

HUMANITIES ESSAY

Bringing it Back Home: The Urbanization of the British Shopping Mall as the West Goes East

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The objective of this research is the formation of a critical position by which the repositioning of the British shopping mall from a suburban to an urban situation can be understood.

Widely discredited as the 'slayer' of the high street, the suburban shopping mall has been cast aside as western development ideals shift toward a new so-called 'urban renaissance'. Accordingly, many architects have focused their interest on Far Eastern models of urban complexity drawn from the unprecedented urban expansion taking place in countries such as China, Singapore and Japan. There, the shopping mall has become a cornerstone of a new urbanity, representing a typological leap from the historic suburban models of mall design established in much of the Western world.

Using Westfield in White City, the Westfield development at the 2012 Olympic site, the Liverpool One shopping centre and the redeveloped Bull Ring in Birmingham as UK case studies, I will draw attention to how the typology is evolving as a culturally hybrid proposition borne of insights drawn from its Eastern counterparts. Can this blurring of cultural lines unravel the layers of existential meaning embodied within the modern British mall to provide a different kind of language with which designers may engage with this building type? Timely questions such as this must be addressed as the 'second coming' of the shopping mall, re-branded under the banner of 'urban regeneration', increasingly defines what happens in the centre of British cities today.

Keywords: Shopping Mall; China; Urban Regeneration; Suburbia; Cultural Hybridity; Architecture

Introduction

Over its brief life architects have struggled with the shopping mall. Its classic suburban form, pioneered in post-war America, was seemingly a guarantor of financial success that locked the typology into a stasis of non-evolution [1–3]. As a convenient lifestyle choice that concentrated desirable elements of consumption within a single protective environment, the 'classic' American mall offered itself as an alternative to the city centre. Moreover, this choice was coupled to perceptions of the motor car as a symbol of suburban freedom. Validation of the suburban mall was derived in opposition to the congestion, confusion and threat implicit within the traditional urban core. Theoretically the shopping mall offered the convenience, comfort and security that the urban realm could not. If the shopping mall thrived by removing the perceived threat of the urban realm, however, it also impinged upon its freedoms.

Victor Gruen's major book 'Shopping Towns USA' [1], published in 1960, served as the benchmark for shopping mall design. Many of Gruen's innovations remain prevalent today. The most fundamental of these was a devastatingly simple plan form christened the 'dumb-bell' [1–3]. It consisted of a single internal shopping street with two large 'anchor stores' acting as 'magnets' at either end of the route, achieving a balance between plan and profit that has underscored the shopping mall's physical form ever since. Spatial formulas such as the dumb-bell served to manipulate the movements of the consumer. Predictability was as much about the replication of profit as it was about guarantees of an anxiety free experience. To obfuscate the mass-produced spatial template at their heart, many shopping malls distinguished themselves by branding

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their internalized worlds with fantastical architectural imagery culled from the globe to create an immersive surface language that heightened the experience of consumption [3, p.329–335]. Tailored to the tastes and preferences of a target demographic the surface architecture of the mall, and hence its identity, acted 'as a cultural sponge, soaking up and morphing to its surroundings.' [4, p.17] Architectural language thus became a signifier of class boundaries and safety with one's own kind, reinforcing the mall interior as a privileged domain of consumption.

This insular, diagram-led approach to shopping mall design became a byword for suburban 'placelessness' [5]. For many architects the shopping mall was seen as an inferior building typology and the preserve of commercially driven 'lesser' designers whose work was at odds with architecture's quasi-socialist agenda of good intentions [6, p.7; 7, p.37]. As the typology gained popularity globally, its limitations became all too apparent. Its putative safety and convenience found traction with a growing consumer base that adopted its amenity in preference to the traditional urban core with which it competed. The presence of a suburban shopping mall became a major factor in the decline of traditional urban centres during the second half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the seemingly guaranteed success of the typological formula led to overdevelopment. An overabundance of competing shopping malls led to real-estate failures and the well-documented phenomena of 'dead-malls' that is fetishized by many urban geographers today [8]. Finally there were the problems inherent in the surface architecture of the shopping mall itself. As a form of architectural 'branding' the mall's surface language faced huge difficulties once it was rendered static by the invariance of built form [3, p.329–335]. While branded imagery differentiated a given mall within a sea of otherwise identical alternatives, the immersive novelty of its surface dressing would be eclipsed by next season's fashion. An architecture based on such a whimsical premise was left wanting when the fickle winds of consumer taste changed direction. Accordingly, moves were made on both sides of the Atlantic to reverse the blight for which the shopping mall was considered responsible. Now widely discredited as the 'slayer' of the high street, construction of suburban shopping malls ceased as western development ideals shifted towards a so-called 'urban renaissance'. But if this scenario appeared to spell the end of a brief, inglorious life for the shopping mall typology in the Western world, its materialization in burgeoning East Asian economies pointed towards something altogether different. Here, the shopping mall has been at the forefront of the massive urban expansion that has gripped Asia in recent decades.

How and where the shopping mall was first adopted in this context does not have the clearest answer. Rem Koolhaas, however, identified the significance of the mall's arrival in Singapore [9]. Here, a fusion of Le Corbusier's 'City of Tomorrow' [10] and Metabolist [11] experiments with new models of urban density (such as collective or mega forms) found organisational clarity in the shopping mall atrium. Delivery of a pedestrian realm that offered respite from Singapore's stifling subtropical heat while segregating differing modes of infrastructure, in the manner of Le Corbusier's machine city, placed an emphasis on the manipulation of the city section. The multi-level shopping mall atrium became an urban nucleus. It provided a comfortably habitable public realm, and efficiently combined horizontal and vertical movement patterns to process the multi-layered infrastructure of the machine city. Vehicular traffic arrived at ground level while pedestrian links were facilitated primarily at first floor level. At no point did these differing modes and scales of transport mix. Above, and connected to the atrium, sat residential accommodation and offices. The atrium itself became the favoured realm for social interaction and shopping defined the blueprint of what social life might be in this urban enclave.

Movement here was based less on the vectoral figure-ground dynamic of the aforementioned 'dumb-bell' and instead took on a centripetal quality revolving around the mall's open atrium (**Fig. 1**). A perpetual, three-dimensional circuit of motion was established. This, in turn, established a series of 'grounds' independent of city grade, which enhanced the internalised logic of the shopping mall form [12, p.47–55]. In clearly defining a set of internalised limits, the mall was able to parcel a branded chunk of pseudo-public city space. The *cut*, however, was literal. Mirroring the Western model of the out-of-town shopping mall, the external city was fanatically excluded. The interior order of the shopping mall now offered an alternative to the heat and *exterior chaos* of Singapore's machine city rather than the hostile asphalt of a perimeter car park.

Singapore was, of course, not the only site in Asia where hybridization of the shopping mall typology took place. Ideas of forging of new ground take on quite literal meaning when transplanted to another locus of experimentation: Hong Kong. Here the challenging topography of the Peak defines 'grade' for much of the island. Accordingly the shopping mall is employed to create a flat pedestrian realm that tames its natural environs to form a network of consumption over the island's city section (**Fig. 2**). As a consequence it is possible to navigate huge swathes of Hong Kong Island without going outside at all. The key is the manipulation of the shopping mall's vertical dimension. This efficiently exploits the extended programme

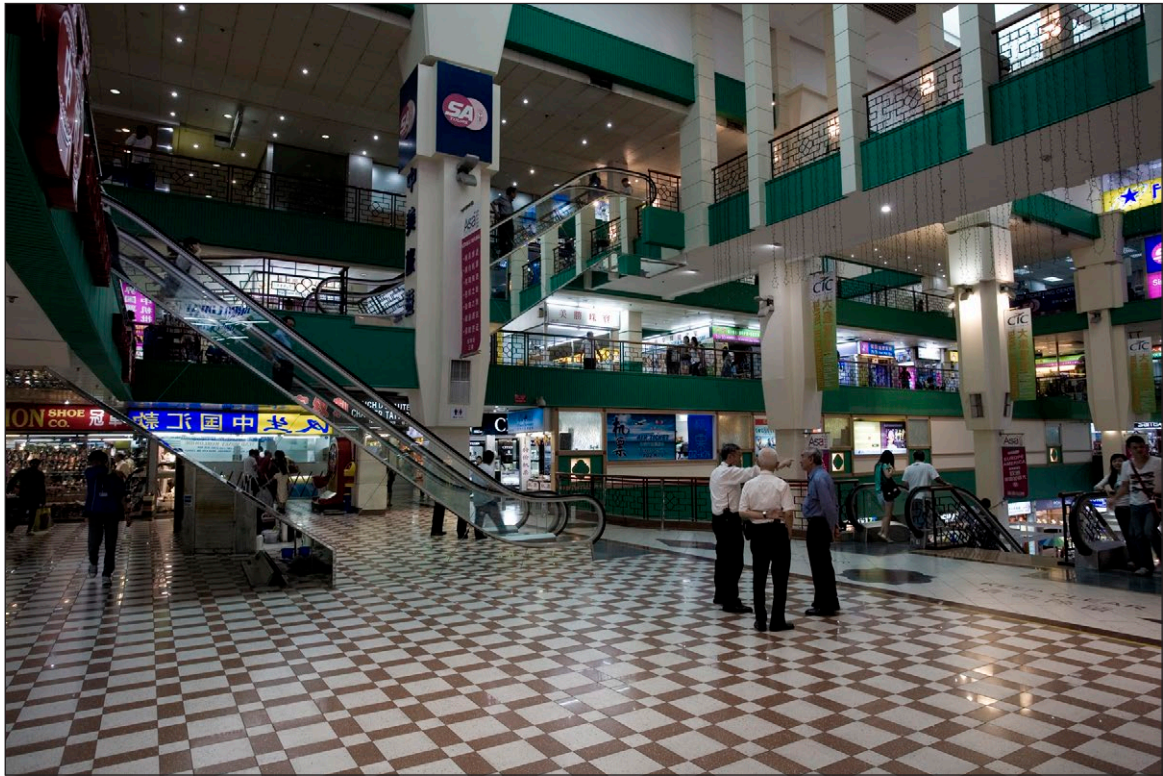


Figure 1: Mall atrium at Golden Mile, Singapore (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).



Figure 2: High level walkway between shopping malls, Hong Kong (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

of mixed-use patterns contained within the 'bounded-city-block' typology. While each corner of the mall infers horizontal continuity it also functions as a vertical *tether*. Corners become complex three-dimensional junctions – filters that inform and activate the first set of choices that visitors must make as they exit the mono-functional enclave of the office or the metro. As such, there is little need for retail anchors in the

conventional sense. By *tethering* the processes of working, living and commuting to the consumption driven amenity of the shopping mall, pedestrian movement is captured and intensified within its layered network. Accordingly, each *tether* point, or filter, becomes a key nodal moment – as the individual is sucked up, down, or through this funnel – in negotiating a psychogeographic relationship with the city. This supposed ‘liberation’ comes at a price, however. Traditionally the shopping mall has marketed its appeal along the lines of ‘safety with one’s own kind’ and there is no exception to the rule here. Hong Kong’s true ground is a noisy, sweaty and frequently pungent affair that is home to the migrant working class that supports its wealthy residents. Ground, in terms of the shopping mall, is a cool, calm, air-conditioned enclave that is home to those that can afford its wares and a realm of exclusion for all others. In manipulating Hong Kong’s city section the shopping mall also stratifies the class structure of the city [12, p.55–63].

Viewed through the prisms of Hong Kong and Singapore, the shopping mall is seemingly antithetical to a healthy, inclusive urbanism. Their ubiquitous podiums, speared by a forest of towers, employ the mall’s insular form to heighten perceptual distance from the outside city. The question turns to where an urbanism founded on such divisions may be more naturally associated with the productive life of the city.

If, in a Western context, the syntax of a wall typically denotes the boundary between a public exterior and a private interior, the walled worlds of ancient China represent a more complex urban syntax. Jianfei Zhu evoked the power and social structures implicit in historic China’s walled urban worlds [13], while Dieter Hassenpflug advanced associated ideas of open and closed Chinese city space – open space being primarily infrastructural or symbolic, and weak in social meaning, while closed space socialises the life of the city within progressive layers of privacy and publicity [14–15]. The habitat of everyday life existed *internally* in urban structures such as Beijing’s *hutong* neighbourhoods and variants such as the Jingyu, Lilong, Shikumen or Siheyuan and later, under Communist rule, the Danwei. They were self-contained, self-sufficient microcosms of the city itself. Open space dissected and fragmented society into manageable parcels, functioning as a command and control structure that could experiment with the creation, alteration and regulation of a ‘collective subject’ [13, 16]. ‘Publicity’ and ‘privacy’ were realized via progressively deeper layers of internally striated order – each layer defined by walled enclosure. The city was codified as an unfolding interior consisting of many grades of ‘public’. Its syntax, which inverts what we understand as urban space in the Western world, is critical to a meaningful exploration of the Chinese shopping mall.

It is the socio-cultural nature of these inverted city spaces that is of interest here. Each wall infers a social contract – a degree of collective privatization of metropolitan space. The walled worlds of ancient China, much like the shopping mall, established a sense of meaning in opposition to their surroundings. In their experiments with the creation of altered social orderings and their resultant physical form these spaces appear to be imbued with the spirit of Michel Foucault’s heterotopia; ‘a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.’ [17] They are a compositional element of the city serving the telos of a continual urban experiment with what its society may be.

The point is that ‘public’ in China is a rather different physical experience to that in the west – namely that it resides beyond the walled boundaries that can make the open space of the Chinese city a hostile, discombobulating experience. Moreover, these walled worlds are a mechanism within which wholesale experiments with the structure of society have been effected throughout Chinese history. An overlap of these structural characteristics has spurred the shopping mall’s naturalization in China’s burgeoning cityscapes. As the spectre of Chairman Mao’s communist rule has receded and China has entered the globalized world, it has been faced with the task of reorienting its social structure – from a collective subject defined under the auspices of the proletariat to one imbued with a nascent spirit of consumerism. The heterotopia of illusion [18, p.237–238] defined by the consumerist fantasies perpetuated within the shopping mall is, accordingly, a key ideological tool in facilitating this transition. Where to western eyes the insular walled world of the shopping mall is antithetical to a healthy urbanism, its relocation to China thus finds a pre-existing urban syntax and idea of ‘public’ with which its physical form shares much common ground. Extending anywhere from 2 to 10 storeys the shopping mall podium is now a ubiquitous presence alongside the teaming road axes that characterise open space in modern Chinese urbanity. Occasionally they stand as individual buildings in their own right, but most commonly their atrium binds together a complex mixed-use city section that combines public transport infrastructure, shopping, work and housing within a bounded city block. It is in this scenario that the shopping mall now underpins the conceptual unit of the modern Chinese city – a context that shares the shopping mall’s own ‘urban’ idiosyncrasies [12, p.75–106].

Accordingly, many architects are keen to make reference to China’s urban heritage, even if it is only for shows of nostalgia. At the truly nostalgic end of the scale Xintiandi in Shanghai (**Fig. 3**) reconstructs a historic



Figure 3: Xintiandi, Shanghai (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

neighbourhood, at considerably reduced density, to create a luxury open-air shopping enclave. Those who have an even stronger desire for the 'real thing' can head to Nanluoguxiang in Beijing (**Fig. 4**) or Tianzifang in Shanghai (**Fig. 5**), both of which leave their historic city structure intact. Their transmutation into modern shopping environments is communicated by the globally recognizable brand names that ripple just below



Figure 4: Nanluoguxiang, Beijing (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).



Figure 5: Tianzifang, Shanghai (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

the putative authenticity of their architectural forms. Debates about the architectural integrity of these approaches are legion with Nanluoguxiang, for example, having been singled out as a ‘Disney Hutong’. What is more broadly apparent, however, is the manner in which open and closed aspects of urban syntax are negotiated within these complexes. The brutal contrast between interior and exterior that defines the paranoid sealing in of pedestrian life in Western (and for that matter Singaporean) malls is less overt here as a result of the overriding structure of Chinese city space. Open infrastructure feels rather alien to pedestrian life; it tends to define a perceptual border that naturally diverts the space of leisure deeper into the city block (**Fig. 6**). In many ways this echoes the distinctions between work and leisure espoused in the ‘City of Tomorrow’ where Le Corbusier notably venerated ancient Beijing as a perfect example of urban planning. For China’s modern malls this results in new, more diffuse permutations of the shopping mall’s diagrammatic formula. These permutations are secure in their ability to retain an audience within their confines as a result of their allegiance with the extant city structure. Boundaries are obvious and rendered hostile by the impassable scale of much of the infrastructure that surrounds them.

Analogies with historic metropolitan morphologies also resonate in modern malls such as SOHO Shangdu, designed by the Australian architectural firm LAB Architecture Studio, and described as a vertical hutong (**Fig. 7**) [19]. Sanlitun Village, designed by the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, goes further still, using oblique angles and informal courtyards to juxtapose the planning characteristics of the hutong and siheyuan with its modern appearance (**Fig. 8**). While the latter may be something of an exception in terms of its low density approach, it is an informative example of how Chinese concepts of openness and closure have begun to modify the shopping mall diagram. These concepts alter ideas of ground or grade as a constant in navigating the wider city and have allowed the shopping mall to become an agent of urban densification. Although the Chinese city was historically a two storey affair, the division between enclave and infrastructure may be readily modified into a more complex, three-dimensional puzzle. China’s shopping malls have learned the lessons of Hong Kong and Singapore to manipulate the city section. Here, the shopping mall at street level has replaced the historic gate to become an agent through which a self-contained microcosm of the wider city unfolds vertically as a series of alternative grounds. Moreover, in contrast to the post-modern faux-historicist stereotypes that often define the architectural language of western suburban shopping malls, China’s offerings are unashamedly futuristic and have seemingly made peace with the world of architectural taste, thus echoing the deconstructive oeuvre of luminaries such as Zaha Hadid or Rem Koolhaas. Modern architectural style is treated as an agent of consumption based aspiration. This aspiration may,



Figure 6: Beijing’s impassable road network (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

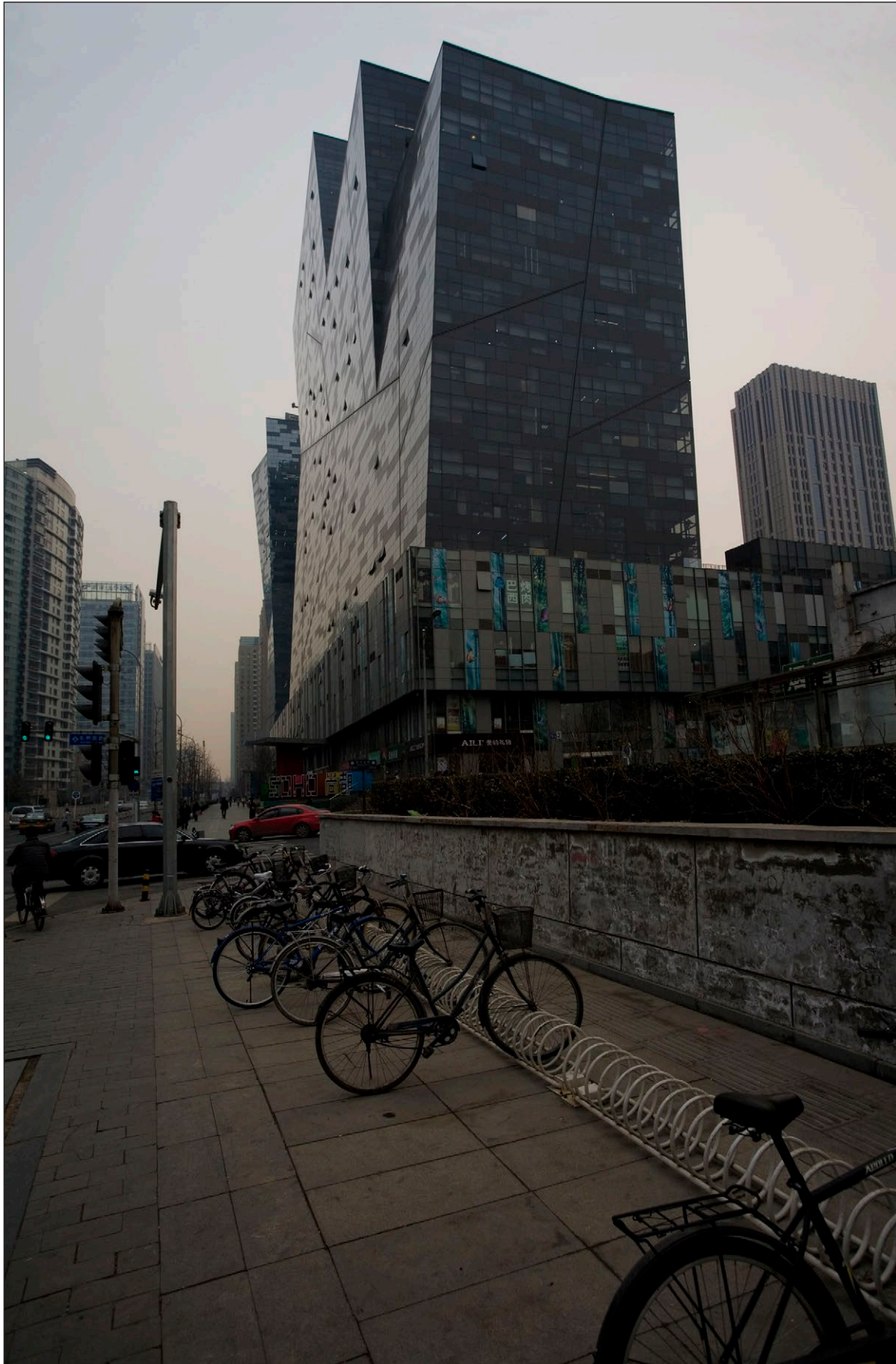


Figure 7: SOHO Shangdu, Beijing (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

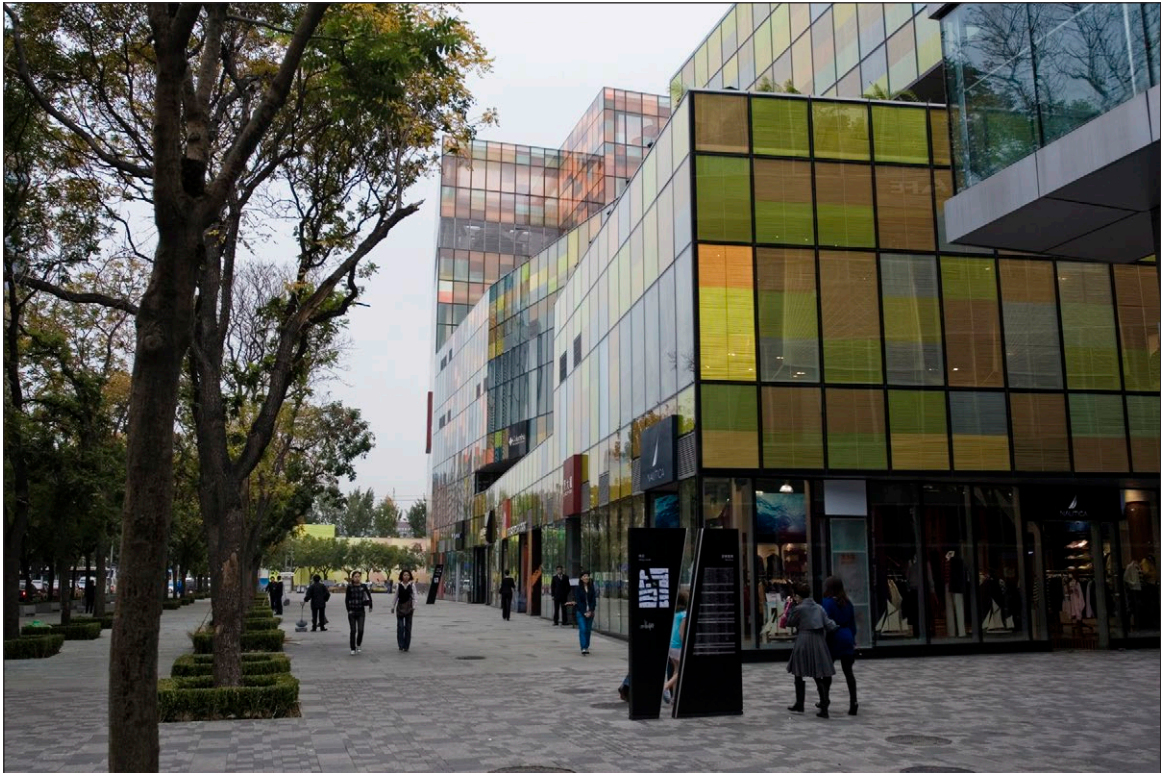


Figure 8: Sanlitun Village, Beijing (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

however, be founded on trying to put some distance between now and the horror of China's more recent history – the obverse of an occidental historical coin that visually celebrates the motifs of its colonial past. New social networks are evolving as a result, stratified by the baseline of the shopping mall, which, in turn, echoes many aspects of the command and control structure of the historic Chinese city [12, p.153–178].

The scenario outlined here points towards the opportunity to re-appraise a much maligned building typology given credence by its global spread, not to mention its arrival on British shores where a more nuanced, complex understanding of the shopping mall is now necessary. Crucially this must establish a critical practice capable of engaging with key questions around the socio-cultural divides that shopping malls have historically perpetuated and the possibility of typological evolution to deliver new types of more inclusive city space. These are timely questions, as the 'second coming' of the shopping mall begins to define the shape of British cities today.

Suburban Homesick Capital Blues

'...one of the great advances in modern cultural theory is the realization, almost universally acknowledged, that cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous and, [. . .] that cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality.' [20, p.348–349]

Cultural hybridity is intrinsic to developing an understanding of how the shopping mall has been re-incorporated into Western modernity and how its altered spatiality is being naturalized 'over here'. If the shopping mall is considered as a heterotopic cell introduced into the body of the city, how does each act and react to the other? Moreover, to paraphrase Stuart Hall's work on the production and dissemination of media, how do the very obvious *complex structures of dominance* employed by the Chinese shopping mall morph to a new context, with its own *forms and conditions of existence* [21, p.508]? These kinds of questions will be addressed by looking at the pivotal role that the shopping mall now assumes in British urban regeneration projects, and the influence of China's urban malls on the hybrid city spaces that result.

While the oriental blueprint of the urban shopping mall has been generated – as noted – by environmental, topographical and sociological factors, its occidental assimilation is driven by a baser sense of necessity – that of capital. Anna Minton describes this home-grown cycle succinctly:

‘During the eighties, alongside the ‘Big Bang’ architecture of Canary Wharf and Broadgate, the phenomenon of out-of-town shopping centres was the architectural signature of Thatcherism. Places such as Bluewater in Kent, Lakeside in Essex, Meadowhall in Sheffield, the Trafford Centre in Manchester and the Metro Centre in Gateshead opened as a result of Mrs Thatcher’s loosening of the planning system, a policy which was later reversed, because of the damaging effect it had on high streets in towns and cities. What has happened under New Labour is that, to find a way around planning restrictions, shopping centres have moved wholesale into the centre of cities.’ [22, p.15]

Manchester’s Trafford Centre, opening in 1998 (**Fig. 9**), and Kent’s Bluewater, opening in 1999 (**Fig. 10**), signalled a simultaneous apotheosis and death-knell for Britain’s out-of-town shopping malls. Those two projects were the biggest and the last. When New Labour swept into power in 1997 they were already under construction, but the focus of planning policy would soon shift. 1997 also marked the publication of Richard Rogers’ urban manifesto *Cities for a Small Planet* [23]. Architecture and political will hence converged at this historical juncture. Within a year, New Labour had invited Rogers to spearhead its ‘Urban Taskforce’. As planning policy turned its back on suburbia and began to promote the virtues of city life, architects needed to learn new tricks. Earlier urban models of British mall development, albeit at a much smaller scale than their suburban counterparts, provided little in the way of useful precedent. Poorly planned, insensitive, and inward-looking, they had been instrumental in alienating great swathes of the city to spur the suburban drive of the 1970s and 80s. Architects by necessity looked eastwards to understand how the infrastructural scales of suburbia could be incorporated into the modern Western city and how they could interconnect.

These inter-cultural explorations [24–25] are the Trojan horse that allowed the British shopping mall to exit suburbia and re-enter the city under the banner of ‘urban regeneration’. As Matthew Carmona notes, ‘the New Labour government of Tony Blair adopted (or more correctly continued) the neoliberal approaches of their predecessors, emphasizing the vital importance of the market in economic and social policy, and of the state in enabling rather than directing development.’ [26, p.38] Recognizing that in ‘the absence of direct public-sector investment it was only through growth that many ‘public goods’ could be provided’ [26, p.38], private capital was able to steer what these *public goods* might be. If the urban shopping mall provided momentum to the physical and financial growth of the Asian metropolis, it could surely be availed upon in Britain to regenerate the urban blight perpetuated by its suburban siblings. In doing so it would become a repository for the stream of capital generation left idle by the ‘end’ of the out-of-town shopping mall. Such a move responds to an age old trope of capitalist development:

‘The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them. And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones.’ [27, p.42]

Creative destruction – the need to destroy in order to create anew – is the condition that Marx and Engels posited as necessary to the cycle of continuous financial accumulation. Here, the intersection of political policy and capital surplus has allowed the British shopping mall to accomplish just such a maneuver, multiplying itself over new territory. Marshall Berman elaborates further:

‘. . .the truth of the matter, as Marx sees, is that everything that bourgeois society builds is built to be torn down. “All that is solid” – from the clothes on our backs to the looms and mills that weave them, to the men and women who work the machines, to the houses and neighborhoods the workers live in, to the firms and corporations that exploit the workers, to the towns and cities and whole regions and even nations that embrace them all – all of these are made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable terms.’ [28, p.99]



Figure 9: Trafford Centre, Manchester (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

The limited life of the branded world of shopping malls makes such *creative destruction* an operative necessity. Furthermore, a move into the city has created a potentially reciprocal circuit of destruction and renewal in consort with the malls suburban manifestations. Bluewater, Trafford Centre, Lakeside, Meadowhall and more all played their part in the running down of their nearby city centres, clearing the way for this new



Figure 10: Bluewater shopping mall, Greenhithe, Kent (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

stream of development. As these out-of-town behemoths go about their business, areas of blight are compulsorily purchased for regeneration led by private capital. As Minton notes, these 'places are not inspired by the culture of where they are but by the idea that the economy will prosper if they meet the economic needs of the region.' [22, p.36] Shopping malls equal revenue in the public and private purse, job creation and 'strategic enhancements' to the public realm via planning conditions such as Section 106 contributions. The latter allow:

'for Local Planning Authorities and persons interested in land to agree contributions, arrangements and restrictions as Planning Agreements or Planning Obligations [. . .] For example, if a developer were to build 100 new houses, there would be effects on local schools, roads etc., which the Local Authority would have to deal with. In that situation, there might be a Section 106 agreement as part of the granting of planning permission. The developer might agree to make a contribution towards the provision of new schools or traffic calming.' [29]

The naysayers are silenced by the obvious financial viability, enhanced amenity and public popularity of such proposals. So the urban mall takes form. As the surface language that distinguishes the mall-space of suburbia becomes tired, the trendier urban worlds of Birmingham's Bull Ring, Liverpool One and London's twin Westfields provide the impetus to bring the brand up-to-date. Suburbia now has a period in which to undergo a makeover while these urban pretenders have their day in the sun. And so this closed circuit of capitalism can theoretically continue. The end of one marks the beginning of another, *again and again in ever more profitable terms*.

But if one thing can be understood from an exploration of the Asian shopping mall, it is that mixed usage and enforced interaction with the cityscape generate a more rooted proposition than the mono-functional enclaves of suburbia. Where an impassable road network can simply cleave the latter off from their surroundings when surplus to requirements – emerging months or years later from the chrysalis of a multi-million pound makeover, or simply disappearing into a cloud of rubble – it is much harder to condemn a large, mixed-use chunk of the city to ruination. Not that this is impossible, of course. Numerous examples exist in the Western world. Jane Jacobs' polemic [30], based on her native New York, and the fictionalized account of inner-city Baltimore's very real decline in the television series *The Wire* [31], are two excoriating examples of capital's willingness to denude the urban environment in the pursuit of filthy lucre.

Nonetheless, the point is that the connections these developments make must be capable of sustaining a stronger sense of the urban, rather than simply stripping its carcass. Furthermore, the untapped potential of the urban shopping mall has been recognized by the architects and policy makers at the helm of Britain's urban regeneration. In 2001, the *Architects' Journal* acknowledged as much, reporting that:

'the UK is undergoing a 'sea change' in its approach to the design of inner-city shopping centres, according to CABI chief executive Jon Rouse. He believes developers are already buying into the idea that retail complexes can no longer be dropped into the centre of towns irrespective of their

street pattern [...] According to Rouse, developers have for years got away with doing 'bog standard' shopping centres, both in and on the edge of towns. But new laws [...] and a change of heart, mean that architects can now expect to be asked to respect the urban fabric – or even restore it after 30 years of blight.' [32]

To understand the latent promise in such a scenario it is time to move from the realm of abstract argument to the realities of current architectural production.

Taking the Bull by the Horns

While much architectural theory has busied itself with abrogating responsibility for a mode of critical practice vis-à-vis the urban shopping mall, a number of British practitioners have engaged, on a more pragmatic, operative level, with the production of a cultural hybrid. As Simon Blore notes, these are not the kind of practices that win high-profile architectural awards [33]. Benoy, BDP and others are unashamedly commercial in their architectural approach and have amassed huge experience in the design of shopping malls. Their moves to the east (both have China based satellite offices) are, of course, strategic, using their expertise to tap into opportunities arising from the world's largest building site. It means that they are operatively engaged in building the contemporary Chinese city and are assimilating its lessons in successive iterations of built form. Similarly, offices that have not yet established oriental outposts are undertaking research visits to gain an understanding of these typological variants [34]. The point is that a form of critical practice is beginning to exist. But as yet it remains largely invisible because its luminaries and subject matter operate in a world that the global architecture profession in general cannot talk comfortably or authoritatively about. Its arrival on British shores, and the scale of the accompanying structures, mean that we no longer have the luxury of ignoring this phenomena. Accordingly I have chosen to explore four major projects that, to my mind, best typify how the shopping mall typology is being hybridized in British cities today.

Birmingham's Bull Ring is the first of these schemes. Liam Kennedy observes that:

'Birmingham's transatlantic modernity is characterized by its commitment to waves of creative destruction: compulsively leveling and rebuilding the urban landscape in the image of an imagined urban future. The post-war modernism was a first attempt at creating a twenty-first-century city. Today, a fresh attempt is well underway, building on – but also seeking to bury – the 'concrete dreams' of the first.' [35, p.1]

This condition describes the modern history of the Bull Ring site perfectly. Originally the location of Birmingham's market square, this more civic space of consumption was pushed aside in 1959 to accommodate Britain's first city-centre shopping mall [36, p.15]. Finally opened in 1964, the original Bull Ring centre was typical of the modern American 'agora' from which it was derived. Like the slightly later Brent Cross and Manchester's Arndale Centre, its Brutalist, introverted concrete form – occupying 32,515 square metres with 140 shops and 500 car parking spaces [37] – was unloved from day one. Pedestrian isolation – due to the increased scale of the road network serving it and the dank subways that traversed this – made the Bull Ring an emblem of many urban ills that stemmed from grafting the American city's infrastructural apparatus into Birmingham's urban core. The misplaced utopianism of its concrete brutality may have been enough to ensure the Bull Ring's fate. But, if further impetus was needed, the more enduring legacy of North America's influence on the British landscape of consumption was at hand. Merry Hill – the out-of-town regional shopping mall serving the West Midlands catchment area – delivered the *coup de grace*.

Accordingly, plans for redevelopment of the Bull Ring were mooted as early as 1987. Chapman Taylor, the architectural practice initially tasked with delivering the scheme, adopted the maxim that more of the same – much more in fact – was the way forward. Naively likened to 'a huge aircraft-carrier settled on the streetscape of the city' [36, p.18–19], their proposal for a colossal, 500-metre long, internalized dumb-bell met with predictable resistance. If Chapman Taylor represented the vanguard of out-of-town shopping mall development in Britain during the 1980s and 90s – Meadowhall and the Trafford Centre are among their more significant works – this kind of urban mall appeared to be a step too far. A spirited grass-roots organization conjured up 'The People's Plan for the Bull Ring' in order to counteract the proposals. This protest group succeeded in changing its course, albeit that the purported radicalism of their proposals – focused primarily on putting the market square back in place – adopted a mode of historicism that was out of step with the developmental trajectory of the city. A new mode of *creative destruction* was required. If straight-faced transatlantic modernity had failed, then perhaps it was time to look eastwards.

Over the 16 years or so of wrangling – from the initial concept designs to the completed building in 2003 – the political landscape changed, ushering in the urban pomp of New Labour. Hammerson, the project developer, switched horses as well. Although the development is now best known for one of its anchor stores – the curvaceous Selfridges façade designed by Future Systems – responsibility for the overall masterplan, and bulk of its architectural treatment, was given to Benoy. Benoy had opened their first overseas office in Hong Kong just a year before the new Bull Ring, or Bullring as it is now known, was completed. And while the project had clearly been on the drawing board for far longer than the practice had been an established concern in Asia, it is interesting to see how eastern and Western modes of shopping mall design are brought together here.

Given the vocal opposition to the new Bull Ring, any successful proposal needed to reverse the blight of its predecessor by making, or re-making, urban connections. A number of strategic cues and limitations were already in place. Sandwiched between Birmingham New Street and Birmingham Moor Street rail stations a captive stream of commuters could be funneled through the development. At the south-east corner of the site, St. Martin's Church was a rare piece of urban heritage spared by the paroxysm of development that had ripped apart 1960s Birmingham. A 15-metre slope across the site made the manipulation of the city section absolutely key. Finally, the movement vectors required to link these disparate elements together, and the demands imposed by the schemes opponents, made full enclosure impossible.

The solution, whether deliberately or coincidentally, appears to be indebted to the manner in which shopping mall podiums adapt to the extreme topography of Hong Kong. In an interconnected urban world anchors play second fiddle to urban tethers – extant flows of pedestrian movement that can be channeled into and then retained within the mall's urban form. Exiting from Birmingham's New Street Station, or simply strolling along the high street, a short walk will deliver you to the Bull Ring's upper level. Here, visual and physical connections are established. It is an entirely pedestrianized route and, in morphing to the site, it takes on a triangular plan form echoing that of the Bluewater shopping mall (for which Benoy shared architectural billing with Eric Kuhne). While the bulk of the pedestrian route is a glass-roofed mall, it is cleaved in two by a sloping, open-air street that runs north-west to south-east terminating in a pseudo-public square that addresses St. Martin's [36, p.18–19]. This split is putatively described as two malls, or districts, with visually distinct surface treatments that further echo the demographic sorting of the three malls at Bluewater [3, p.343–344]. Going down one level, further into the mall interior, renders the diagram clearer. While 'the split' is still present, a linear route running from south-west to north-east across the site reveals a conventional 'dumb-bell' plan form, terminating with its two anchor stores – either the aforementioned *nouveau-riche* luxury of Selfridges or the less salubrious Debenhams. 'Outside' is a momentary diversion that creates a high-low demographic fissure, increasing the catchment of the development. The bottom level renders the 'dumb-bell' as entirely internal, but also takes the tired consumer off the beaten track, opening onto the *al fresco* dining spaces of St. Martin's Square. In this way, the split facilitates linkage to the mall's urban surroundings while visually fortifying its perceptual borders. Accessible at each level of this sloping street, a smaller and larger three-dimensional racetrack emerges, depending on whether you want half, or the whole, of the mall experience. As Peter Coleman observes, the 'triangular layout is an organizational diagram where none of the three levels individually forms the overall pattern. The triangle is formed by the combination of the three levels layered upon each other.' [38, p.162] Perpetual motion is once again the order of the day. Capturing its visitors in a repetitive cycle of centripetal movement, the Bullring exploits the visual disjuncture between its legible, pedestrianized world and the raw infrastructure of the Brutalist city to reinforce its desirability as an urban enclave. Is version 2.0 of the Bull Ring a first step towards Birmingham's urban future, propounding integration and connectivity, or a stand alone continuation of the introverted world of its forbearers?

Where the modernized Bull Ring differs from its Asian progeny is in the relative paucity of urban activities across its site. While the quantity of space delivered over the site has increased – at 125,325 square metres, version 2.0 of the Bull Ring is almost four times the size of its predecessor – the programme of use has remained the same. Focused solely on retailing, the site lacks the patterns of mixed-usage that contribute to a more rounded conception of urbanity in its Asian counterparts. While it strategically taps into extant pedestrian infrastructure its lack of alternate activities above and below the mall section are all too obvious. Furthermore, and in spite of its laudable connection to the High Street, the infrastructure that remains in place around the Bull Ring renders it by-and-large an urban island. Its linkages feel strategic only – based on the things that absolutely had to be preserved or routes that could be most effectively exploited.

Such suspicions are confirmed by factors such as the complete absence of unprogrammed seating – and by this I mean seats for non-paying customers – in St. Martin's Square. It is not only that the Bull Ring lacks the potential for urban unpredictability that arises from the cross-programming of its oriental counterparts.

It actively seeks to discourage it. To adapt to the condition of the city centre, the Bull Ring has imported the three-dimensional complexity of the Asian shopping mall. But rather than using this as a device to liberate the pedestrian's experience from awkward terrain or oppressive heat, it has been ruthlessly combined with the paranoid measures of exclusion that govern the typology in its out-of-town setting.

All of this would be less immediately bothersome if the architectural treatment was successful. Although the sparkling aluminium discs and otherworldly blobbyness of Future Systems' Selfridges façade add a certain cool factor to the image of Birmingham's regeneration – the project even attracted a RIBA design award in 2004 – it adds little to the mall or department store typology beyond external exuberance (**Fig. 11**). Up



Figure 11: Future Systems façade for Selfridges, The Bull Ring, Birmingham (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

close, where the decorative uselessness of Selfridges' shiny scales is apparent, it is the painted concrete shell behind that truly governs the interactions between the building, the city and its public. And, like the building that occupied the site before its arrival, it is largely impermeable. Presenting a defensive edge to the city beyond, the Selfridges perimeter is all about exclusion. Its version of city life is focused inwards, toward the interior of the mall. Formally, the mall may have donned new clothes, but spatially little has changed. And regrettably, this is the best bit. Behind its headline grabbing prosthesis, the remainder of the Bull Ring is very much about business as usual. From the faux monumental postmodernism of its facades, to the desperate contextual reference of the bronze 'Bull Ring Bull' sculpture at one of its principle entrances, the familiar clichés of the out-of-town shopping mall have simply been reassembled to suit a new condition.

As a banner of regeneration its results are ultimately mixed. In 2008, Birmingham was, once again, named as the UK's ugliest city, and the Bull Ring was identified as a prime exhibit of its urban disfigurement [39]. Yet its popularity with the punters, boasting an annual footfall of 40 million visitors, is also hard to argue with [40]. The uneasy balance of architectural ugliness and consumer popularity makes the next bout of *creative destruction* seem inevitable [36, p.25]. Obsolescence is, of course, an inherent part of the branded world of the shopping mall [3, p.329–335]. Moreover, it is part of the lifecycle of many building typologies as their component parts age at differing rates. But the point here concerns what is rendered obsolete. On one level, if the Bull Ring is proved to facilitate patterns of urban habitation that sustain a meaningful urban regeneration, its core megaform structure could remain and simply be refreshed as this current brand becomes *passé*. Albeit that idiosyncratic blobs such as Future Systems Selfridges do not lend themselves readily to adaptation or customization. The bigger fear, however, is that the inflexible agenda of manipulation underpinning the mall megaform will fail to nurture a productive urban realm, rendering its core structure unsustainable. In such a scenario, and when the brand reaches obsolescence, the best option may in fact be total creative destruction.

Mall design has already moved on however, albeit not here. Like the 'pioneering' Bull Ring centre of 1964, version 2.0 of the Bull Ring was one of the first major mall-led urban regeneration projects in the UK. Several more nuanced schemes have appeared in the UK over subsequent years. The question is what they are doing differently, and whether they are doing it better.

Mersey Paradise

'Before Liverpool One was completed, I met one of the developers in charge of the project. He explained to me that the aim was to create more Bluewaters, but this time within the city. "I think what's been going on for the last five or six years is that people have been visiting regional shopping centres like Meadowhall and Bluewater and finding them much cleaner and safer than other parts of city centres. They don't care about the legal niceties, they just wonder why some parts are managed better. Our desire is to use the same principles applied to the major shopping malls, such as Bluewater, but in the context of the city centre," he said.' [22, p.17]

If Anna Minton's critique – or more accurately its developer's description – of Liverpool One depicts a depressingly familiar scenario, there is a contradictory argument that marks it out as something of a departure for the shopping mall typology on these shores. Opened in 2008, this BDP-masterplanned 'shopping district' in the centre of Liverpool occupies a total area of 180,000 square metres. It comprises 130,063 square metres of retail space, a 14 screen cinema, 23,000 square metres of restaurants/cafes/bars, two hotels, 600 apartments, offices, a 5-acre park, 2000 car parking spaces and, last but not least a brand new transport interchange [41]. The BDP chairman, David Cash, has gone as far as describing the project as his favourite of the practice's buildings, observing that, 'Liverpool One is much more than a shopping centre – it is a place for people.' [42] If a more impartial endorsement is required, the awards group of the Royal Institute of British Architects nominated the project for the 2009 Stirling Prize. It didn't win of course, but was the first time that a masterplan has been put forward for this accolade. Furthermore, Liverpool One had infiltrated the armature of cultural snobbishness that normally undermines architectural discussions of the typology. It was an acknowledgement that the project differs from conventional shopping mall stock and is apparently better for it. Liverpool One appears to represent a shift from more 'route one' attempts to shoe-horn the mall into the city centre – in schemes such as the aforementioned Bullring or BDP's West Quay in Southampton [43, p.44–50] – to a seemingly more holistic interaction with the urban world. Wading past the awards and statistics, it is therefore important to get to the root of its difference.

On first acquaintance two things are immediately apparent. First, the resolution of its mixed-use programme clearly understands that developments of this scale do not fare well as monofunctional enclaves. Second, and perhaps more interestingly, the physical nature of the mall megaform has benefited from a more sensitive approach. Rather than destroying pre-existing street patterns to feed the introverted logic of the typology, Liverpool One extroverts the mall form, giving continuity and extension to the city's street network. In such a way the 'ground' of the mall appears to fuse with the ground of the city (**Fig. 12**).

Appropriating the southern end of Liverpool's Paradise Street – the development coined a working title of 'The Paradise Street Project' in early design iterations – Liverpool One taps into the city's main pedestrian shopping street, claiming the triangular chunk of urban space below the east-west axis of Lord Street and Church Street. Peter Coleman, BDP's director of retail design, outlines the approach further:

'Dividing the area and connecting with the northern part of the city, Paradise Street forms a central spine to the masterplan. The masterplan incorporates two fundamental urban forms which correspond to the two areas either side of Paradise Street. The west side is formed from a newly made, urban fabric of large scale, contemporary mixed-use buildings (which define the Park, South John Street and the West side of Paradise Street). The urban form on the east side sits within the finely grained existing fabric of retained historic buildings and the mixture of creative new infill buildings [...] The approach of largely adopting the existing street pattern, along with reforming desire lines, assists the integration and continuity of the new with the existing city. Furthermore, the network of combined streets encourages a series of pedestrian circuits which extend between the existing and newly regenerated parts of the city.' [38, p.211]

This syntax is initially pleasing because it renders the shopping mall as something other than an alien object gazumping the natural order of Liverpool's urban realm. Subtle touches throughout the development – such as continuity of finish to the ground plane – conflate the old and new, lending further legitimacy to the urban design credentials of the masterplan. In this sense, Liverpool One evokes Asian schemes such as Xintiandi and Tianzifang, adopting through preservation, the motif of instrumental, productive city space to brand the development as a heterotopic urban cell. But, if the easterly portion of the development embodies the sense of a megaform whose fractal elements are scaled as units of the city, the Western portion, where *creative destruction* has had a freer hand, is simply jarring. Such incongruity is also present in the blocky, modern extensions to Xintiandi. But in the context of Shanghai these forms are more the rule than the exception. At Liverpool One, the Western district cannot be viewed as anything other than urban disjuncture. The question is whether its urban qualities in other parts of the scheme can provide some form of redemption.

Emerging from the central spine of Paradise Street, the taller, less animated forms of the Western district – whose stony solidity and glazed ground floor typifies the modern architectural palette of commercially led urban regeneration projects – gives way at two points. The choice is between the dark canyon of Thomas's Lane or the more welcoming Paradise Place, which connects New Manesty's Lane in the eastern district with the John Lewis anchor store in the west. I chose the latter. Entrance into the block is telegraphed by South John Street, which runs perpendicular to, and is terminated by, the anchor store. Its northern extremity terminates at the point that Lord Street, and thus Liverpool's central shopping district, ceases to be pedestrian, and is marked by a further anchor store. While the complex remains open-air, its limited porosity and three-storey compressed armature [18, p.220–221] create the sense of an interior. It somehow lacks the generous, *al fresco*, *joie de vivre* of comparable Asian schemes such as Beijing's Sanlitun Village. Moreover, South John Street reveals itself in plan as the most hackneyed of shopping mall stereotypes: a dumb-bell layout (**Fig. 13**). The two porous points along its axis create what Coleman refers to as 'knuckles' with the parallel Paradise Street [38]. Like tethers these filter a number of streams of pedestrian movement, but lack the anchoring function of the former. In this case, these knuckles facilitate and control either a racetrack arrangement between South John and Paradise Street, or a larger set of loops extending into the lanes of the eastern district. A superimposition of mall diagrams thus sets up a series of expanding centripetal circuits, whose mechanics of persuasion are hidden by the changing urban qualities of each of Liverpool One's sub-districts. Therein lie the fundamental characteristics of this city ground. Each loop renders, and reinforces, movement that is internal to the heterotopic cell. Streets and axes are left open-ended to supposedly forge new connections, but the moment one moves off the principal path things feel remote and disconnected. Here the divergence between an oriental and occidental urban syntax is most apparent. The 'open' space of



Figure 12: Street network around Liverpool One shopping centre, Liverpool (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).



Figure 13: South John Street, Liverpool One, Liverpool (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

Liverpool's surrounding streets, where social life is conventionally enacted in occidental climes, is rendered an uncertain territory by Liverpool One's adoption of a hybrid spatial order whose binary characteristics seek to create perceptual distance from all territory external to its limited heterotopic enclave.

This is the principal syntax with which Liverpool One bludgeons its visitors. But there is more. The South John Street dumb-bell is also a three-dimensional hub that naturalizes further streams of movement through the development. On one level this takes up topographical differences along the length of the dumb-bell. On another, and very much in keeping with its Asian relatives, this is where the mall connects to an expanded programme of mixed-usage.

Along the Western edge of South John Street, the apparent ground level is raised by three storeys. It connects to Liverpool One's *al fresco* food court and extends further west into the artificial Chavasse Park (Fig. 14). This augmented topography is the mechanism that binds the megaform's extended programme together. In doing so it echoes the manipulation of the city section and rarefied rooftop parks of many Asian shopping malls. The three storeys beneath Chavasse Park conceal the bulk of the development's 2000 car parking spaces, while hotels, apartments and restaurants hug its edges. Frivolous gestural canopies, water features and a variety of flooring materials also mark this change of programme. It is the space of leisure that links the consumption oriented mall 'street' with the productive spheres of domesticity and work. At its extremities, the park steps abruptly away from the vehicular infrastructure that serves it, reinforcing a set of perceptual borders. And like its Asian cousins, Liverpool One contrives a sense of exacerbated difference between the pedestrian and vehicular realms at its perimeter to concentrate activity toward its 'interior'. But unlike its oriental brethren, its programme is dispersed horizontally, rather than vertically, across its site. On one level density is reduced, on another, the transitory elements remain the same.

Identifying these characteristics brings home some less savoury facets of the Liverpool One megaform. Paradise Street is the supposed *spine* of the development, though the true mechanism of linkage is the parallel South John Street. As a form of extroverted dumb-bell it makes the city street the preserve of the *hidden persuader* [44]. Such profit-oriented motives are, in common with Birmingham's Bull Ring, borne out by the complete lack of unprogrammed seating and amenity in its 'public' park. Leisure, it would appear, needs to be bought. It reveals the nature of this city space as the privatized domain of the Business Improvement District (BID) Minton notes that a:



Figure 14: Chavasse Park, Liverpool One, Liverpool (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

'Business Improvement District is a company which charges a levy – sometimes called a tax in America – on local businesses and uses the revenue to do everything it can to improve the 'trading environment' in a particular area [...] Treating the city as a private business, accountable to property developers and retailers rather than local electors [it] creates places which are quite different from the British cities of the last 150 years, focused on revenue and commercial rather than innate value' [22, p.41–42].

Indeed, the development was subject to a number of critical broadsides during its design and construction, concerned about the impact of effectively privatizing a significant chunk of Liverpool's city centre streets [45–47]. And while the putative friendliness of its urban niceties may go some way to assuaging these concerns, there remains little doubt that public, for Liverpool One, is a space and demographic to be manipulated for maximum profit.

Such agendas are often defined over and above the scope of architectural engagement, and BDP should be commended for a valiant attempt at something different. Coleman has indeed put a great deal of research into understanding what makes modern shopping malls tick. His design guide, *Shopping Environments: Evolution, Planning and Design* [38], no doubt has pretensions of taking its place as a companion text to Victor Gruen's 'seminal' observations. But the fact that the design principles observed in the guide are adopted in such an uncritical fashion – at best multiplied or combined in a manner to render them simultaneously less perceptible and more powerful – renders the accompanying commentary mute. The plaudits associated with the Liverpool One development stem principally from its sensitive preservation of Liverpool's historic urban fabric. These are genuinely the most successful moments. They have, however, changed the character of the streets in these areas. Privatization and careful demographic sorting, via strategic selections of retailers, have stripped the city street of its everyman status – even in the preserved lanes. And these are far from its most representative moments. The eastern lanes and the westerly park simply feed the main event, whose most significant achievement appears to be finding a new means to perpetuate the status quo. The fact that it has made itself the centre of the regenerated city is even more troubling.

Way Out West

Birmingham's Bullring and Liverpool One are redolent of the difficulties associated with adapting Asian models of consumption led urbanism to pre-existing patterns of British city life. There are, however, some alternate modes of urban regeneration founded on the shopping mall that merit discussion. A parallel stream of enquiry must investigate the role of the typology in the brownfield regeneration that is expanding the territory of the city itself. Both paths of development import the fragmentary urbanism that is the hallmark of contemporary Chinese city development. But, if the former assimilates these lessons to reinvigorate existing city nodes, the agenda of the latter is based on the creation of entirely new urban fragments or meganodes. As Shane observes, these 'large urban fragments [stand] out against the surrounding urban fabric or field [...] forming a city archipelago of urban islands.' [48, p.249] They represent a more fundamental shift in the trajectory of urban development. From the rejuvenation of a Western metropolitan past, to an Asian, megalopolitan model of the future.

It is to Britain's world city, London, that the analysis now turns. As Fraser writes, it:

'is a constituent of urban regeneration that it involves new processes of growth once cities recover from periods of economic hiatus, man-made conflict or natural disaster. Not only do regeneration projects literally consist of different collections of atoms, they also infuse new approaches into whichever city they are in. Today the change for London lies in switching from previously dominant urban development models, stemming largely from America, to a condition that is openly global and multivalent. London is now part of a worldwide urban network that is shooting different nerve reactions across its emergent urban fabric.' [49, p.16]

London's brownfield sites represent just such an opportunity for disaster capitalism [50] to experiment with the creation of consumption-led, Asian-influenced, sub-centres under the moniker of urban revivification.

Opening in 2008, Westfield London (imaginatively named after its Australian developer and geographic location) marked the arrival of what was briefly the UK's largest in-town shopping centre in west London. Located in White City, Westfield London appropriated a huge brownfield site – part of which once housed the 1908 Franco-British exhibition – to create 150,000 square metres of retail floor area over its five floors,

housing some 270 shops, 68 eateries, a 14 screen cinema and 4500 car parking spaces [51]. Adopting Victor Gruen's out-of-town maxim, the site also fulfills the criterion of *maximum infrastructural promise*. Hugging the westerly edge of London proper it occupies a liminal zone, between the urban core and the sprawl of residential opulence beyond. Bordered by the major A3220 West Cross road link, it is just a stone's throw from West London's principal arterial route, the Westway. Two underground stations – served by three tube lines – and a purpose-built overground station provide public transport connections to the greater London area and beyond, with services running between Milton Keynes and East Croydon. This delivers a catchment of around 2.7 million people – 200,000 of whom work within only two miles of the site – with a weighted spending power of £5 billion [52]. Brownfield development in this form accords with the idea of 'accumulation by dispossession' [53, p.48–49], whereby capital expropriates urban dereliction to create colossal new revenue streams. The question is whether Westfield London is more than just a cash-cow in built form.

Mixed-usage is assured by the pre-existing urban fabric surrounding the site. Even if the neighbouring BBC headquarters is now decamping to Manchester, a combination of extant use patterns and Westfield's proposed £1 billion mixed-use expansion of the White City site [54] provide a horizontal tapestry of human habitation ripe for exploitation. As with Liverpool One, the horizontal emphasis could be considered indicative of the difference in density patterns between Britain and Asia. It also speaks of a scenario in which Westfield London amalgamates the in-town shopping mall with the parasitic agenda of its out-of-town variants. And true to the form of the latter, its presence has steadily siphoned off trade from London's West End and smaller neighbouring enclaves such as Kensington High Street and Shepherd's Bush Market [55]. Similar again to its out-of-town predecessors, the range of uses within the curtilage of the development site is strictly predicated on consumption. The nature of brownfield development, in this case, means that beyond the most utilitarian of strategic connections – and the retention of a pre-existing railway depot below grade – creative destruction is completely unfettered. Given a free hand, what kind of environment does Westfield London create?

'I went to Westfield in Shepherd's Bush recently. It was a disconcerting experience because it wasn't nearly as unpleasant as I'd hoped. It's quite light and airy, very convenient and usable. It has the slightly unreal quality of a peace-loving planet from a *Star Trek* movie. I hated that I didn't hate it. Even as a non-driver, I could see no obvious reason to shop in Oxford Street instead (let alone the Kilburn High Road).' [56]

Like Bluewater before it, Westfield London marks out its stall as a 'shopping mall for people who don't like shopping malls'. As the International Council of Shopping Centres says, 'Westfield and its centres invoke in the minds of shoppers and competitors a specific image of quality that no other shopping centre company has achieved.' [57] Here, architectural treatment was split between Westfield's in-house architect and Benoy, whose involvement with its spiritual precursor in Kent has already been documented. On the surface, what is immediately striking, is how differently Westfield London treats its formal elements. Rejecting a sober historicist aesthetic, the mall instead defines its visual identity through 'a relaxed Asian-style collagist aesthetic which combines fragments of recent architectural styles.' [49, p.19] Elements such as its swooping diagrid glazed roof and supporting aluminium 'trees', the double-height luxuriousness of its first floor malls, and the contemporary furniture that adorns their break-out spaces, marks a wholesale departure in aesthetic (Fig. 15).

As the eyes of the West have looked increasingly to the Orient's unprecedented urban expansion to inspire the future of its own cities it is not only space, but also form that has been assimilated. The unabashed modernity of China's shopping malls has become the 'cool factor' with which to brand the vehicle of Britain's urban regeneration. Moreover its appropriation of the radical aesthetics and movement based formal qualities employed by many more credible contemporary architectural practitioners, confers a putative sense of authenticity on proceedings that the post modern stylings of the Trafford Center, Bluewater et al have never had [12, p.201–238]. Material emphasis is on the modern, but also quality, durability and permanence. The illusion is only broken at the points where the collagist quality of this treatment becomes apparent – normally the limits of the mall and occasionally the transition between different branded zones. Westfield, Liverpool One, and to a lesser degree the Bullring, fetishize their material qualities to confer a sense of voguish monumentality on the shopping mall chassis. For the urban shopping mall it is another way of creating meaning in opposition, mothballing its cobwebbed grandparents out-of-town to create competitive advantage. Does Westfield London deliver an experience that is more than skin deep however?



Figure 15: Mall atrium at Westfield London (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

'At Westfield, inside is outside and outside is inside. Live green hedges authenticate enclosure, while metallic trees, frosted with silver ball bearings, dress the avenue of approach. The premature gush of a water feature duplicates the wave patterns of an undulating roof. The proper response, stepping through the mall entrance, is a happy slap of enchantment: a great tree of the world with dancing shadows.' [58, p.140–141]

The true test is in unraveling the diagram and in understanding how Westfield London connects to the outside world. As a pedestrian, the principal point of arrival temporarily suspends the insubstantiality of Westfield London's collagist illusion. Emerging from Shepherd's Bush station, a diagonal external street ushers the visitor away from the traffic of the Holland Park roundabout and toward the mall (**Fig. 16**). Dubbed as the 'Southern Terrace', this street creates yet another *al fresco* dining edge condition that softens the sense of a mall monolith. In common with the Asian shopping mall this is the cement that links the shopping mall to a wider programme of mixed-use. Dispersed to the perimeter of the mall plan it reflects the horizontal, rather than vertical, emphasis of its relational network. And as a point of first contact in the 'outside' world it gives an illusion of permanence to the clutter of modern fragments – reminiscent of Beijing's Sanlitun Village – that formalize Westfield London's architectural treatment.

Once you have passed through one of the three entrances that line this route, however, the game is soon evident. Westfield London's internal realm is in fact a two-storey double racetrack, accessed at each of its knuckles (**Fig. 17**). Four principle zones – each themed around its dedicated anchor store – converge under the building's main architectural event, the curvaceous roof of the central atrium. As an architectural device this should unite Westfield London's interior world, but the collaged pile up of modern branded luxury that clamors from every storefront simply reveals its insubstantiality. A further luxury enclave, The Village (not to be confused of course with the one in Beijing), deals with high-end shopping off the beaten track of the main mall and has been designed as a totalized luxury environment. Its elaborately sculpted ceilings and twinkling chandeliers further undermine the cohesiveness of the mall aesthetic and heighten the sense of unreality.

Stylistically, Westfield London may appear to have moved on from the world of Bluewater, but if these initial signs pointed towards a new vernacular in British shopping mall design, the spatial result is left thoroughly wanting. Zoned, centripetal movement is the order of the day. The sense of interiority is reinforced,



Figure 16: The 'Southern Terrace' at Westfield London (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

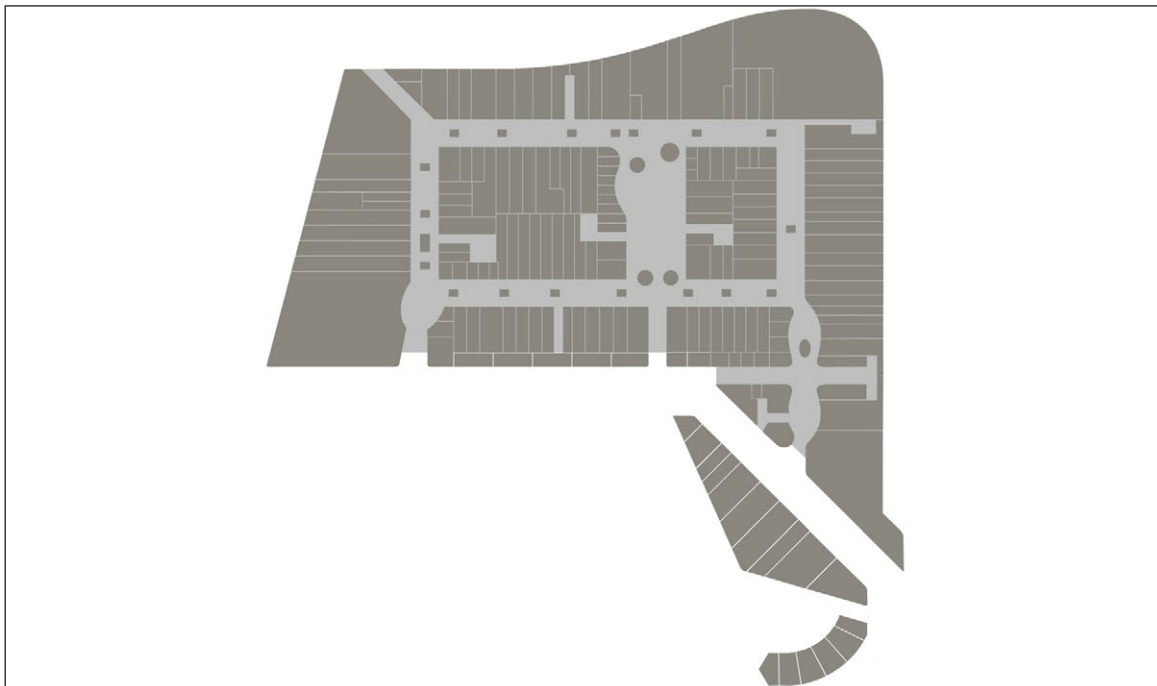


Figure 17: Floorplan of Westfield London (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

ironically, by a second visit to the Southern Terrace. With the exception of its two extremities, each of which opens on to a busy main road, this 'street' allows no view of, let alone contact with, the outside world. Raised by two storeys above the residential terraces of Wood Lane it is a buffer that provides momentary relief for those suffering from mall fatigue, or a reassuringly soft first step for the mall sceptic. In either case, it reinforces a sense of perceptual distance from the wider urban realm and offers a level of comfort that the latter supposedly cannot. Everything is focused inward, treating the site as a bounded block that parasitically

sucks in and contains urban life from the surrounding metropolis. Superficially, this may resemble the neo-Corbusian vernacular of Asian cities like Singapore, but the reality is that Westfield London has simply adapted the out-of-town form of the shopping mall to an urban setting. Lacking the inward heterogeneity to be a megastructure in the truest sense, it similarly fails to knit together the surrounding cityscape to establish a satisfying collective or mega-form. It is a heterotopia of illusion in the basest sense. A moment within a dispersed urban network, that realizes a fantasy of consumption and little more. Hop on the train at Kensal Rise. Hop off twelve minutes later, straight into Westfield London's jaws, cutting out the messy sprawl of west London in between. Time and space is compressed. The city is transformed into a Deleuzeian assemblage of lines and dots, or vectors and nodes. In this way, London begins to move toward the nodular structure of the Asian mega-city. But unprogrammed activity has no place here. This much feels clear from its inward, mono-functional form. As a container for the urban life of the city it needs to do so much more.

Olympic Wonderland

Westfield London's main failing is therefore that it treats the shopping mall as an end to urban development in itself. The most compelling examples in Asia, and on British shores, understand that the shopping mall instead needs to be woven into a larger whole. This means creating meaningful connections with the extant metropolis – something the closed form of Westfield London resolutely fails to do. Or, it means planning a more comprehensive parcel of urban space from scratch.

'According to Westfield, Stratford City is 'the largest retail-led development in the UK, probably in Europe'. When I went to see one of the developers at the company, he described it to me as 'the last big site in London', where 'you can start to see a small town'. With its seventy-three hectares of former railway land, it is, like Docklands, the ultimate brownfield site. Over the last fifteen years entirely new places have been created in these former industrial areas all over Britain, but of all these, because of its sheer size and its association with the Olympics, Stratford City is the flagship.' [22, p.18]

For six weeks during the summer of 2012, Stratford, in East London, was home to the most eye-catching heterotopia on the planet. London was never going to be able to match the conspicuous consumption of Beijing's 2008 Olympic Games and wisely focused on regeneration, sustainability and legacy instead. And for 70% of those with a golden ticket, the gateway to the games gave a first taste of what this legacy might be [49, 59].

Westfield, the Australian developer whose flag was already planted on the other side of town, had won their own golden ticket. 'Stratford City', the 180-acres of land earmarked in part for the Athletes' Village, fell under their ownership. Crucially, this parcel of land separated the Olympic Park from Stratford's transport infrastructure. When London secured the Olympics in 2005, the process of negotiating access rights to the park was paramount and created what Westfield have referred to as a 'synergistic win-win' [59]. The coalition of public and private capital clearly favoured Westfield. London 2012's Olympic gateway duly also became Europe's largest urban shopping mall.

At 175,000 square metres, the £1.7 billion Westfield Stratford City comfortably eclipses the major out-of-town shopping malls – Bluewater and Lakeside – in the orbit of East London. The statistical might doesn't stop there. 300 shops, 84 restaurants, a 17 screen cinema, a bowling alley, two hotels comprising 617 rooms, 36,500 square metres of office space and 5000 car parking spaces await all who enter [60]. 4.1 million people, with a weighted spending power of £3.24 billion, live within a 45-minute drive of the site [61]. And its public transport credentials are formidable. Two underground lines, the Docklands Light Railway, National Rail links between central London and East Anglia, and high-speed rail links to the Eurostar hub in Ashford, Kent, underline the *maximum infrastructural promise* of the site. In its first year it attracted 47 million visitors – an average of 800,000 people per week – who clocked up £896 million of sales [62]. The numbers tell a compelling story, but it is the performative dimensions of this gateway that I am more concerned with.

The fact of the gateway makes Westfield Stratford City a more complex affair than its sister mall in Shepherd's Bush. Both its public transport connections and attachment to the Olympic Park are significant urban tethers. Linking the two was never going to be easy. Stratford Station spits the visitor out on the wrong side of the tracks. An impassable belt of rail and road infrastructure lies between Stratford Old Town and Stratford City. Accordingly, in a nod to its Asian brethren, the mall refashions the notion of where the ground is (**Fig. 18**). Subterranean routes pass under the tracks to the internalized belly of the mall, but the principle



Figure 18: The raised ground planes at Westfield Stratford, London (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

point of arrival is from the plaza – Meridian Place – between Stratford's rail and bus stations (**Fig. 19**). Here there is a choice. Either one can cross the busy Great Eastern Road to enter Stratford Old Town to the east or, take the pedestrian route signaled by the overscaled, though decidedly unspectacular, two storey steps upward to the west. Westfield Stratford City is also 200 metres away at this point. But its promise is already discernable via a familiar urban syntax and reinforcement of perceptual borders. Up the steps and over the curving, viewless bridge that crosses the railtracks, each part of the movement sequence places another perceptual layer between, and reinforces a sense of depth from, the old town (**Fig. 20**). At this point are you presented with a *knuckle* that indicates your arrival in the mall proper. It is a mall of two halves, split between a 4-storey 'galleria' and an exterior realm described by Westfield's design director as 'a new London high street' [57, p.52]. To roof over the principle pedestrian route to the Olympic games was clearly considered to be a step too far. Its absence signals the mall's gateway function, albeit that there is little doubt about the true agenda of this space. At this first knuckle, the Olympic Park is still not in sight. Rather, the visitor is greeted with an open-air street lined with shops, hotel lobbies and trendy *al fresco* restaurants. It is a conceptual mirror of Westfield London, but also a mechanism that furthers perceptual distance from the city outside. Its pedestrian streets, two storeys above grade, signal a new urban realm entirely.

After a further 200 metres there is a second *knuckle* which joins the Olympic Axis – Stratford Walk – at an oblique angle. Here is a first view of the 'main event' that culminates with the main stadium (**Fig. 21**). Four cranked routes converge at the centre of the external mall. Instrumental axuality is once again adopted as a motif of social production, using oblique vistas of the malls worldly goods to keep visitors within its *racetrack* and ensure that the Olympic Park beyond is not able to achieve symbolic and invariant status [63, p.215–239]. One part of the diagram defies this orthodoxy. The enclosed portion of the mall that joins this *knuckle*, creates a dumb-bell along the linear vista between the mall and Olympic stadium. Where the gateway finally materializes, retail consumption and Olympic spirit are symbolically conflated in urban form.

In common with lessons learned from Chinese hybrids, there is little evidence of these anchors being deployed in a conventional, Western sense. John Lewis is the only recognizable department store in Westfield Stratford City. Sitting at the *knuckle* that marks the exterior section of the malls furthest extremity, it gives way to the more significant urban tether of the Docklands Light Railway and Stratford International rail station. This *knuckle* also connects to the curved interior mall that links back to the principle point of entry and is bisected by Stratford Way. A double triangle sets up the pedestrian route in plan, once again subscribing to



Figure 19: Meridian Place, Westfield Stratford, London (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).



Figure 20: The bridge connection between Meridian Place and Westfield Stratford, London (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

the maxim of perpetual motion. But, unlike the previously explored precedents, the mall's tethers, by virtue of the steps taken to distance themselves from the uncontrolled metropolitan realms beyond the site, are far less prone to generalized urban contamination.

It is a cliché in many ways, and one well trodden in criticism of the shopping mall, but the railway tracks leading to the site signify the moat, while the malls raised urban realm and limited permeability evoke the castle walls. Where the walled worlds of China such as Tianzifang, Xintinadi or Beijing's Sanlitun Village, from which this approach has been hybridized, are regulated by the fixed size of their urban blocks, the horizontal aggregation of density over the Westfield site has led to a much larger and far more alienating structure. Westfield went to great lengths in order to achieve these ends, appealing against the outline planning approval for the site (which stipulated that no building should be more than 110 metres in length) to



Figure 21: Stratford Walk, Westfield Stratford, London (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

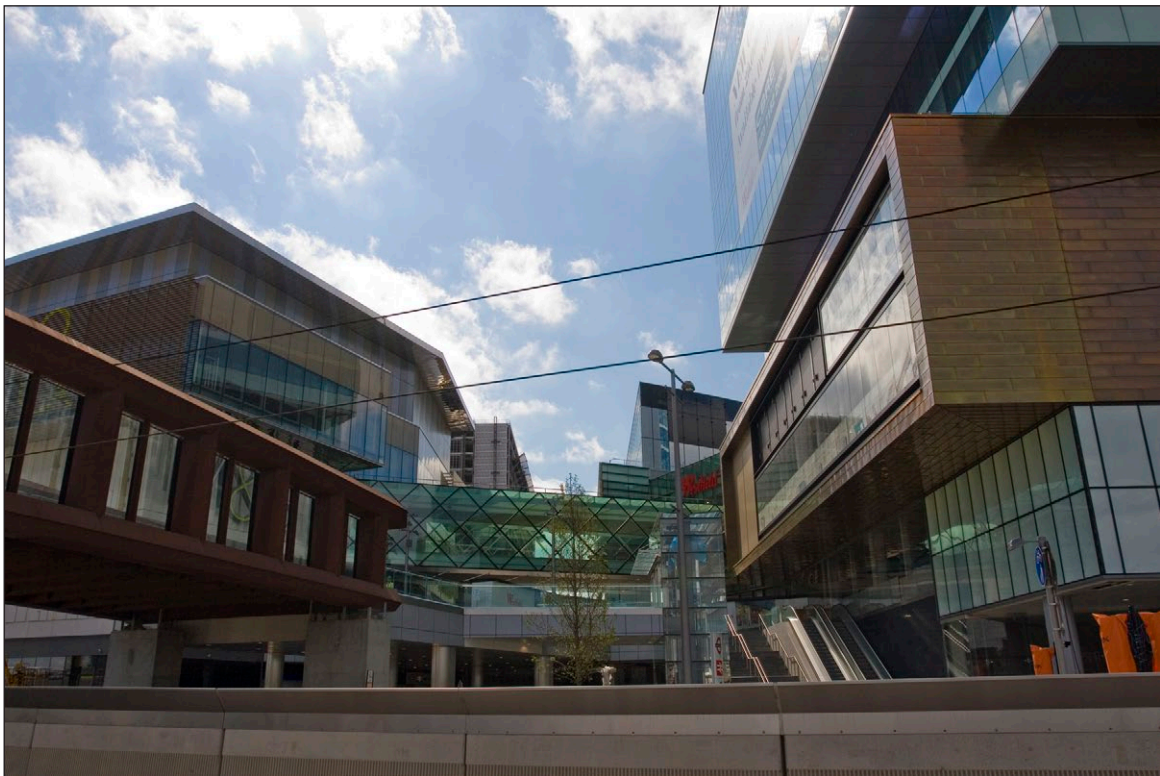


Figure 22: The visual assemblage of architectural fragments that gives Westfield Stratford its identity, London (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

create unbroken facades along its northern and eastern borders with the rail lines [57, p.46–48]. Echoing the approach taken at Westfield London, its designers' efforts to variegate the façade have been naively likened to the creation of a giant cake [57, p.51]. This sample-board aesthetic of modern architectural fragments does little to mitigate the brutality of its elevational edifices however (**Fig. 22**). Interiority is simply reinforced. Each tether pulls the visitor away, a long way away, from old Stratford. And, when the mall citadel does open up to a wider realm – the Olympic Park – it is only when it is ready, and strictly on its own terms.

This language of closure applies not only to Westfield Stratford City, but also to the environs of the Olympic Park and Athlete's Village as well. Where man-made infrastructure fails to present a closed border, the River Lea and its tributaries complete the job. Pedestrian movement to and from the site is throttled, rendering it a true heterotopia in form and function. Structurally severed from the new city, the park adopts its own internalized logic of movement based on the scales of its programmed elements and their unique requirements. The unique nature of the Olympic Park is one that will always be based on the production of desire lines between key architectural elements and the movement of high volumes of pedestrian traffic. And London has learned a number of important lessons from the application of such urban conventions, within building typologies such as the shopping mall.

For the Olympic Park's long vistas, this means the creation of a conflict between the eyes and the feet. Winding through the centre of the site, the River Lea provides the opportunity to create a waterside park that subverts the more conventional processional axes associated with such large-scale events. This presents a natural obstacle to the north-south vista between the Olympic Stadium and Velodrome at the park's extremities. Reversing the syntax of the shopping mall – which places the promise of its anchor stores just out of sight – the park's twists and turns render its visitors final destinations always visible but tantalizingly out of reach. Many would argue that this is exactly what parks should do, and it is not my intention to confuse apples with oranges here. Vectoral clarity, however, is brought to these movement patterns by the bridges that span the River Lea transverse to its visual axis. As is the case with the site exterior, pedestrian movement is throttled down to key points, exploiting openness and closure to consolidate the park's main events in an expanding loop that begins and ends with the shopping mall. The reversal of the mall's axial syntax merely represents a means of adapting this approach outward into a larger domain – albeit one that, to all intents and purposes, remains interiorized. It would seem that capital and culturally hybrid architectural form have conspired to transform the Olympic Park into an Arcadian carpet, primed for socio-economic manipulation.

If the Olympic Park appears to dance to the diagram-led tune of the adjacent shopping mall, the fear is that its architectural identity is headed in a similar direction. Beijing's Olympic effort was crowned by Herzog and de Meuron's monumentally wasteful, but architecturally sublime, Bird's Nest Stadium (**Fig. 23**). London's equivalent stadium, designed by global stadium conglomerate, Populous, is, by contrast, an exercise in the creation of an anti-monument. A literal expression of the generic kit of parts that comprise a major stadium,



Figure 23: The Bird's Nest Olympic stadium, Beijing (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).



Figure 24: Olympic stadium, Stratford, London (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

it is a pared back, dogmatically honest sum of its functional requirements (**Fig. 24**). Furthermore, the stadium acknowledges its ephemeral association with the fulfillment of its Olympic duties and is designed to be partially dismantled in anticipation of a more modestly scaled future. Mirroring the chameleon character of the mall's formal language, obsolescence replaces enduring monumentality in commemoration of the Olympic dream.

Obsolescence is, however, the framework within which a legacy masterplan will be realized. The 'one town centre, two hearts' [64] moniker of the Stratford Metropolitan masterplan makes the contrast between Stratford City and Stratford Old Town a fundamental characteristic of its urban strategy. And the respective titles of 'town' and 'city' leave little doubt as to where Stratford's ambition of becoming London's 'third city', are focused. Barring the most perfunctory of connections, it would appear that the walled world of Stratford City will remain largely intact and thus divisive. It is hard to imagine diversity thriving around its hard, impenetrable edges. Pedestrian movement will be funneled to selected and infrequent points. The mall will remain the core feature of the masterplan. It has been dubbed a mixed-use town centre, but in reality consolidates the commercial functions of the city into a single megaform. Office space and trendy apartments will claim the Athletes' Village and land cleared by the removal of Olympic infrastructure. In this sense a horizontally dispersed collective form will be established in consort with the shopping mall node. Orders of scale associated with these use patterns bear little resemblance to commensurate activities on the other side of the tracks however. Stratford Old Town, for any of its perceived failures, has grown organically and created heterogeneous relational networks based on spatial practices specific to its inhabitation. Conversely, Westfield Stratford City's urban grain will continue to be defined as an extension of the language and axial structure expounded by its mall, which striates the liminal territory between the Old Town and City (**Fig. 25**). Each section of the collective form is zoned, largely homogenous and easier to reinvent when freed of the entrenched and conflicting use patterns that define Stratford Old Town. Organic relational networks are seemingly sacrificed to the circuit of obsolescence, creative destruction and renewal that are the stuff of major capital. Relational networks will therefore be forced to emerge within and respond to a pre-defined framework of privatized city space, rather than allowing the former to incrementally shape the latter. Change, when it comes, will be total, and as usual driven from the top-down.

In its very conception, Stratford City acts as an urban island, a heterotopia [17–18] that zealously reinforces its borders to perpetuate an internalized world with its own logic and order. But when that world is only



Figure 25: Mall axis at Westfield Stratford, London (Photograph: Nicholas Jewell).

capable of externalizing the shopping mall's manipulation over a wider metropolitan field it lacks the conviction of an enduring cityscape. The question as to whether the architectural practitioners responsible for its creation are engaged in the production of a morally responsible urbanism is surely paramount. Is it time to say that enough is enough?

Stitched Up

For the oligarchy that funds the shopping mall's steamroller urbanism, of course, enough will never be enough. Even as I write, Croydon, in South London, is in the throes of major developments whose express intention is to turn London's Westfield twins into triplets. Once again, the name of the game is urban regeneration. It would appear that Westfield is intent on establishing dominion over any London sub-centre that aspires to 'third city' status. In effect, the Australian developer is staking a claim on the liminal sprawl between the city core and suburbia. Progressively constricting the transport hubs that link the two, this tranche of shopping mall development appears to act as a strategic bulwark, parasitically sucking activity from each condition through convenience and the exploitation of deficiencies perceived in either.

Westfield intend to pump £1 billion into Croydon's depleted Whitgift Centre, expanding its retail floor area to 139,353 square metres along with the familiar armory of additional statistics. Most significant are its proposed improvements to the public realm. 'Public realm improvements' can be a rather nebulous term and the reality of Westfield's intervention is one that is ultimately self-serving. Few would describe central Croydon as beautiful, but it does have a perfectly serviceable pedestrian high-street – North End – that the Whitgift Centre addresses, facing the smaller, competing, Centrale shopping centre. Clearly not content with its market share, Westfield's most striking public realm interventions are, on first inspection, its modifications to the exit from West Croydon Station and the tram stops connected by North End. Westfield plans to move each of these approximately 100 metres to the east. These will then align with the terminal points of the covered north-south axis, parallel to the existing high street, that will form the regenerated Whitgift Centre's principal mall space [65]. One's perception of where the high street is and the form it takes, is irrevocably altered. Adjusting the pedestrian flow in such a fundamental way is a naked expression of its developer's underlying agenda. Profit must be maximized at all costs, even if it means laying waste to the existing high street in the process.

Digging deeper, the proposal to bridge across Wellsley Road does, at least, provide a safe pedestrian realm over the ferociously busy highway to the east of the mall. But, this also taps into the new, Westfield-designed pedestrian plaza – lined with trendy open air eateries – that will greet the 20 million commuters passing through East Croydon Station per year. And, most significantly, this new urban space sets up an east-west pedestrian axis that bisects, and terminates within, the Whitgift Centre's central mall. There will, of course,

be the usual superficial niceties – public art, local sponsorship, streetscape improvements, etc. However, all these ‘gifts’ really do is obfuscate the harsh strategic reality behind each of Westfield’s key design moves. Each of Croydon’s transport hubs will be locked down, funneling the pedestrian through an urban plan that dances entirely to the Westfield tune.

When the shopping mall was located out-of-town it was easy enough for mainstream architectural practice to ignore this phenomena, excepting the odd glib dispatch in the architectural press [7, p.37]. The lack of a compelling thesis was troublesome then, and its need is even more pressing today. An emergent critical practice appears to have got little further than assimilating high-density Asian models of mall design and adapting them to the lower density British metropolis in the most workaday manner. In the adoption and adaptation of these design characteristics there seems to be a lack of desire to probe more deeply into what their constituent parts do. At best these proposals know when to leave the functioning cityscape alone. At worst, they are content to address the rubric of urban regeneration in the most unsustainable manner – hollowing out the town centre in a manner that is every bit as damaging as the effect of their suburban counterparts. We therefore need to do better. We need to grasp the market-based realities of urban regeneration, not to replicate them, but to understand the socio-economic and socio-spatial factors that influence their delivery. Only then can we unravel their component parts to explore how they can deliver holistic models of urban regeneration that are socially, environmentally and economically sustainable.

First of all we need to return to the abstract architectural form that has made the shopping mall a constituent of urban regeneration.

‘Banham would no doubt have recognized Westfield’s Stratford City as a massive, enclosed megastructure, despite its fragmentation and the transformation of many elements from earlier American mega-malls. He would surely be surprised at the concept’s return and its longevity. . .’ [66, p.107]

Shane correctly identifies the megastructural impetus that underpins Westfield Stratford City and many of the other precedents visited over the course of this study. He also alludes to the belief that the megastructure was already the work of history when Banham published his treatise on this architectural concept in 1976. The reality was of course that it was just getting started. Banham, unlike many architectural critics, did appreciate the potency of the shopping mall. He was fascinated by its role in the architectural ecology of his beloved city, Los Angeles [67]. He did not explore its Asian fusion with urban patterns of mixed-usage that has, in turn, ensured the longevity of the megastructure, but nonetheless, it is useful to re-visit some of his observations.

‘. . . the concept of the megastructure had been for one hectic decade the dominant progressive concept of architecture and urbanism. It had enjoyed that dominance because it offered to make sense of an architecturally incomprehensible condition in the world’s cities, to resolve the conflicts between design and spontaneity, the large and the small, the permanent and the transient.’ [68, p.10]

I have elucidated the specific cultural, environmental and ideological conditions that have generated a hybrid kind of Asian mall-led megastructure. I have also explored the political and financial nexus that has hybridized these characteristics in British nodes of urban regeneration. Banham’s statement, however, is revealing in so much as it makes clear the generalized characteristics common to both. This is the *making sense of an architecturally incomprehensible condition in the world’s cities*. Like the shopping mall, the megastructure renders an identifiable order within the sprawling urban condition and a theoretical antidote to the dislocation that the globalized condition can produce. In reality, it is no more effective at smoothing off the rough edges of the urban condition than the shopping mall, but it achieves the same resonance in modern society’s collective mindset to act as a form of urban anaesthesia. Behind the empty promises of a safe, environmentally constant, effortlessly comfortable world it provides the architectural vehicle through which big finance can plan and implement legible large-scale development. Coupled to the shopping mall, the power of this anaesthesia is rendered exponentially, as are the potential profits. This depends on the shopping mall fulfilling a role as civic space – the condition that has allowed the megastructure to propagate and endure in an Asian field of critical urban practice. And while the British hybrids explored by this study disaggregate Asian mixed-use density over a more horizontal urban field – resulting in a collective or mega form as opposed to a megastructure – the shopping mall remains the device that hoovers up pedestrian and

vehicular infrastructure to bind its expanded programme together. As an urban entity, the trajectories of the shopping mall and megastructure now appear irrevocably linked.

What does this kind of hybrid urbanity mean? Western commentaries continue to be both enthralled by the speed, scale and technological advancement of the Asian tiger, while appalled by the manifest inequalities and human rights abuses that its totalitarian regimes produce [69–71]. It is, at times, all too easy to judge an emergent socio-political milieu 'over there' which we perceive as inferior to our own entrenched democratic framework. Additionally, it is easy to forget capitalism's hidden hand on both sides of the spectrum and its seeming indifference to the nuance of such concerns. We would be better served by acknowledging that the morphology of our own cities is changing to adopt a specifically Asian bent, but this should not be accepted as the end of the matter. As Lefebvre understood, the abstract space of a socio-political milieu is produced through the medium of urban form [72, p.49–53] and the adoption of the shopping mall in this context appears to be far from benign in terms of its long term consequences. If these urban forms increasingly resemble the power structures of cultural and political entities that we purport to criticize, then what does this mean for the future of our cities?

If demonstration were needed of where the British government's priorities lie in this regard, one only needs to look back to the riots that briefly gripped London in August 2011. While many high streets were looted in a smash-and-grab free-for-all, and while Tottenham and Croydon burned, police were scrambled to Westfield London and the Stratford Olympic site [73]. Croydon's malls were also protected – the hammer of regeneration may be about to fall, but Westfield already had its teeth into Croydon high street. The defense of these citadels of consumption at the expense of the traditional high street is indicative of the extent to which public policy, and as a result the spaces of our cities, are now in the thrall of private capital. Not only were 'social and economic tensions connected to such symbolic regeneration projects [. . .] suppressed' [49, p.10], the creative destruction of the older, less malleable, high street was accelerated. Whether a deliberate or accidental by-product of the patchy security effort that surrounded the riots, it remains the case that a new set of brownfield opportunities has been opened up, for disaster capitalism to re-make the city in the shopping mall's image.

Does this equate to an incremental simmering down of the modern British metropolis, creating a series of heterotopias that treat their inhabitants as obedient collective subjects? The legislative agenda that accompanies the production of these city spaces would certainly seem to point in this direction. Governed by the internalized logic of the BID, regulation of each of these spaces has been insidiously transferred away from local government to the domain of private capital [22, p.40–58]. Anchored by the shopping mall, the BID megaform allows the mall's pseudo-public spatial logic to be extroverted over a wider field. Civic freedoms are subjected to a behavioural code determined and enforced by private ownership. Accordingly the appropriation of public space becomes a contractual affair, which delivers varying degrees of publicness to its assorted stakeholders. In the case of the shopping mall, the right to the city is literally predicated on one's ability to consume. If such repressive measures are required to perpetuate this vision, it is surely indicative of a metropolitan model that fails to understand how a heterogeneous society actually behaves in urban space. It is the model, not the society that is flawed.

The problem is hence not that cities in Britain and other Western countries are beginning to resemble the urban conditions found in China. An open, multivalent condition, and the hybrid opportunities that it brings should be celebrated, not denied. The problem is the degree to which private capital is trenchant in the production of both. Within the heterotopic cell structure of the Chinese city, the shopping mall furtively assimilated itself into extant urban patterns that were re-imagined via the vehicle of the megastructure. Its fiscal success drove its propagation and subsequent adoption as a spur of urban regeneration on our own shores. But, if the historic Chinese heterotopia were the spatial tool that, in theory, regulated a collective subject, the class basis of the modern heterotopia is a wholly divisive, brutal social condenser. Striation between the haves and have-nots has often been the stuff of fictionalized, Ballardian dystopias [74–77]. And it would appear that the real-life urban shopping mall is now being tainted by a distinctly dystopic brand of spatial practice. China's shopping malls have, for some time, been the scene for suicidal impulses [12, p.179–200, 78–79]. This appalling phenomena has been replicated twice in quick succession at Birmingham's Bullring [80–81], and a failed attempt has also taken place at Westfield Stratford [82]. Marginalized by the forced dispossession that favors a moneyed elite and estranged from the man-made apparatus of consumption, it appears that the dispossessed have little option but to sacrifice themselves on its altar. The social constructs of the shopping mall are thus revealed as empty in the most brutal of ways.

A morally, socially responsible architecture can no longer perpetuate such a state of affairs. It must, however, also acknowledge the longevity and continuity of the shopping mall typology. If the shopping mall is indeed here to stay and now penetrates every facet of the built environment – as Koolhaas and others have suggested – then critical theory needs to be mobilized to question the types of social space that it seeks to produce. What is at stake is the right to shape a free-thinking, progressive field of urban interaction. Only by fully understanding the machinery of consumption that permeates the shopping mall can its excesses be resisted, allowing the urban realm to be privileged as a more sentient, egalitarian field.

Competing Interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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