

Shopping Centers and Sprawl

Emil Pocock

By Zoë Diaz-Martin

The interesting, interdisciplinary aspect of smart growth makes it a topic that explores seemingly obscure and unimportant features of daily life, revealing their social and environmental implications. Take shopping malls for example – most Americans frequent them, use their facilities to satisfy all their consumptive needs but almost never know of the impacts of their use and are even less aware of the past history of these modern markets. Dr. Emil Pocock, however, is not most Americans. He is a Professor of History and American Studies at Eastern Connecticut State University and is perhaps one of the most informed people in regards to malls, shopping centers, their history and the issues surrounding them. His lecture entitled “Shopping Mall Sprawl” outlined the history of malls, highlighted main problems with the rise of malls, detailed the relationship between malls and downtown areas, and finally gave some key aspects of changing the shopping mall system. Although, Pocock provided excellent information on shopping malls in America, a void was left about the spread of malls abroad and the history of malls in the global context, which is an issue that is briefly explored here. From the commencement of the lecture until the finish, Pocock provided interesting information and brought forth aspects of shopping malls that were stimulating and thought provoking.

Pocock began by acknowledging how shopping malls have become ubiquitous icons for sprawl and with good reason due to how they take up large areas, are easily mass produced and are very accessible. Psychologically they are reassuring edifices providing shelter, having surveillance cameras, and because of their placement in suburbs or the certain neighborhoods having shoppers of similar background. However, their history did not begin with this aim nor were they intentionally created to embody sprawl, but did so through an evolutionary process.

Shopping centers were first seen in the early 20th century and became particularly noticeable in the early 1920s and into the 1930s. These shopping centers were not intended to serve the general public but were strategically placed outside of wealthy suburbs to meet the needs of those affluent customers. The shopping center was typically centered around services such as food markets and drugstores and featured only street parking. However, these dynamics changed with the commence of World War II as shopping center became more available to the general public and even more geared to serve under privileged citizens. During this time they were placed across from housing projects and within walking distance from homes and working sites. The post-war era brought new legislation, the tax appreciation law, that encouraged development and with that the building of shopping centers. This piece of legislation was responsible for some of the most drastic changes to the American landscape and to the evolution of shopping malls, especially during the formative years of the Cold War era.

With the intensification of the Cold War, development began with the intention of enhancing the ability to disperse the American population in case of nuclear war. This led to the building of interstate highways leading from highly populated urban areas to less densely population regions. Although these interstate highways systems were not meant to facilitate sprawl, they most certainly did. Shopping malls during this time began to be constructed around suburbs and outside city centers and the first enclosed mall was built in 1956. These enclosed shopping centers maximized economics of an area and were dually seen as new pedestrian civic centers. One drawing feature of these areas was the provision of massive parking space, which was even boasted of in post cards. These shopping malls continued to spread around the nation taking various shapes and sizes.

Pocock continued by addressing malls in America today. In terms of dimensions, most malls are considered by definition as large or more than 225,000 square feet. Of these large malls more than 1,000 are enclosed. Trends have continued and the development of malls has followed the development of suburbia. A case study highlighted Columbus, Ohio and the way in which the construction of the beltway that goes around the city and the interstate highway leading out of the city allowed for the movement of shopping centers from city centers to the outlying suburbs. In Connecticut we see the placement of malls along interstate highways in small towns that have relatively large populations. Many of the malls in America utilize large quantities of space, on average around ninety acres, equaling about thirty or forty city blocks. The largest problem with this trend in development is that it improves housing and living standards outside of city centers while neglecting older, intercity areas that are in need of more attention.

This led into the dynamics and relationship between downtown areas and shopping malls. The resultant neglect of intercity areas has led to the degradation of downtowns and unfortunately, revitalization of downtowns has limited success thus far. Some of this may be due to the stigma attached to downtowns such as their being unsafe and inconvenient because of traffic, walking and parking. Many people, especially suburbanites, find shopping malls to be easier in terms of logistics and go to them for their shopping needs, exacerbating inner city problems. Some unsuccessful case studies of revitalization efforts were the Midtown plaza in Rochester, NY that featured department stores, pedestrian walk ways, art work and a parking garage but it simply could not compete with suburbia's malls. Another was a mixed-use center that was supposed to be more of an upscale, private domain but was too exclusive, controlled and consumer-focused. Some other unsuccessful techniques have been downtown and festival events but they have not proved to be permanent solutions.

Although many efforts at revitalizing downtowns have not worked, Pocock outlined some positive aspects of the situation and some controls that aid in alleviating the negative effects of shopping malls. Construction of malls has slowed, which may be due to a loss of interest in those venues, but is more likely due to the economic downturn. The increase in “dead malls” and their consequent demolition or conversion has enabled varied use of the spaces for new health services, civic centers, theaters, new shops and so forth. Existing malls are becoming more compact. Even the Mall of America that draws people from all over the world and is a staggering seventy-two acres is considered relatively compact because of its two attached, seven story, parking garages. Some city malls have been and continue to be successful, like the Stamford Town Center or the Providence Place Mall, which do tempt suburbanites to venture into the city centers. These establishments are able to retain the presence of large department stores, which are the anchors for the mall. These anchors were what drew masses to downtown areas before their downfall.

Pocock ended his talk describing the entrenchment of malls in American society which has even been incorporated into the modern America dream of owning land, a house, a car and having a mall down the road. This has created the feeling of entitlement people have about malls in our society which has even been noted by progressive media. A radio piece entitled “A Mall Makeover” presented by Debbie Smith on National Public Radio’s show *All Things Considered* highlighted malls and specifically the recent hardship malls have encountered. Smith opens the piece stating “if you were born anytime in the past 40 years, you’ve probably spent a lot of weekends at the mall. Movies like ‘Fast Times at Ridgemont High,’ ‘Clueless,’ and ‘Valley Girl’ made cultural icons out of malls” emphasizing their entrenchment in our culture. Smith’s piece featured Pocock and after his introduction, Smith explains half jokingly “yes, in consumer-

crazed America, we have shopping mall historians.” This is even more evident in relation to the global scale; of the twenty- two largest malls in the world, four of them are found in the U.S. (Pocock 2000).

This is an issue that Pocock has also been looking into – the spread of malls worldwide and especially in Asia. In Forbes “The World’s Largest Shopping Malls”, Pocock explains that the building boom in Asia, specifically in China, Malaysia and the Philippines, has led to the development of malls and the rise in consumer’s ownership of cars has led to a “phenomenon that has stimulated demand for more destination shopping centers” (Van Riper 2008). The article “It’s a Mall World After All” in Newsweek explores reasons of why malls are being exported from America. Some consider the safety aspect of malls, which is especially important in developing countries where crime is an issue and in the same countries malls act more as “surrogate civic centers, encouraging social values that go beyond conspicuous spending” (2005). In this article Pocock reveals a negative aspect of malls in developing countries in that malls can limit social activism when he asks “What better way to control folks than to put them under a dome and in enclosed doors?” (2005). The ‘mallings’ of not only America, but of the world, is an intriguing phenomenon which will be interesting to follow up on in the future considering contemporary global social and economic situations.

Smart growth and shopping mall sprawl is becoming a global issue and it is important to identify the phenomena’s beginning to help shape solutions, which is exactly what Pocock’s lecture accomplished. Initially, this seemingly vague and unimportant topic of malls was revealed to be a complex and dynamic issue that relates to history, sociology, economics and government. Emil Pocock’s knowledge on the subject also proved to be vast and informative as his work delves into the not so obvious matter of mall sprawl and the questions surrounding it.

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OTHER APPLICABLE SITES

- Emil Pocock Homepage: <<http://www.easternct.edu/~pocock/>>
- Eastern Connecticut State University Shopping Mall and Shopping Center Studies Homepage:
<<http://nutmeg.easternct.edu/~pocock/Malls.htm>>
- Eastern Connecticut State University Shopping Center History site:
<<http://nutmeg.easternct.edu/~pocock/MallsHistory.htm>>