Destination Shopping
Defining “Destination” Retail in the New American Suburbs

Barrett S. Lane
University of Pennsylvania
CPLN 500: Prof. Eugenie L. Birch
TA: Amy Lynch
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As the suburbanization movement took hold in the years following World War II, so did the way in which retail and commercial centers catered to their audience. For years, the idea of shopping at one location to get all of one’s necessary goods was conceptualized by large downtown department stores, such as Sears & Roebuck or H.M. Macy & Co. But as retailers found more and more of their audience fleeing the cities to the suburbs, they realized that they needed to follow suit in order to maintain profits and keep their companies competitive. Now, just as the way in which individuals and families have changed their patterns of living in the suburbs, retailers and commercial developers have begun to retool their approach to catering to the suburban consumer. In the postwar years and through the 1960s and 1970s, traditional shopping centers and shopping malls were the norm across suburbs, featuring an array of different retailers anchored by one or two big box retailers or department stores. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, commercial developers began to find their niche; setting up different kinds of retail centers for different consumer groups and classes. The evolution of power centers, fashion centers, entertainment centers, and “shopping villages” reflected the changing pattern of suburban growth and the specialization that consumers now demanded from retail. Ultimately, creating retail in the suburbs and later in cities revolved around creating “destinations” in retail, and the change seen in America’s suburbs, cities, and suburban business districts forced retailers and developers to continually challenge and redefine what they saw as “destination shopping”, using consumer markets and tastes to retool their strategy.

Department stores were the first retail establishments to settle outside the major cities. Starting in the 1920s, major department stores such as Boston’s Filene’s and New York’s Saks Fifth Avenue began to open up branch locations in growing suburban communities in response to the “fast-paced growth of metropolitan areas” and the resettlement of up-market consumers (Longstreth 109, 111). These stores were not as big as their downtown counterparts, but offered enough amenities and
goods to properly serve suburban audiences. Furthermore, these branch stores followed two principle design standards that led to their success: removing themselves from established business districts and downtowns and providing ample parking (figure 1) (Longstreth 119-120). After World War II, suburbs began to grow and so did demand for more retail opportunities in the suburbs. Department stores responded by increasing their space and presence, creating “station wagon stores” to accommodate the growing number of consumers and cars (Longstreth 137). Stores such as Neiman Marcus’ branch store in University Park (near Dallas) and the Scruggs Vandervoort Barney branch store in Clayton (near St. Louis) reflected the movement of “well-heeled” consumers to the suburbs and reflected their desired to be able to access high shopping without having to travel into the nearest major city (Longstreth 137, 144). The move to upgrade store area and provide more room for retail came at a cost, at least in the eyes of critics. For years, department stores were icons of urban architecture, with fancy facades and eye-catching storefronts. This was in stark contrast to the new generation of suburban stores, which lessened the focus of exterior architecture in order to increase retail space, accommodate cars, and focus getting more merchandise into the store. Stores such as Lord and Taylor’s Eastchester store and Hutzler Brother’s Towson store were architectural eyesores compared to their inner-city relatives, but were able to carry the same amount if not more merchandise and accommodate more cars, something that this new generation of shoppers valued more than fancy display windows and curb appeal (figure 2)(Longstreth 152, 155).

As department stores made their way into the new residential frontier, a new marketplace for retail also began to emerge, one that would both embrace department stores and their culture but also give them a run for their money. Starting in the 1950s, shopping centers and shopping malls began to arrive on the scene, offering consumers a wide array of different retail options in one location (Cohen 28). Unlike department stores that sold a variety of wares under one roof, shopping malls were able to accommodate multiple vendors and retailers, giving consumer more options than ever before. A key
design feature also included orienting these new commercial centers to emulate “main streets” and existing commercial districts. One of the first shopping malls, the Northgate center in suburban Seattle, arranged stores in parallel facing each other, turning their back to the surrounding parking, mimicking classic commercial districts (Cohen 28). Shopping malls also began to incorporate department stores into their plans, first seen in suburban Detroit’s Northland Center, which featured a branch of J.L. Hudson (Cohen 31). By incorporating them as anchors, it would maximize the amount of retail choice and opportunity for consumers without having to sacrifice on ceding potential shoppers to these new shopping centers. Courtyards, public art, and landscaped gardens kept shoppers attracted and happy (figure 3)(Cohen 31).

By the end of the 1950s and leading into the 1960s, shopping malls experienced another redesign, this time creating an enclosed area that would properly define their existence and program. The Southdale Center in suburban Minneapolis was the first shopping mall to create an entirely indoor area, making the shopping experience holistic and all encompassing (Cohen 32-33). From the 1960s up until the 1980s, shopping centers and malls grew both in individual size and frequency across the North American landscape. In the early 1960s, there were only 5,000 shopping centers in the United States, accounting for $55 billion in annual sales (Cohen 55). By 1964, the number of centers increased to 7,600 and by 1980, there were more than 22,100 shopping centers (Cohen 55). Part of what made these center successful was their ability to cater to the middle-class: the typical suburban denizen (Cohen 57). Malls such as Grand Rapids’ Woodland Mall featured both department stores and mass merchandise retailers alongside specialty shops and more focused retailers (Cohen 57).

However, just as shopping malls were gaining popularity and quickly becoming the mainstay of American consumerism, several changes in the retail and demographic landscape were disrupting this newly established formula, forcing the retail industry to change again. First, the emergence of more
specialized retail outlets catering towards the younger generations; the Baby Boomers and early Gen-Xers caused mall developers and retail giants to rethink the way they sold merchandise and what kinds of merchandise to sell. As historian Nancy Cohen notes, “The once undifferentiated mass market was splintering...New chains surfaced to specialize in narrow categories” (59). Brands such as The Gap and The Limited represented the specialization this younger generation of consumers and suburbanites wanted: “stocking a limited range of goods in depth” (Cohen 60). Second, the emergence of low-cost mass merchandise stores (beyond mall anchors) such as Kmart and Wal-Mart came onto the retail scene, offering consumers a wide array of products (ranging from apparel to home goods, electronics, and specialty items) at a substantially discounted price (figure 4)(Cohen 62). These stores often anchored strip-malls or were self-sufficient, made billions annually in sales (up to $16 billion by 1970), and spun off focused and alternatively-structured retailers such as Marshall’s (apparel) or BJ’s (wholesale clubs) in their wake (Cohen 62). These new stores also played off customers who wanted the same kind of merchandise one could find at staid department stores but either couldn’t afford their prices, didn’t want to pay the higher prices, or were looking for items of lower quality (Spector 22).

Third, and most importantly, the definition of retail and the traditional consumer market was changing to reflect a more diverse, taste-specific market that wanted their commercial centers and shopping malls to reflect individual preferences and become landmark destinations, not just for shopping. In the retail arena, the emergence of programmed shopping center definitions gave developers a sense of scale, helping them determine how large they should or should not build future malls and stores. Words and phrases such as “community center”, “regional center”, and “superregional center” entered their lexicons, helping them accurately plan out new construction and help them make decisions such as how much parking to include, how much retail to allow, and what kind of consumers to plan for (coming from an age where, admittedly, developers had no clue as to how much parking one should include for new construction)(Cohen 10, 45). In the consumer sector, suburbs
were becoming more and more diverse, both in program and makeup. By the 1980s and 1990s, suburbs were still auto-centric and family-oriented, but the emergence of many corporate headquarters and business developments (not retail) brought in the arrival of skilled, professional workers and the need to create suburban business districts and retail zones near the daily workforce population (figure 5) (“Transforming Suburban Business Districts” 3). Suburban residents were also changing: the traditional family unit, while still dominant, was on the decline as singles, retirees, and immigrants were beginning to move in, representing the new wave of suburban residents (“Transforming Suburban Business Districts” 56). Furthermore, these social groups, which were long thought of as urban dwellers, had to be accounted for in future retail planning in the suburbs. The traditional mall could only do so much for these new generations and consumers that demanded more in terms of style and taste. A new approach to retail design and program needed to be implemented to reflect the change occurring on the suburban frontier.

The first challenge in redesigning retail was to better integrate it with existing commercial office and medium-high density development. Historically (in the scope of the postwar era), shopping malls were created to maximize the amount of leasable area and set aside architectural beauty and detail to bring in as many people as possible, creating a “ho-hum” look that mimicked suburban life and would be a comfortable place to shop and pass time (Jacobs 7). Furthermore, malls were isolated from residential areas; they operated on different densities compared to their surroundings and were programmatically different. However, the arrival and wave of suburban business districts and “edge cities” in the late 1980s and 1990s introduced commercial property that was intermixed with differing levels of density and programs, one that wouldn’t support previous model of strict separation of uses. New “cities” such as Tysons Corner (Washington), Plano (Dallas), and Redmond (Seattle) demonstrated the presence of medium-high density commercial and residential space within predominantly low-density residential areas (“Transforming Suburban Business Districts” 21). In an effort to capture this new market and
accommodate for the change in density, retailers and mall developers responded by making malls denser, taller, and more akin to urban structures rather than sprawling suburban ones. This design, which began in the 1970s with “vertical” malls, stacked retail in a denser arrangement, built up to fit within the profile of the edge city, placed parking inside structures as opposed to sprawled out lots, and often connected to adjacent commercial properties (Cohen 65). Malls such as the Stamford Town Center in Stamford, CT and the White Plains Galleria in White Plains were forerunners of this trend, creating structures that fit seamlessly into the dense commercial development of their respective cities, building structures up and moving parking underneath (figure 6). These projects were successful in that they not only catered to nearby residents, but also nearby office workers. They also encouraged visitors and shoppers alike to travel into suburban business districts rather than away from them.

The second challenge was to better cater to the new suburbs through carefully planned studies and designing area-appropriate retail. While suburbs were becoming more diversified in the late 20th century, malls were still blind to new suburban demographics. As a result, many of the major malls that tried to cater to everyone either went abandoned or became distinctively seedy as the new generation of suburbanites flocked to more specific shopping options that best suited their tastes. Failures to understand neighborhood demographics and suburban trends led to malls that either floundered in initial opening and operation (such as the case of Cincinnati’s Forest Fair, a mall that was too upscale for its market) or were doomed financially from the start (arguably the case of the current Meadowlands Xanadu)(Cohen 80). As previously mentioned, the new suburbs, as studied by the Urban Land Institute, saw more and more residents living in multi-family housing, delaying marriage, becoming more tolerant of alternative lifestyles and changing their view on traditional monogamy, and empowering women beyond the role of housewife and family shopper (“Transforming Suburban Business Districts” 58). Retailers needed to accommodate these changes (mall shoppers beyond family units and happy housewives), but also invest in the local community. As Geoffrey Booth, Bruce Leonard, and Michael
Pawlukiewicz point out, knowing market position to avoid failure (a la Forest Fair) is only half the battle; to get successful suburban retail and encourage the support of local residents, community support is paramount (“Ten Principles” 2, 4). As a result, suburban retail trends in the 1990s saw new commercial development that was more oriented around creating communities and senses of place that were market sensitive, offering appropriate shopping to service the community that doesn’t create “NIMBYism” or seem too out of place (“Ten Principles” 4,5).

The end result is a “lifestyle center” as opposed to a shopping mall, where the focus is on creating an inclusive community that caters to a particular area lifestyle or market rather than being a collection of disparate shops that share a common roof (Cohen 125). Lifestyle centers reflect the new suburb because they take the best of traditional downtowns (open air retail and gathering points) and carefully select properties that will do well in the area. Furthermore, while they compete with malls, they serve different purposes. Consider the case of White Marsh, Maryland. This middle-class suburb northeast of Baltimore has The White Marsh Mall and The Avenue at White Marsh (figure 7). Both host a mix of retail, dining, and entertainment options, but the layouts are entirely different. The mall is a traditional setup, anchored by Sears, JC Penney, and Macys, with an emphasis on shopping and catering to a wide catchall market (White Marsh Mall). The Avenue, on the other hand, offers far less retail and focuses more on entertainment and dining concepts to keep customers on the property longer. Additionally, The Avenue “recreates the ambiance of a traditional town center, complete with movie theatres, restaurants, street shops, and outdoor gathering points” (“Ten Principles” 2). However, while the tenants themselves cater to the surrounding middle-income market, the architecture and attention to layout and detail creates a much more upscale ambiance (“Ten Principles” 2). Essentially, The Avenue attempts to create a more intimate, personalized shopping experience that focuses more on creating a community rather than a shopping center. Additionally, more upscale lifestyle centers also exist in communities and suburbs that cater to a more up-market crowd. The Shops of Saddle Creek in
Germantown (near Memphis), Town Center Plaza in Leawood (near Kansas City), and The Avenue East Cobb (near Atlanta) one-up mid-market lifestyle centers with higher end tenants such as Talbot’s, Ann Taylor, and Williams Sonoma, feature more expensive, sit-down restaurants, and have “lavish landscaping” (figure 8) (Cohen 126,127).

Third, in the same vein that lifestyle centers were built to bring purpose to retail complexes and better reflect community surroundings, developers were challenged to create themed developments that centered around a specific arena of commercial retail (e.g. fashion, entertainment, culture, etc…). The idea of an entertainment zone blossomed in cities, of all places, with the idea of the festival marketplace in the late 1970s, a retail zone centered around a historical landmark or district where residents and visitors could shop and dine at a mix of local and chain businesses (Cohen 66). James Rouse, considered the father of the festival marketplace, developed Boston’s Faneuil Hall Marketplace, Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, and New York’s South Street Seaport, three projects that saw investment return to the cities that had been victimized years earlier with the mass outpouring of residents and retail to suburbs and by creating niche markets in the retail community (Cohen 66,67). Festival marketplaces were also successful because they took the “shopping” out of shopping centers, similar to lifestyle centers, but also added unique programs that made them attractors to both locals and visitors. In the suburbs and other cities across the county, entertainment and mixed-used centers were seen as the next logical step. They built upon the basic foundations created by lifestyle centers; creating contextual links to communities, destinations that consumers could identify with, and emphasizing place making as a major part of the experience, but they also needed something more to push themselves beyond being just another shopping center (more unique features and less Gap and Banana Republic)(Beyard et al. 76,78).
The entertainment center is a specific-focused area of complex retail development that became popular in the late 1990s as a response to the rise of fashion malls and fashion squares that dominated the 1980s and early 1990s. Many of these centers featured entertainment-focused businesses, such as movie theatres, arcades, amusement centers, or mixed-retail/entertainment properties as anchors as a way to pull in not only local populations, but regional and even visiting crowds and markets. Whereas shopping malls operate and function during the business day, entertainment centers are meant to extend beyond normal business hours, operating into the night and intent on keeping consumers on the property as long as possible. Entertainment centers are not anchored by traditional department stores or mass merchandisers, but instead with properties like Dave and Busters, AMC Movie Theatres, and Wolfgang Puck's that offer destination dining and entertainment options (Beyard et al. 84). Centers like Hollywood and Highland in Los Angeles and Downtown Disney in Lake Buena Vista are classic examples of entertainment centers: they attract both locals and visitors due to their placement in prime tourist markets, feature a mix of mainstream and specialty retail and dining, and also focus on providing an array of entertainment options (figure 9)(Beyard et al. 83). Hollywood and Highland boasts the Kodak Theatre performing space and nearby megaplexes while Downtown Disney features Cirque du Soleil and an array of on-site nightclubs (Beyard et al. 83).

Entertainment centers can even function beyond being tourist attractions, working as local catalysts to revamp suburban economies and re-establish retail dominance. In some cases, the property can function as a vertical mall, lifestyle center, and entertainment center, all in one. Such is City Center property in White Plains. In the early 2000s, the city wanted to re-establish itself as a premier residential and entertainment center in addition to having fine shopping. Developers worked with city officials to create City Center, a mixed-use high-density entertainment center that featured small branch department stores, mass retail, casual and express dining, and a huge multi-screen state of the art movie theatre as an anchor (figure 10). Additionally, the development also includes two 35-story high-
rise condominium towers and a smaller 15-story loft apartment building adjacent. Since the completion of the project in 2005, this suburban city has seen its business district improve greatly. Retail along Mamaroneck Avenue has been sustained thanks to the added foot traffic brought in, the construction of the nearby Ritz Carlton Hotel and Towers has added more upper class workers, visitors, and consumers into the area, and the construction and opening of a Wal-Mart across the street has also increased business in the downtown.

Suburbs and shopping malls have changed drastically in America over the second half of the 20th century and leading into the 21st. The simplicity of bringing big city department stores and traditional shopping centers and malls into communities and “boom-burbs” has since given way for more tailored, taste-specific retail centers that accurately define their target market. Moreover, the way in which retail and retail development has identified “place” and “destination” has changed, with its definition being used more liberally in print and marketing contexts while less so in the lexicon of planners and developers. Half a century ago, Seattle’s Northgate and Minneapolis’ Southdale were considered “destinations”, but by today’s standards, they are hardly worth traveling the extra distance to. The idea of a destination is now best suited as a retail complex that either has a far-reaching array of different retail, dining, and entertainment options (King of Prussia Mall, Garden State Plaza) or one that is so focused in one specific category and retail arena that it draws in visitors from around the region and nation (Chicago’s Navy Pier, The Forum Shops at Caesar’s Palace). The changing role and makeup of suburbs and their residents, the key demographic of shopping malls and complex, spurred this change and retailer’s needs to alter their definition of what constitutes a “destination”, and with more and more Americans of all backgrounds and classes moving into these crucial retail battlegrounds, it will be up to developers, planners, retailers, and demographers to study these evolving settlement trends, evaluate their connection with retail, and continue to redefine the retail destinations around them.
Appendix

**Figure 1: Strawbridge & Clothier Department Store, Jenkintown, PA.** Opened in the early 1930s, this is a classic example of a branch department store. Operating in the Philadelphia suburbs, this branch does not offer the scope that one would have found at the Downtown flagship store, but the store allows for parking in the rear and has enough merchandise to supply its upscale market.

**Figure 2: Lord & Taylor Department Store, Eastchester, NY.** This store typified postwar suburb department store development. The architecture lacks curb appeal but makes up for banality in increasing interior floor area and storing room for merchandise. Not seen is the vast parking lot surrounding the store.
Figure 3: Northland Center, Southfield, MI. The Northland Center, opened in 1954, was the first mall to include a major department store anchor. It also used public art, gathering spaces, and a distribution of mixed retail types to attract and retain consumers. However, the mall was still open air. Minneapolis’ Southland Center would become the first enclosed mall two years later.

Figure 4: Wal-Mart. Mass-merchandise discount chains, like Wal-Mart, posed a threat to shopping malls. These “category killers” were one-stop shopping areas where suburban residents of all backgrounds could get all their everyday and specialty needs at a low price. Wal-Mart and other stores like K-Mart and Target are sometimes found as Mall anchors, but more than often anchor strip mall retail or stand-alone.
Figure 5: Tysons Corner, VA. Edge cities such as Tysons Corner demanded a different approach to retail development. Because commercial and residential properties are intermixed here in program and density, strictly separating their use would not suffice for the given daily and permanent populations. Tysons Corner has rectified this problem by implementing a series of retail complexes (The Galleria, for one) that seamlessly blend within the mid-density fabric.

Figure 6: Stamford Town Center, Stamford, CT. Unlike its predecessors, this mall builds up rather than out. Note the presence of multiple levels in the figure along with the many escalators connecting the different floors. Because the mall is situated between high-rise hotels and office towers, it fits in well with its physical context and its retail is appropriate for up-market Fairfield County.
Figure 7: White Marsh Mall and The Avenue at White Marsh, White Marsh, MD. The White Marsh Mall (foreground) is a large catchall mall that caters to the middle-income residents of suburban North Baltimore. However, it does not create a sense of place tie in with the community. The Avenue (background) contains less shops in comparison, but has a more “main street” feel. The mall is anchored by several department stores, whereas restaurants and movie theatres anchor The Avenue.

Figure 8: Birkdale Village, near Charlotte, NC. This typical lifestyle center features a mix of residential and upscale commercial retailers catered to the high-middle income to upper-income market. Mall retail is present (such as the Victoria’s Secret in the foreground), but also present are green spaces, an attempt to blend in distinctive architecture and landscaping, and creating a sense of place.
Figure 9: Downtown Disney, Lake Buena Vista, FL. This classic example of an entertainment center makes shopping an event, using dining and entertainment to anchor the property and push activities way into the night. In the case of Downtown Disney, the markets include tourists in addition to locals. Establishments like Bongo’s Cuban Café (picture) and formerly Virgin Records entice visitors to stay longer and create a sense of vibrancy and liveliness.

Figure 10: City Center, White Plains, NY. City Center combines all three aspects of the vertical mall, lifestyle center, and entertainment center to create a day and night destination for locals in Westchester County. Potential residents can live on-site in one of the two condominium towers (pictured), catch a show at the movie theatre, shop at Target or Nordstrom Off-the-Rack, or grab a meal at Legal Sea Foods on Mamaroneck Avenue. The property has been a boon to the city’s economy and brought in a surge of new residents and millions in additional retail dollars.
Works Cited


