

GENDERED SPATIAL ORGANIZATION IN VICTOR GRUEN'S SUBURBAN SHOPPING MALL

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The social dimension of space comprises the ways in which the built environment shapes human experiences and interactions. There is a mutualistic relationship between space and power, whereby space is defined by individuals with socioeconomic and/or political power and power is subsequently upheld by the definition and organization of space. When Dolores Hayden asked: “What would a non-sexist city be like?”, she was asserting that the built environment is dictated by our society's gendered social hierarchy and that architecture represents a physical record of those at the top of this hierarchy. The built environment is comprised of the institutions and structures that benefit certain individuals and oppress others. Capitalism, as a system in which wealthy persons can sustain their privilege, and where this privilege is related to gender and race, has contributed to the construction of the built environment and continues to do so. With the rise of postwar suburbia came the proliferation of the suburban shopping centre. Shopping mall architecture had not been thoroughly considered until the architect Victor Gruen began to theorize on the construction and planning of malls, employing merchandising strategies to maximize profits. Considering the greater number of stores and services that are targeted toward women (than toward men), there seems to be a strong relationship between the shopping mall and women as a social group. However, Gruen only briefly discusses the role of women in the planning of his malls, describing them as target consumers. The exclusion of women from his planning philosophy reveals the way in which women are perceived as non-actors in society. Malls were constructed to allow women a sense of freedom, yet continued to restrict their access to places of power. Shopping malls embody the notion that the built environment is, as Leslie Kanés Weisman writes, a “form of social oppression [and] an expression of social power.”

society. Malls were constructed to allow women freedom, yet continued to restrict their access to places of power. Shopping malls embody the notion that the built environment is, as Leslie Kanes Weisman writes, a “form of social oppression [and] an expression of social power.”

Women's sociospatial confinement during the postwar era reveals a relationship between socioeconomic gender inequality and the built environment. And so, Gruen's mall architecture, defined by the planning of the mall as a totality (the mall as a single-, double-, or triple-pull plan and the situation of the centre within its suburban context), by the planning of the individual interior spaces within the mall (the organization of interior pedestrian space, the organization of consumption spaces, and the placement of stores, and the placement of stores), and by the mall's interior design, has upheld the gender hierarchy of our imperialist, capitalist patriarchy.

In current literature addressing women's relationship to the built environment, there is significant focus on the domestic sphere. The suburbs grew out of the postwar baby boom and signified the new and increasing importance of domesticity. Suburbia perpetuated the utopic vision of American domesticity that developed alongside the Cold War, where families retreated into postwar affluence and consumerism. After the Second World War, middle-class women were largely removed from their positions in the workforce. Confined to large homes, far away from city centres, these women became homemakers, which developed as a profession in its own way. A homemaker's place of work was in the home, but she was tasked with child rearing and other domestic chores, tasks that necessitated consumption. Thus, the shopping centre became a spatial extension of her life as a homemaker. Betty Friedan, in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, discusses “housewifery” as comprising the tasks related to married women, most of whom are unemployed and with multiple children. As the role of housewife or homemaker came to be wholly singular identities, the work associated with these identities grew to be more time consuming. Friedan also comments on the open plans of many suburban houses: the absence of separation between the living room, dining room, and kitchen, entraps housewives in a homogenized domestic space. Understanding women's relationship to the home is necessary for understanding their relationship to the built environment outside of the home.

Places of consumption prior to the establishment of the suburban shopping mall had already been gendered. The department store was recognized to be a place most frequented by women and was thus organized to accommodate a segregation of men and women. Men's products were sold on ground floors, near principle exits, and women's products occupied the remaining spaces within the building. Gruen's mall adopts the gendered shopping experience of the department store, perpetuating the gendering of shopping itself. An analysis of his work establishes a relationship between the proliferation of suburbia, gender-based oppression, and the introduction Gruen's shopping mall. And because his model has been so widely adopted, he is responsible, or at least complicit, in the perpetuation of gender hierarchies.

In *Shopping Towns USA*, Victor Gruen's written work discussing the planning of suburban shopping centres, the mall is described as the new suburban city centre. Gruen recognized that shopping malls held great potential in contributing to the civic and commercial liveliness of the suburbs and so, the primary objective of the shopping mall was to generate capital within the suburban context, that is, outside of the city centres. Northland Center in Detroit and Southdale Center in Edina, a suburb of Minneapolis, were Gruen's first two mall projects and exhibit very clearly his strict merchandising planning philosophy. Organization of the mall was carefully considered to maximize commercial opportunities, employing the use of “magnets”, in the form of big retail chains, as points of attraction. Northland Center (*Figure 1*) featured a single-pull plan, with one major attractor, the department store Hudson's, situated at the centre of the mall, around which pedestrian traffic would constantly flow. Southdale Center (*Figure 2*) featured a double-pull plan, with two major attractors situated at opposite ends of the mall, directing traffic from one end of the shopping centre to the other. Southdale, being the first enclosed shopping mall, embodied the notion of convenience and represented the ideal consumption space for women. It gave women the opportunity to leave their homes and to shop, in a spacious, temperature-controlled environment, regardless of season. Gruen's shopping centre, as a new building typology, promised women convenience. But what may have been convenient for women – the mall having a great number of stores, each offering different products and concentrated into one location – was, above all, commercially beneficial for big businesses.

Merchandising planning was created and implemented to assure commercial effectiveness in the mall and to shift important economic activity away from city centres. The various design and planning strategies employed in mall architecture have been used to maximize trade opportunities and to constitute the shopping centre as a suburban city centre and a hub of entertainment. Essentially, the shopping mall acted as a tool for developing the suburbs

private, unpaid work of mothers, homemakers, and housewives, and so the freedom promised by shopping malls, or rather, by consumption within the malls, was nothing more than a lie.

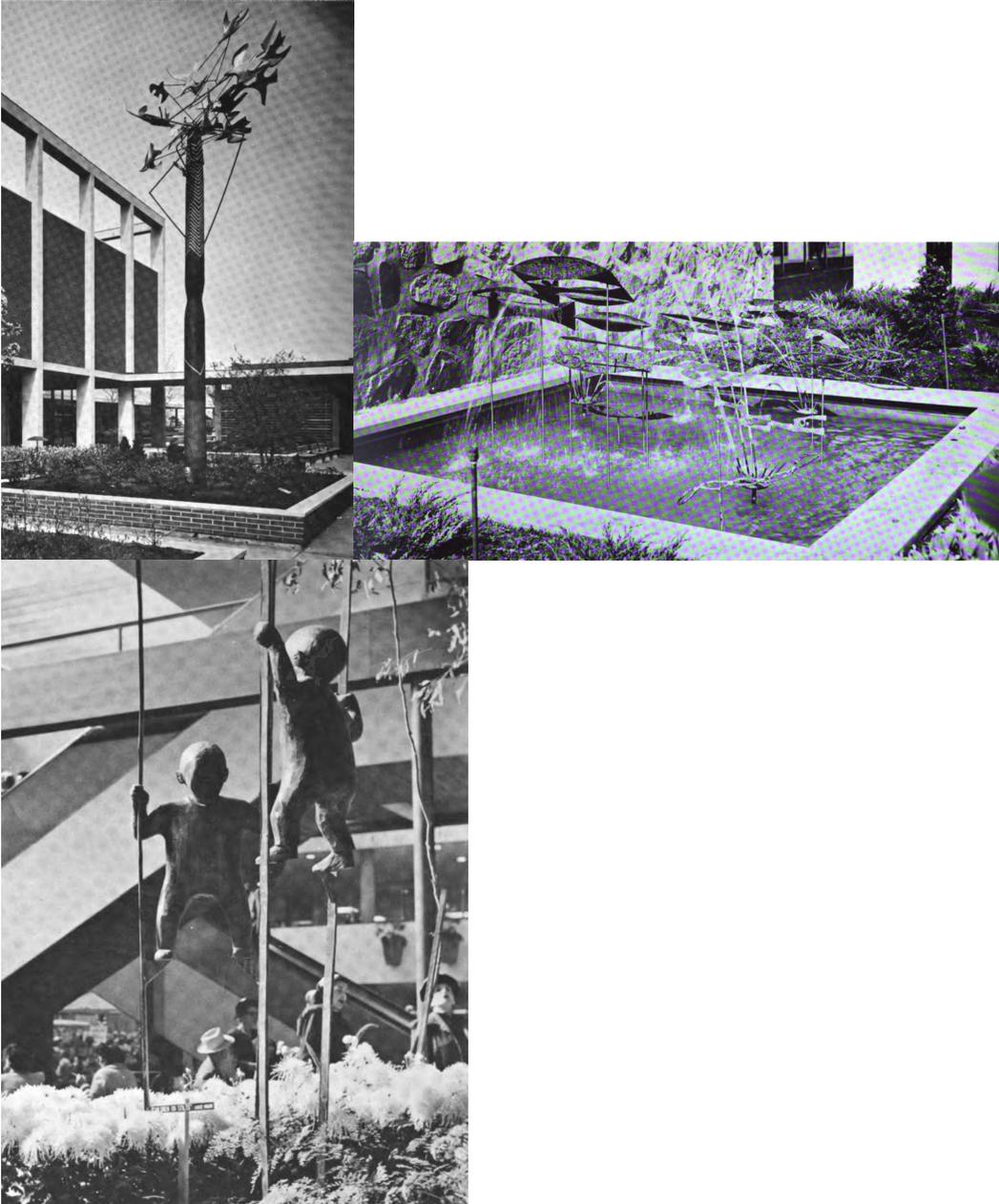
It would seem that the relationship between women and the practice of shopping is so profound, that the history of the shopping mall and its precedents are a history of women themselves. To analyze the malls of Victor Gruen as fabrications of gendered space, we must understand the ways in which shopping practices and the shopping mall have been, over the last century and a half, constituted as female practices and spaces, respectively. Thus an analysis begins with the recognition that capitalism and patriarchy are systems in which persons with socioeconomic power have the ability to oppress minorities and to shape the definitions of gender and space (and their relationship to each other). The emergence of shopping as, firstly, a leisure activity, and then, a female-oriented economic activity, is related to economic class and race. Beginning in the late 19th century, retail spaces, such as department stores, began to be characterized as feminine in nature. Department stores accommodated women through the implementation of rest areas, lavatories, and concession areas. Though the addition of amenities for women in public spaces facilitated the entry of women into the public sphere, retailers were not particularly concerned with accommodating women, but with catering to them in order to increase profits. During the postwar years, as a result of government mandated domesticity for women, shopping was redefined as a task related to housewifery, or professional housework. However, shopping, as a female-oriented practice, seems to be rooted in women's economic status, as well as related to women's unemployment. Women from from the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes could afford to remain unemployed after the war. This is certainly true for white women, who were significantly less employed than African-American women (between 1950 and 1970, black women surpassed white women in labour force participation by at least 5 percent). In a sense, the shopping mall became a necessity for women because it provided them with increased physical mobility, which, along with social mobility, is an important factor in women's autonomy.

The history of the shopping mall as a gendered space and of shopping as a gendered practice is evident in modern mall designs and planning. Gruen has perpetuated the feminization of shopping spaces and practices because of a desire to maximize profits. In *Shopping Towns USA*, Gruen describes a hypothetical shopping centre where, out of 500,000 square feet of rentable area, approximately 50 percent is dedicated to or associated with women's interests. This assured that women would be constantly stimulated while in the shopping centre, and that they would constantly be surrounded by pleasurable experiences. The hypothetical shopping centre also features many "neutral" stores and services: food retailers, children's interest, furniture, drugs, optometry, shoe repair, banking and postal service, among others. Considering the diversity of the stores in the hypothetical, 50 percent is a considerable amount of space to be solely dedicated to women's interests. By creating feminized consumption spaces, Gruen is transforming suburban women's experiences into almost purely capitalist ones. Interestingly, in *Shopping*, when referring to the generic shopper, he uses female pronouns, indicating that the generic shopper, the *targeted* shopper, is a woman. By capitalizing on the combined history of women and shopping, Gruen is complicit in the confinement of women to spaces devoid of power.

The interior design of retail spaces took on a domestic aesthetic that allowed female patrons a sense of the comforts of home while shopping. The department stores of the late 19th century catered to women's needs, not only in terms of products and services provided, but through the domestication of a retail space. Similarly, Gruen attempted to domesticate the shopping mall – to posit the mall as an extension of the home – by placing great importance on the newly recreational aspect of shopping. The notion of shopping as a recreational activity was facilitated most importantly by the creation of places for relaxation: clusters of benches hidden away from major pedestrian traffic. Often, these sitting areas were covered by trees or plants, further emphasizing the space as a separate entity; another world within the mall.

What do these commercial-to-domestic transformations represent in terms of architectural intent? Domesticating space is an attempt to cater to the needs and desires of women, an attempt filtered through a commercial lens. And the novelty of a domestic scene within a commercial setting in purely entertainment. Women were believed to engage in shopping practices for more aesthetic reasons. Gruen capitalized on this belief by placing importance on the aestheticizing of shop fronts (which facilitated window shopping) and the inclusion of fountains and exotic plants to create a paradisaical atmosphere. Storefront window displays included elaborate and decorative arrangements, adding another dimension of visual interest along pedestrian routes. The creation of extravagant window displays contribute to the commercial effectiveness of the shopping centre, but also served to guide or manipulate women towards the purchasing of a product. Fountains and exotic plants helped foster an atmosphere of newness, a comfortable contrast to the domestic aesthetics. In both Northland

guide or manipulate women towards the purchasing of a product. Fountains and exotic plants helped foster an atmosphere of newness, a comfortable contrast to the domestic aesthetics. In both Northland and Southdale, Gruen commissioned a great number of artists to provide sculptures and murals to decorate and enliven the spaces between shops (*Figures 3-5*). The artistic interventions within the shopping centre helped break



Source: *Shopping Towns USA* (Gruen and Smith, 1960), 154.

Figure 3: Sculpture by Gwen Lux in Northland Center. Source: *Shopping Towns USA* (Gruen and Smith, 1960), 156.

Figure 4: Fountain by Richard Jennings in Northland Center. Source: *Shopping Towns USA* (Gruen and Smith, 1960), 157.

Figure 5: Sculpture by Dorothy Berge in Southdale Center.

the commerciality of the space, provided it with visual interest and exoticized the space. But as a contrast to the inclusion of various artworks, Gruen employed a rather strict regimentation of storefront design. He enforced relative uniformity in shop dimensions and architectural language, controlling the size, location, colour scheme, material choice, and character of business signage. There seems to be a parallel between suburban uniformity and the regimentation of the appearances of the individual shops. The borrowing of architectural language and intention from the suburban houses by Gruen in his shopping centres indicates an ideological closeness between the architecture of his malls and that of

The borrowing of architectural language and intention from the suburban houses by Gruen in his shopping centres indicates an ideological closeness between the architecture of his malls and that of suburbia, with both seeking to promote conservative social agendas. Interior design was used to create signifiers of the sociospatial context in which the shopping mall was situated. It was used to disguise the mall; to present it, not as a retail space, but as a social space. And while shopping centres did serve a purpose as social centres, allowing women to branch out into the public realm, they remained within the metaphorical and physical confines of capitalism. Interior design was used to create familiarity, positing the shopping mall as an extension of the domestic realm, which, as has been previously discussed, constitutes an extension of women's oppression.

An analysis of Victor Gruen's numerous shopping centres, specifically, Northland Center in Detroit and Southdale Center in suburban Minneapolis, has established a pattern of architectural and planning techniques that fit within the suburban postwar utopic vision of Middle America. By creating intentionally feminized consumption spaces, Gruen's shopping malls played a role in reframing women's existences solely as consumers and excluding them from any positions of paid production. The constitution, and subsequent marketing, of the shopping mall as a female-oriented space was meant to glorify women's roles as housewives. In reality, the role of housewife, that is, of professional mother or wife, was conceived as an unsatisfactory substitute for a life outside of the confines of the domestic sphere. It is not a coincidence that it is in the rapidly developing middle class the modern shopping centre was implemented. Capital gain and the maintenance of power concisely explain the emergence of the shopping centre in the suburbs. Suburbia allowed the shopping centre to thrive because of a specific familial configuration, the nuclear family, which proliferated due to the exploitation of women's invisible labour. And so, the shopping centre's false promise of freedom was allowed to go uncontested. Gruen also benefited from the combined history of women and the department store, a history that grew to include the shopping mall. He catered his shopping malls to meet the needs and desires of women, so that the mall would be commercially effective. Gruen extended his merchandising planning through to the interior design of the malls. His incorporation of exotic, decorative, and domestic elements was at once fresh and familiar. It is unsurprising that man-made buildings have in some way upheld the existing social gender hierarchies, thus it would be most interesting to study shopping malls that have been designed by women. For example, Norma Merrick Sklarek, a female African-American architect, has designed several commercial buildings during the time of Victor Gruen and has even worked for Gruen for a number of years. There is however a significant lack of documentation of work made by women, especially black women. Gruen proves to be an interesting case study when considering the role of the architect as it intersects with many systems that shape our society. The built environment in America is so closely related to economic activity and to the class inequality inherent in the capitalist system. It is important to critically consider the systems that dictate how and for whom we construct our environments, for what may benefit certain individuals, may harm others.

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