

DREAM WORLDS and *Malls*

Le centre commercial est le théâtre d'une société dont la marchandise est le fétiche. Là, le consommateur prend physiquement possession de l'objet du désir créé par les images médiatiques de la publicité. Les vitrines des magasins ne sont que l'ultime représentation de cette manipulation symbolique. L'architecture entière devient un écran où est projetée l'imagination mercantile de notre époque.

Imagine, if you will, the chance to design your own shopping mall. How would you think about the space? What services would you make available to the consumers you wanted to attract? Which stores would you highlight? How would you give the mall a character of its own? Would you make it like a long hallway or give it the qualities of a large and spacious arena? Are you looking for intimacy or anonymity? Do you want people to be able to see each other as they shop? Or would you prefer the kind of space which, similar to a shopping street, keeps consumers on the move and therefore less likely to interact with each other? Would you look for ways of encouraging if not creating a public space, somewhat like a square in the grand European tradition, where large numbers of people could congregate? How would you manage an environment in which the public space might take on more importance than the shops or restaurants within the mall? Should there be parks inside malls? Are they really no different than early twentieth century music halls, places of entertainment and pleasure and voyeurism?

All of these questions circle around another and perhaps more primary one. What theoretical tools will serve us best in trying to understand the mall as a fundamental part of twentieth century life and as a representation of the way in which our culture, our society, thinks about itself?



The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project

Susan Buck-Morss recently wrote a book with the above title on Walter Benjamin's examination of arcades in Europe during the late nineteenth century. She begins with a quotation from Benjamin: "We have," so says the illustrated guide to Paris from the year 1852, (providing) a complete picture of the city of the Seine and its environs, "repeatedly thought of the arcades as interior boulevards, like those they open onto. These passages, a new discovery of industrial luxury, are glass-covered, marble-walled walkways through entire blocks of buildings, the owners of which have joined together to engage in such a venture. Lining both sides of these walkways which receive their light from above are the most elegant of commodity shops, so that such an arcade is a city, a world in miniature."¹

Buck-Morss talks about Benjamin's desire to examine historical phenomena and make them talk - to bring to life the "everyday" not as text but as subject for conversation and exchange. It is, so to speak, the objects of modern day consumerism which need to be given life, not to overvalue them or even confer upon them a status which they don't deserve, but to uncover in their very existence the way in which mass culture works.

Benjamin saw cities as intensely transient places where spatial and temporal relations undergo non-stop change. The city becomes an environment of traces and memories. No sooner have you moved from one sphere of experience than you encounter another. People are in motion as are cars and trains and buses. Destinations are merely short-term stopovers in the constant flow. This sense of movement transforms reality into a dreamscape. Yet it is a reality which nonetheless services the people who use it. It is this relationship between the functional and the imaginary which I want to explore in the following short piece.

Though he may not have used the term, Benjamin was in fact approaching the analysis of malls and cities as an ethnography. He saw the covered shopping arcades of the nineteenth century as replicas of an internal consciousness, a collective dream dependent on "commodity fetishism". At the same time the malls represented all that was utopian in the projections of a nascent capitalist sphere.

Place Montreal Trust

I walk by Abercrombie and Fitch which is the prestige store of the Montreal Trust Shopping Mall and the first thing to be noted is the way it sits astride a series of escalators which open onto a cavity in the centre of the building. This large open space has a gallery at every floor which allows for and in fact encourages viewing. There are two elevators with glass windows to reinforce the sense that this is an environment where consumers should be able to watch each other. Skylights bring in natural light at a variety of different angles. The cavity is reminiscent of large exhibition halls and many of the stores are designed around the idea of theatrical display, with some storefronts recessed differently from others and with different intensities of artificial light. Artificial versus natural. There is something both strange and wondrous about the mannequins in the store windows. They are meant to stand in for the spectator/consumer. They are dressed in every possible type of clothing and assume many different physical positions. It is their gaze, the stasis in their eyes which interests me most. They simulate the potential look of "everyperson" - a desire to be perfect, to be shaped and formed in a perfect manner which is offset by the knowledge that perfection cannot be attained. The window display must capture the eye before thought - engage that curiosity which comes with watching an image, which perhaps explains why more and more windows make use of television monitors. If the screen can bring you face to face with the image you desire then the store simply becomes a quick stopover, a functional experience designed around service but not around persuasion. Of course that means less and less employees and more merchandise. Racks of goods continue from the monitor into the store which suggests that as you try on a pair of jeans, for example, you are attempting to wear the image.

The continuity between image and consumption is not as direct however, as the above argument might suggest. Window displays are part of a continuum. They are inescapable unless you never go to shopping malls or never walk around the city. Images of consumption begin in the home. The presence of television monitors slips into that continuum. It might be better to say that we are wearing the television set. We may have internalized some of its values but we can also remain resistant. Yet we are also dependent on it as a source of information. This electronic clothing is a sign system which we use to explain the choices we make both to others and to ourselves. What must be understood here is that our very notions of space and time are changed by these processes. And it would be foolish for the architect involved in the creation of a mall

not to be aware of them. "This overexposure attracts our attention inasmuch as it portrays the image of a world without antipodes, without hidden sides, a world in which opacity is no longer anything but a momentary "interlude". It must be noted however, that the illusion of proximity does not last very long. Where the polis once inaugurated a political theatre, with the agora and the forum, today there remains nothing but a cathode-ray screen, with its shadows and spectators of a community in the process of disappearing. This "cinematism" conveys the last appearance of urbanism, the last image of an urbanism without urbanity, where tact and contact yield to televisual impact..."²

Abercrombie and Fitch is very conscious of the need to theatricalize and to create a visually rich environment for its products. Its windows are like a "tableau vivant". In the window I examined a hammock with Teddy Bears on it surrounded by an artificial tree. There was a large picture of two wolves with the suggestion of a hunt. Then of course there was Spring clothing, what you might need to relax and be comfortable during the coming vacation. There was also a wooden croquet set along with other such adult games. All of this centred on the notion that the man can be the child - that play is as good as work and both are necessary for each other. The store looks as if it is trying to open its doors to the wilderness which beckons somehow beyond its borders which may explain the Teddy Bears. It does have a lot of hunting gear in the back but that seems to be more symbolic than real which is in fact precisely what the window display is promoting.

Opposite Abercrombie and Fitch is Cafe Les Palmes which takes this notion of the outside to the extreme. The kitchen is visible as are the many palm trees which sit in close proximity to a large number of false columns designed around an Egyptian motif. Thus



you can sit and eat and watch the fountain in the centre of the mall as it shoots water into the air. You can listen to the sound of that water and smell the trees and watch a chef prepare your meal. You can experience all of the elements of an environment from which you are completely detached and if that bothers you, you can go into Abercrombie and Fitch and buy something to bring you closer to the outside.

Now, I don't want to focus too heavily on the motif of inside/outside but as I have mentioned there is a tremendous skylight and it dominates the entire mall. Given the intensity and length of Montreal winters the trees, water and natural light contribute to a feeling of well-being which perhaps explains why the mall is designed as a series of galleries which you have to walk around to enter and exit. The galleries slow down the usual downtown rush and there are strategically placed seats to reinforce the idea that this is also a place of rest. Make this your second home, a place to vacation, even a place to eat. The familiar is mixed with the exotic. This explains why the kitchen of the restaurant is visible. We are at the edge of a beach. We can listen to the rush of waves even as a snow storm batters the outside. We can, so to speak, almost make our own food as we picnic. This is also part of the mentality in the self-serve basement food emporium. Everything is fast and everything is prepared but you still pick up your own food and can, if you're lucky, find a table with an umbrella to sustain the fantasy.

"The covered shopping arcades of the nineteenth century were Benjamin's central image because they were the precise material replica of the internal consciousness, or rather, the unconscious of the dreaming collective. All of the errors of bourgeois consciousness could be found there (commodity fetishism, reification, the world as "inwardness"), as well as (in fashion, prostitution, gambling) all of its utopian dreams. Moreover, the arcades were the first international style of modern architecture, hence part of the lived experience of a worldwide, metropolitan generation."³

For Benjamin, although this quote does not suggest it, the new material world of the arcade led to a reenactment of all that was dreary about everyday life. This is perhaps one of Benjamin's most important insights. As cities have become depopulated, the mall in the city centre has become a new public space centred on eating and consuming. This all takes place within the context of the televisual, within the context of images. It is not so much that the images satisfy a fantasy as they fit into a pre-existent set of dreams about money and material wealth. Images transform architectural design into a play with surfaces where stores allow viewers to enter and experience the advertisements which they have seen elsewhere. Malls are like a forest of symbols and signs with direction markers pointing every which way. This in fact may be at the heart of their attractiveness. For as the urban landscape becomes denaturalized our culture will have to find a new way to bring back the natural configurations which it has eliminated. But this new nature will imitate not reproduce, simulate not reenact.



There is a need to see malls not as reflections of some low cultural activity not worthy of comment, but as the very essence of where our culture is defining itself. They are a symptomatic map as much of conscious as unconscious needs and activities. Thus the palm trees at Montreal Trust and the ones in San Diego effectively join together. A picture is assembled which confirms a continuity between the home and the market-place, between various levels of artifice and nature. "The arcades, as houses without exteriors were themselves, just like dreams. All collective architecture of the nineteenth century provides housing for the dreaming collective: arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax-figure cabinets, casinos, railroad stations, - as well as museums, apartment interiors, department stores and public spas."⁴

The architectural becomes a scaffolding onto which the body maps itself. And this body of the late twentieth century inhabits a space which is so close to a dream world that as Benjamin suggests, the fantasy needs to be recounted, narrativised, otherwise we will never understand its effects.

Notes:

1. Walter Benjamin, quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1989) p. 3.
2. Paul Virilio, "The Overexposed City," in *Zone 1/2*, p. 23.
3. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, p. 39.
4. Ibid, p. 271.

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