumerism was not longer *a* driving force but *the* driving force in postwar America. This is why Gruen's biography is closely linked with one of the tragedies of postwar capitalism: Within a short period of time, civic spaces became absorbed by commercial spaces, many of which started to simulate public space. This is the reason why Gruen claimed in his unpublished biography that real estate businesses had high-jacked his concept of

²² Gruen/Smith, *Shopping Towns*, 21.

shopping towns and reduced them to “machines for selling.” He stated that he “disclaimed paternity once and for all” and refused to “pay alimony to those bastard developments.”²³

The shopping mall was, William Kowinski argues, the culmination of the American dream, “both decent and dement; the fulfillment, the mode of the postwar paradise.”²⁴ It offered a kind of mega-stage upon which the drama of the “American Way of Life” could be played out. As enthusiastic master of ceremonies in a Viennese political cabaret, Victor Gruen had gained in-depth experience on the art of staging. From 1926 to 1934, the trained bricklayer was busy modernizing the flats and shops of Jewish friends during the day; at night, he devoted himself to the fine line between political activism, anti-fascism and entertainment. Gruen wrote poems, popular plays, and pamphlets; he moderated evening shows. After he managed to escape Austria four months after the so-called Anschluss, he first united his cabaret friends in the Refugee Artists Group on Broadway in New York. But despite success and raving reviews, he then opted for a return to architecture. He seemingly longed for the designing of more spectacular stages that, by means of an abstract modernism on the one hand and a groundbreaking degree of spatial manipulation on the other, promised unimagined opportunities for performative enactments.²⁵

In 1962, disgusted by the implications of his interventions, Gruen turned towards the neglected downtowns, which were suffering from a loss of capital and the flight of middle class residents. At every turn, Gruen was guided by a strong belief in the integrative power of the old market square as a place for social interaction and an intuitive understanding of the city as a stage. So when Gruen was hired to confront an urban crisis in Rochester, New York, he engineered a new blueprint for inner city redevelopment by malling the downtown district, and surrounding it with a ring that should insulated downtown from the intrusion of the car. Finally, the city of Rochester cheered in its promotional film, the city “made peace with the shopping center.”²⁶

²³ Gruen 1964, 222; Victor Gruen, “Shopping Centers: Why, Where, How?”, February 28, 1978, speech before Third Annual European Conference of the International Council of Shopping Centers, London; LoCVGC, box 78.

²⁴ William Severini Kowinski, *The Mall of America. An Inside Look at the Great Consumer Paradise*, New York 1985.

²⁵ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping. Cinema and The Postmodern*, Berkeley 1993, 57.

²⁶ Rochester: A City of Quality, Part II (1963),

The World as Shopping Mall

In the 70s, when Gruen had long realized his misconceptions and was working with two ecological foundations in Los Angeles and in Vienna on the idea of sustainable city development, the shopping center became an integrated feature of US-American suburban life. In 1974, 15,000 shopping centers accounted for nearly half the nation's retail sales, and 800 regional malls accounted for nearly a third of this total.²⁷ As the shopping mall prospered, the US filmmaker George Romero shocked his audience with a darkly funny interpretation of postwar consumerism: He set his gruesome battle between zombies, "normal" humans, and a gang of violent bikers in an abandoned shopping mall, where the streams of blood followed the light melodies of background music. Zombies return to the mall, one of the central characters recognizes, because of the residual connection they feel to this place: "They remember that they want to be here." Seeking refuge in the shopping mall, another protagonist recognizes the zombies as part of herself. "They are us", she muses, and the line captures the core idea of the movie's take on American consumerism –that the ideology of consumption is all-inclusive.

In 1978, when the movie *Dawn of the Dead* was released, most US-Americans shopped in malls but critical evaluations of mall life were still rare. It was not until 1984, when 23,000 shopping malls were strewn across the US-consumer landscape, that Jerry Jacobs tried to make sense of this new consumer space. In his book, *The Mall. An Attempted Escape from Everyday Life*, Jacobs proposed, following Durkheim, that the mall creates narrow social worlds that reflected the intolerance of an enclosing society.²⁸ One year later, William Severini Kowinski concluded in his book, *The Mall of America. An Inside Look at the Great Consumer Paradise*, that the essence of the mall was control.²⁹ Both books shared a common, flawed, premise: They interpreted the shopping mall as an escape from everyday life, and not one of the dominant forms of it.

In the US, mall construction continued to flourish until the late eighties, when the economic crises combined with a saturation of the suburban mall market put the building boom on hold, and forced developers to adapt aging mall complexes. Hundreds of "ghost malls" were seen as littering the US suburbs. Some of the potential leisure ruins were "de-mallized", i.e.,

²⁷ Frieden and Sagalyn 1989, 6).

²⁸ Jacobs 1984.

²⁹ Kowinski 1985.

transformed into residential areas, corporate or collage campuses, others were “hyper-mallized”, i.e., transformed into Urban Entertainment Centers. With the spell of mall culture being broken, social criticism began to mount: In the early nineties, Mark Gottdiener analyzed the mall world as an extensive advertising magazine and Meaghan Morris, in an attempt to counter cultural pessimism, reconstructed the mythographies and personal stories fabricated by female mall visitors attempting to make do of suburban life. Sharon Zukin related shopping malls to large-scale structural changes in the economy and Robin Shields and Lauren Langman suggested a link between the construction of the built environment and consumers’ desires. Margaret Crawford investigated the shift from the concept of the world in the shopping mall to the world *as* shopping mall, where design principles developed in the context of the shopping mall now started to shape facilities such as cultural centres, leisure zones, or museums that were previously considered non-commercial.³⁰ Finally, Rem Koolhaas and Michael Sorkin mused over post-mall urbanism – the city as open air shopping mall.³¹

Variations on the Mall and the Future of the City

In the 90s, in the context of the neoliberal globalization combining neo-classical economic fundamentalism, private sector market regulation, international free trade principles and conservative family values, the shopping mall went global, and it also went Big. The largest shopping mall is currently located in Beijing, China: The Golden Resources Mall is the neon-lit anchor of 1,78 square kilometres of private development that include apartment buildings along with schools, offices and a shopping complex. In August 2008, the city of Dubai, UAE, opens what is claimed as the world’s largest shopping mall. The complex comprises apartment houses, a new “downtown” called Old Town, and the world’s highest building, the Burj Dubai. In these post-urban environments variations on the mall extend upon Gruen’s concept of engineered urbanism, the mall is supposed to provide an affective anchor for a community built from scratch. In addition, the shopping mall also provides guidance for projects in new urbanism: While the Megamalls pursue the supersizing of the mall matrix, more upscale, inconspicuous Lifestyle Centers build in affluent suburbs present themselves as just another urban streetscape. A model development here is the so-called Grove, a quant outdoor retail and entertainment complex that opened in 2002 in the city of Los Angeles. The Los Angeles based developer, Caruso Affiliated Holdings, headed by the president of the

³⁰ Crawford Margaret, “The World in a Shopping Mall,” in: Sorkin Michael (Ed), *Variations on a Theme Park. The New American City and the End of Public Space*. New York: Hill and Wang 1992, 3-30.

³¹ Zukin 1991, Sorkin 1992, Morris 1993, 295-319, Gottdiener 2001, Langman 1992, 40-82, Koolhaas et al. 2002.

Los Angeles Police Commission, hyped the project as “a 21st century adaptation of Main Street USA.” Like Megamalls Lifestyle Centers use the technologies of theming, scripting and branding to imagineer a distinct destination. Finally, the shopping mall has come to organize the redevelopment of downtowns, where Gruen’s ideas about urban planning, both influential and abused, have led to areas that serve the new gods of consumption and define consumption as the organizing principle of city planning. In effect, over time many of the redeveloped downtowns resembled the features of an extensive, outdoor mall.

Today, the prevalent variations on the mall are large-scale, privately owned, consumption-based environments built on the historic coordinates of the shopping mall. They adhere to several of the themes that gave rise to shopping centers during the booming postwar economy, but they translate these themes into the currently dominant economic, social and cultural formations: They extend upon the philosophy of containment that marked the shopping center during the Cold War era: They mean to provide values like safety and security, if necessary with military force. At the same time, these places claim the role of a collective agora; its users stress the value of community and, inadvertently, an anxiously shield off outside. In addition, these manifestations extend the relationship between space and consumption that was established in the postwar mall: Their power derives from the consumer utopia, which drove the development of the shopping mall during the post-war economic boom, when the politics of consumption promised a path to social egalitarianism and an indication of the West’s superiority over communism. Today however, in the context of a radically globalized world economy, mall variations are both a distinct manifestation, as well as a powerful engine of a large-scale transformation in de-industrialized as well as turbo-industrialized cities, wherein the boundaries between consumption and production, private and public, are increasingly perforated, and torn.

Ironically, many of these new mall variations reproduce Gruen’s original visions about the shopping mall. Many of them provide public goods and perform public functions, but these services are independent of central and local governments. In the context of neoliberal orthodoxies and the doctrine of privatization, the mall variations are true “Shopping Towns”; they are designed to integrate living into shopping, not, as Gruen had intended, shopping into living.

Because of this condition, I argue, variations on the mall are telling laboratories for the modalities of radical urban restructuring, and therefore productive anthropological sites for an analysis of neoliberal space formation. Critical analyses of urban formations and what has

been called an “actually existing neo-liberalism” expose injustices created and supported by this new, entrepreneurial form of urban governance; they distill rescaling processes that cater to an upscale consumer class while they expel, marginalize and control minority groups.³² With respect to this paradigm, David Harvey has called neoliberalism a form of creative destruction that has devastating effects on all areas of urban life. For him, neoliberalism is a means to redistribute wealth, i.e., a means of capital accumulation through the dispossession of the rights, resources, and wealth of others.³³

Following these considerations, post-Gruen mall developments pose a series of challenging questions: What does the claim to “public space” mean in the context of privately owned, profit-driven consumer complexes, what kind of public is enacted here? If mall variations are basically the corporate replacement of previously existing public streets, do these innovations indicate that today the “public” can only be consumed if it is privatized? What are the particular strategies deployed in order to legitimate and execute the productions of difference and dispossession?

In addition, mall variations exhibit a series of other tensions: In postindustrialized as well as turbo-industrialized environments, the relationship between production and consumption is redefined following the large-scale transformations in the economy. Do shopping malls now resemble a prototype “social factory”, where affective labor is invested in consumption and commodities? And, in the context of the speculative flows of transnational capital, how do the complexes manifest the relationship between the global and the local, is “locality” only the elusive product a continuous adaptation of themes? What is the role of mediation, scripting and branding in these profoundly imagineered places, how the notion of a sense of place reproduced on a daily basis?

These are a few of the questions that might inspire our analysis of the contemporary city, questions that might spike our imagination of the future of the city – a city that it is fighting for.

³² Brenner 2002.

³³ Harvey 2003 and 2006.