Parks, Malls, and *The Art of War*

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ABSTRACT

In the post-war years, Americans migrated *en masse* into suburbs punctuated by shopping centers that served as social and recreational hubs. Concerned about the civic wellbeing of shopping-centered suburbanites, a group called the Agora Coalition formed in the 1990s to enhance malls' civic functioning through a combination of design and programming strategies. This paper presents an adversarial alternative to such an approach. Rather than working "with" the mall as its prodding civic conscience, the paper recommends strategizing "against" it on behalf of civic life. The paper reveals four vulnerabilities in malls that such thinking can exploit: mall users may not find malls ego-enhancing places in which to socialize; the current economic recession has pointed up that many mall goods are frivolous nonessentials; malls are less likely to engender topophilia than are local public landscapes; and, as successful retail institutions in a competitive capitalist environment, malls employ successful strategies for gaining customers that designers of civic spaces can emulate. Indeed, the adversarial, zero-sum approach recommended here exemplifies the use of market-honed, "mall" strategizing. To nurture such thinking, I refer to Sun-Tzu's classic treatise *The Art of War*. The 2,400-year old text is required reading in MBA programs nationwide and presumably informs the thinking of many who build and manage malls. What would these people do if they were now competing against their creations on behalf of civic life?

Introduction

THE DECADES FOLLOWING World War II witnessed the radical redistribution of the American population as (disproportionately white, middle-class) urbanites migrated into new, mass-produced suburbs. The dispersal aroused keen geographical and sociological interest in the same questions that had preoccupied Durkheim, Tönnies, and others during the demographic upheavals of urbanizing, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe (only now the direction of population movement was reversed). What would become of the networks of community built up in the city as its residents decanted into the suburbs? How might social relationships endure in the

superblock hinterlands, behind the whitewashed picket fences of detached, single-family houses?

One optimistic meditant on the question was Victor Gruen, an Austrian refugee from the Nazis who became a prominent shopping-center designer in post-War America. Gruen believed that his creations—shopping centers—would provide the material temptations to lure suburbanites together under a single roof, and the civic-oriented spaces, activities, and events to propel them into new networks of social interaction. Gruen believed that shopping centers would establish themselves as the civic centers of suburbia.

After a prolific and influential career—one that earned him the sobriquet “the father of the American mall”—Gruen retired in bitter disappointment because, he felt, the real estate industry had consistently undercut his vision. In a diatribe he wrote that “greedy” developers had been less than faithful to his plans. As a consequence, his “bastard” malls had failed to achieve their civic function (Lukas 2004).

In the 1990s, long after Gruen’s departure from the scene, a group of scholars, architects, and planners calling themselves the Agora Coalition formed to, in effect, reform Gruen’s bastards and make them function the way Gruen had wanted. The group aims to retrofit and reprogram malls to make them better-functioning civic spaces. Benjamin Barber, the Coalition’s leading academic spokesperson, has written that this strategy is necessary, since Americans spend much of their time in malls (Barber 2001). With an air of resignation, then, the Coalition follows them inside and tries to make the settings more civic. Thus the Coalition accepts Gruen’s initial premise—that shopping malls are necessary to the invigoration of American civic culture.

This paper rejects the (compound) idea that malls are givens upon which our civic health depends. Shopping malls are privately owned enterprises geared toward making a profit. Their managers cannot be expected to grant their patrons the same freedoms of expression and behavior that the public enjoys in the spaces that malls often imitate architecturally (and whose niche malls largely fill in suburban America)—squares, sidewalks, parks, and so on. No existing law grants public-rights advocates sufficient power to “overhaul” malls into robustly civic spaces if the management does not itself will it (Barber 2001). As things stand, shopping malls undermine actual public spaces by offering ersatz alternatives that promote a truncated model of citizenship and a deformed image of nature. Given these propositions, the Agora Coalition’s strategy of working “with the mall” makes sense only as

an admission of defeat: public space is to be privatized, the strategy implies, with only the details of the occupation to be worked out.

This paper presents an alternative to the Coalition's stance. After discussing the rise of shopping malls as pseudo-public spaces in suburban America, and elaborating on how malls undermine the public realm, it advances a strategy of resistance to them. The strategy begins by recognizing that, regardless of the legal constraints to overhauling malls, shopping centers are not indomitable hegemonic presences to which we must surrender a portion of our civic culture. By refusing to accept them as givens, and instead scrutinizing them as competitors against other, more truly public spaces for the prize of citizen presence, we may discover that malls have vulnerabilities that can be exploited. In the final section of the paper, I describe four vulnerabilities: mall users do not seem to find malls satisfying or ego-enhancing places in which to socialize; the economic recession has caused numerous malls to close and has pointed up the fact that many mall goods are frivolous nonessentials; it is doubtful that members of a community feel strong emotional attachments to malls as they often do to local public landscapes; and lastly, as premier retail institutions in a competitive capitalist society, malls have honed successful strategies for gaining customers that can be emulated by designers of civic spaces and used against them. Indeed, the adversarial, zero-sum thinking embraced by this paper is an example of using a capitalistic "mall" strategy against the mall. In order to nurture this thinking, I refer to Sun-Tzu's classic military treatise *The Art of War*. The 2,400-year-old text has been embraced by contemporary business theorists and practitioners including, presumably, some who build and manage malls. What would these people do if they were now competing against their creations on behalf of civic life?

The City Manqué

Since the 1920s, suburban shopping centers have brought the amenities of downtown to residents of the urban fringe (Longstreth 1997). Critics compare these outlying rivals of downtown shopping districts to theme parks, for they employ urban décor and public space elements to create the illusion of being part of an integrated urban environment (Goss 1993, Lukas 2004, Jones and Wills 2005). Others see shopping malls as authentic, *sui generis* places, the commercial and civic nodes of the dominant American settlement form. Such a perspective, indeed, animated the work of Victor Gruen, the influential, Viennese-born designer of numerous shopping malls during the

post-World War II suburban construction boom. A socialist who had fled the Nazis in Europe, Gruen designed the first completely enclosed, climate-controlled mall and the first mall with two anchor tenants straddling rows of smaller shops. Having invented these successful, now-ubiquitous mall types, Gruen earned his reputation as the “father” of the American mall. Yet he was not entirely an apostate of his communalistic beliefs. As he witnessed the dispersal of urban populations into sprawling, post-war suburbs, Gruen came to believe that community life could be maintained in this environment only by the spatial orchestration of retail capitalism into a cooperative, civic form. The individual businesses of a shopping center would recognize their need to band together and “submit to certain over-all rules in order to further their common welfare” (Gruen and Smith 1960, 11; see also Dyer 2003). Moreover, the space of the shopping center would facilitate the “banding together” of the residents of the surrounding superblocks to ensure their collective well-being. “It’s the merchants who will save our urban civilization,” Gruen once asserted (Lukas 2004). He presented his vision in a book titled *Shopping Towns USA* (1960), in which he and co-author Larry Smith wrote that shopping centers would “serve a multitude of human needs and activities” (11). Suburbanites would congregate in the shopping centers for social activities, entertainment, and edifying lectures as well as to render themselves vulnerable to “a subtle attack by tasteful presentation of merchandise” (Dyer 2003, 265). Thus the well-designed center would facilitate not only consumption but also the sort of “participation in modern community life that the ancient Greek Agora, the Medieval Market Place and our own Town Squares provided in the past” (Farrell 2003, 9–10; see also Cohen 1996, 1056). That Gruen was a believer rather than a beguiler about this is evident not only in his writings and designs, but also in his increasingly bitter feelings towards the real estate industry. Because newly constructed shopping malls typically raised adjacent property values, developers would sacrifice the community-oriented elements of Gruen’s plans and sell the land to speculators (Lukas 2004). In 1968, after years of disappointment, Gruen retired and moved back to Vienna. There he penned a diatribe against American real estate developers. “(T)he environmental and humane ideas underlying...the original centers were not only not improved upon—they were completely forgotten,” he wrote (Farrell 2003, 14; see also Kowinski 1985). “I refuse to pay alimony for those bastard developments” (Lukas 2004).

Shopping malls not only recreated the atmosphere of bustling downtowns, but also of the parks people went to for escape and connection with nature. In this way, malls encapsulated the full range of urban experience. J. C. Nichols' Country Club Plaza, built in 1922 outside of Kansas City, is one of the earliest examples of malls containing a park (Farrell 2003). Victor Gruen's Cherry Hill Mall, which opened in 1961 in New Jersey, had an island paradise-themed greenhouse with living trees, a twenty-foot high aviary containing a variety of tropical birds, and a humidified climate (Dyer 2003). Over time, discrete, park-like areas would transgress their borders to permeate entire atmospheres of shopping malls. Using potted plants and trees (often preserved, and blended with urethane and fiberglass), landscaping, children's play areas, and "props" such as benches, garbage cans, and light poles, designers made whole shopping centers "feel like parks" (Farrell 2003, 35). The effect was reinforced by the appearance of tenant businesses that carried names and shelves of merchandise that evoked the idea of nature: Natural Wonders, the Nature Company, Animal Lover, and so on (Farrell 2003). These are thoroughly post-Enlightenment evocations—nature-dominated, sanitized, and ready for instant, gratifying consumption—making them equivalent to and interchangeable with the malls' evocations of urbanity. Thus while green, parklike areas do exist in some malls, more generally nature and urbanity are conflated to produce a single, all-permeating hybrid form of simulation (Goss 1993). For the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard, the simulation combines even more contradictions. The functions of work, leisure, nature, and culture "which once generated anxiety and complexity in real life, in our 'anarchic and archaic towns and cities,' all these sundered activities, these activities which were more or less irreducible one to another, are now at last mixed and blended, climatized and homogenized in the same sweeping vista of perpetual shopping. All are now rendered sexless in the same hermaphroditic ambience of fashion!" (Baudrillard 1998, 29–30).

Baudrillard's exuberant prose parodies the twentieth-century suburban zeitgeist. After the inaugural shopping mall construction boom of the mid-1950s, the mall became a cultural icon, "the cathedral of our new secular civilization" (Barber 2001, 204), as inextricably tied to the nation's soul as the automobile and the mass-produced suburban house, which had together created its niche. In 2004 there were more shopping malls (47,000) than high schools in the United States (Lukas 2004), and Americans were spending the bulk of their discretionary time outside the home in them (Oldenburg

1989). Malls became fixtures in popular consciousness and culture commensurate to their importance to everyday life. They took supporting (and sometimes starring) roles in movies and television shows, and provided settings for songs, novels, and comics. If ambivalent notes were sometimes struck, reflecting a Puritan strain in our culture that remains ill-at-ease with conspicuous consumption, the vacantly civic plazas of malls themselves offered soothing balm wrapped in the ethos of irony (Goss 1993). Frank Zappa's song "Valley Girl" christened a generation who came of age amidst the mannequins and "*mise en spaces*" (Davidson 2008, 172) of the mall.¹ Ironically, the Sherman Oaks Galleria—praised in the song for "like all these like really great shoe stores"—stands surrounded by one of the nation's most ethnically and linguistically diverse populations (Zappa 1982). (This was less true in 1982 when the song came out than it is today, but the Valley was already marked by growing demographic complexity). "Valley Girls" took little notice of the outside world, however. The song expresses amusement at how teenagers in the mall were so sheltered that, like an indigenous tribe in a remote coastal cove, they evolved their own dialect. Valley Girl slang was "clearly a linguistic response to the mall as public culture and space," notes Kevin Starr (2004, 315). "In the absence of competing institutions—that is, competing voices and dictions—Valleyspeak spread from mall to mall, starting in the San Fernando Valley and sweeping across America, as a way for teenagers to bond with each other, through a specialized vocabulary, mantric patterns of interjection, and singsong intonation" (Starr 2004, 315).²

The shopping mall established itself in American culture as the metropolitan appendage of suburbia. In contrast to the intentions of Gruen and other early planners, the appendage did not serve any real civic function. Instead malls were civic simulacra, ersatz downtown shopping districts conflated with ersatz public parks. An ocean of ink has been spent in criticism of malls for turning out this way. Far less has been spent, in academia, in working out practical and constructive solutions to the problems caused by Americans' indulgence in malls. Most prominent among the constructive thinkers are the members of Benjamin Barber's Agora Coalition, a not-for-profit group made up of academics but also architects, planners, and other professionals from New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, who are "dedicated to creating, conserving and where necessary recreating public and civic space" (Barber 2010). Conceding that Americans have largely abandoned their public spaces in favor of shopping malls, the Agora Coalition has resolved to follow them inside and make malls more civically meaningful. The

strategy includes urging public officials to protect free speech in malls and improving public transportation, road patterns, and mall design so that malls better articulate with their social and ecological contexts (Barber 2001). The Coalition seeks, in other words, to disinter the ambitions of Victor Gruen and make malls real “shopping towns.”

While efforts to insert public-space functions into shopping malls are laudable, they do not make malls truly “civic” (from the Latin *civic-us*: “belonging to citizens,” *Oxford English Dictionary* 1989)). Shopping malls might be made more multi-use, but they limit or exclude forms of community life that do not harmonize with the interests of their corporate tenants. Even while they exploit their niche as (and often call themselves, with capital letters) “town centers”—some to the extent of having post offices, college campuses and other public-oriented institutions on their premises—they are not public spaces. In 1980, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that mall owners could ban the distributing of political literature on their properties because this could interfere with the primary purpose of a mall, which is shopping. The Court allowed, however, that individual states could “furnish an independent basis that surpasses the guarantee of the federal constitution in protecting individual rights of free expressions and assembly” (Satterthwaite 2001, 115). Have individual states taken advantage of this allowance, exercising what amounts to a right of fractional eminent domain—the right to take not entire ownership of a property but some of the control of its use for a public purpose? The example of California, which is among the states with the strongest free-speech protections in malls, is revealing (Farrell 2003, 217). In California, mall owners dictate when, where, and how political speech may occur on their premises. For example, the Northridge Fashion Center, a large mall in the San Fernando Valley, has a “General Policy for Public Communication Activity” that applies to leafleting, collecting signatures for ballot initiatives, and similar activities. According to the document, such activities may take place only at designated “Community Areas” and only after the hopeful communicator submits an Application Form to the Management Office at the mall at least thirty-six hours ahead of time. The mall’s separate “Code of Conduct” makes clear that “Any activity inconsistent with the general purpose of the property, which is shopping, dining, visiting theaters or offices for business purposes” will not be allowed. I was given the documents by the mall’s manager after a security guard stopped me from interviewing mall patrons for this research project.

If malls cannot be made civic places, the equivalent of the town squares, then neither can they be made parks—and not simply because these are also civic places. These they are, however: like sidewalks and squares, parks are traditional public fora in which free speech rights enjoy strong constitutional protection (Mitchell 2003). In this sense they are simply another part of the civic realm. Though people may think of parks as functionally equivalent to malls—that is, places of escape from daily stresses including those induced by pondering weighty civic discourse—they are, in fact, meaningful reservoirs of democratic rights. As protected in parks, notes Don Mitchell (2003, 128), these rights offer the possibility for critical opinion formation “within which political movements could organize and expand into wider arenas.” For this reason, no amount of greenery can turn a mall into a park.

But parks are, of course, more than leafy civic space. One of their main functions is to offer urbanites contact with nature. “Nature” is a socially constructed concept, and the meanings invested in it by one generation will influence the way in which subsequent generations understand and value the natural world (Lidskog 1998, Cronon 1995, Cohen 2004). For example, Kong *et al.* (1990) found that the presentation of greenery in Singapore impacted children’s views of nature. Most greenery in the island city-state is carefully managed for utilitarian and aesthetic purposes. As a result, the researchers found, Singaporean children tend to show little affinity for nature and assign its preservation a low political priority. In light of such research, should we be concerned that Americans spend a good deal of time surrounded by “nature” in the form of half-artificial trees and the other “greenery” carefully constructed and arranged to beautify shopping malls?

A Perspective Against the Mall

Shopping malls appear as both city streets and parks, but in important ways they are unlike either. For this reason, the Agora Coalition’s strategy of working with malls to create greater congruence between their function and their appearance cannot achieve total success. At best, it can produce a more-convincing simulacrum of urbanity—one that, troublingly, would bear the Coalition’s implied seal of approval. What is therefore required, I believe, is a strategy converse to the Coalition’s—one that refuses to follow Americans into the mall and instead strives to bring them back out. From the perspective out of which this strategy arises, every visit to a mall entails an unacceptably high opportunity cost for the public realm. This cost is the loss of potential neighborly contact, the gaining of social capital, the estab-

lishment of affective bonds between people and their neighborhoods, and so on. An immediate objection to such zero-sum thinking is that it overstates the inherent antagonisms between the private and public realms, or at any rate between malls and public spaces. The one's gain is not necessarily always the other's loss. After all, civic functions do occur at malls. People occasionally meet their neighbors in food courts. "Community Areas" get used for community purposes sometimes. More outstandingly, shopping centers bring tax revenue and jobs to municipalities. For this reason, public space planners are not at war with shopping-center developers. Indeed, there are clearly arenas in mall design and management in which both private and public interests can cooperate for mutual benefit. It is, of course, within these arenas that the Agora Coalition positions itself to work "with the mall" to maximize its civically benevolent (or at least nontoxic) side. But the space of this arena is only so large. What I suggest is a complementary approach by public-space advocates outside the arena. This more radical and adversarial approach refuses to allow the mall to exploit its niche as suburbia's *de facto* "downtown" while curtailing possibilities for citizenship. The perspective underlying this approach assumes that a community's truly public spaces would function better if citizens used them more, and used malls less. It further recognizes that malls undermine the public world outside them. Lastly, it recognizes that for all of their success over the past half-century, malls are not indomitable components of the natural order before which we must prostrate our civic culture. Below I outline how malls undermine the public realm and how they are vulnerable.

Malls Undermine the Public Realm

To illustrate how malls undermine the public realm, we first must recognize that suburbs have become more urban in the past forty years. This change has shifted the basis of the pseudo-urban mall's appeal. Whereas formerly the "urban"—the bustle and glitter of the environment—provided the main basis of this appeal, today it is the "pseudo"—the fact of private ownership and control that lies behind the pretense of urban experience—that seems most attractive to mall shoppers. The perception that malls are "safe havens" in the chaotic spaces of urbanizing suburbs can undermine those spaces by increasing their actual chaos.

Vulnerabilities in the Mall Provide Opportunities for Exploitation

I identify four vulnerabilities in malls that advocates of other public spaces can exploit: (1) Mall users may not find malls satisfying or ego-enhancing places in which to socialize; (2) the economic recession has caused numerous malls to close and has pointed up the fact that many mall goods are frivolous nonessentials; (3) it is doubtful that members of a community feel strong emotional attachments to malls as they might to local public landscapes; and (4) as premier retail institutions in a competitive capitalist society, malls have honed successful strategies for gaining customers that can be emulated by advocates of civic life and used against them.

Malls Undermine the Public Realm

Early shopping centers attracted customers by simulating urbanity (Longstreth 1997). Residents of the urban fringe could enjoy the bustle and excitement of urban districts in shopping centers located far from downtown. Since the 1990s, malls have gone to even greater lengths to provide urban glamour. In place of the standard department-store anchors, there have arisen “soft” or entertainment anchors that lure people to the mall for activities other than shopping. Restaurants, cinemas, various forms of live entertainment, and creative architectural design make malls “experience-oriented” rather than “product-oriented” (Jerde Partnership 2004, 8). Yet the mall’s significance has changed not only because of the new offerings inside; equally important has been the transformation of the environment outside. In the past four decades, suburbia has partly urbanized, a process that undermines the mall’s novelty as an “urban oasis” on the margins. This urbanization is less apparent in newer, outer-ring suburbs than in older ones nearer the urban core. The newer suburbs are more likely to remain socially isolating environments—seas of single-family housing units embedded in superblocks that lack communication to major roads (Oldenburg 1989, Dagenhart 2008). As Sharpe and Wallock argued in 1994, these sprawling outer developments have not turned into cities, contrary to the claims of numerous observers. However, even if “edge cities,” to use Garreau’s (1991) term, are not fully *fledged* cities, they are not traditional suburbs either. They experience higher rates of construction, service, and retail industry growth than central cities (Fishman 2000, Kotkin 2005). Moreover, evidence from southern California contradicts Sharpe and Wallock’s observation that suburbs are impervious to ethnic integration. Although suburbia does remain disproportionately white, Allen and Turner (1997, Allen 2005) demonstrate

that many suburbs—especially those built on the metropolitan fringe after 1970—have become notably diverse.

At the same time, research in southern California suggests that planners of new suburban areas are integrating urban design concepts into their work. Ajay Garde (2008) interviewed senior planners in the five-county metropolitan region and found that they are responding to traditional “suburban” problems like sprawl, social segregation, high resource demand, and lack of community by introducing “city sense”—a mix of physical design elements and policies that instill urban values—into their plans. The new projects typically include features that aim to improve the quality of the public realm, encourage the use of alternative modes of transportation, create opportunities for activities at different times of the day, improve local tax bases, create well-connected buildings, streets and open spaces, and contribute towards “changing the overall character of the project area from suburban to urban” (Garde 2008, 333).

As new suburbs become modestly more urban, older ones are becoming immodestly more so. In first- and second-ring suburbs, infill and retrofit projects are creating city-like environments with high population densities. As the spatial limits of metropolitan areas become reached, these older, more centrally located suburbs are growing to contain ever-larger percentages of total metropolitan populations. These crucial areas “will be the primary opportunities for shaping American urban regions of the 21st century” writes Dagenhart (2008, 343). Again, southern California proves exemplary. Large segments of the San Fernando Valley—once iconic as “America’s suburb”—now have city-like population densities, as ethnically diverse central city residents, supplemented by international immigrants, continue settling there (Maida 2001, Allen 2005, Kotkin 2005). Mixed-use developments adjacent to transit hubs have begun to appear, as in North Hollywood, which create lively urban nodes. More innovative construction and design work is needed, however. The San Fernando Valley suffers from inefficient public transportation, a lack of affordable housing, areas of grinding poverty, low-quality public schools, rising crime rates, and other negative aspects of city life (Kelley 1999, Covarrubias and Winton 2007).

The citified suburb—a conflicted hybrid of urban and suburban features, qualities, and values—has built up around the mall. The basis of the mall’s appeal has changed as a result. While the mall once provided an “urban oasis” in sprawling suburbs, it now provides shelter from the disorder—real and imagined—of the encroaching city (Flusty 1994, Goss 1993). With its

thick, windowless exteriors, security-guarded entrances and ubiquitous, ceiling-mounted dome cameras, malls appear to some cultural observers as panopticon prisons or militaristic fortresses (Davis 1990). George Romero's film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) has been interpreted as a perceptive early portrait of this new function of shopping malls. They shelter disproportionately white, middle-class suburbanites from the "others" who have invaded their world, just as it protected the film's characters from rampaging zombies.

Yet the mall's metamorphosis into "interdictory" space may have been a response to more than just the (pseudo or actual) urbanization of suburbia (Flusty 1994). The social structure of suburbia itself may have preselected for this outcome as well. One reaches this conclusion, at any rate, from ethnographic research on suburbia by anthropologist M. P. Baumgartner (1988). Based on his detailed study of conflict management in an affluent New York City suburb, Baumgartner found that suburbanites maintain a peaceful community atmosphere with strategies of "avoidance" (11). Avoidance strategies—which in Baumgartner's study took such forms as children turning deaf ears to their parents' reprimands, husbands mumbling automatic apologies to their wives to shoo away criticisms, and people ignoring individuals who have offended local norms when encountering them—predominate more in suburbia than in most other settlement forms. Oddly, avoidance is a strategy that suburbanites share with members of "the simplest human societies," hunter-gatherers such as the Hadza of Tanzania (11). Why is this so?

Baumgartner's answer is that both suburbanites and members of hunter-gatherer societies have high levels of geographic mobility and material independence, and low population density. In cultures where direct, confrontational styles of conflict management prevail, third-party authority figures are often relied upon to intervene. Individuals whose social position calls forth respect and whose judgment is universally accepted help settle scores. In suburbia, however, social networks tend to be thin, fluid, and homogeneous. Such conditions favor the development of "a culture of avoidance" (Baumgartner 1988, 11). When called upon to intervene in conflicts, even the police and judges tend to counsel avoidance as a solution.

The fortress-like mall seems well-suited to suburban culture, because it, too, facilitates avoidance. It can shield people from conflicts in both the private and public realms. People can visit the mall to escape a tension-filled home. They will also be screened from unregulated contact with "others" that might cause anxiety. As an outstanding example of how the mall facilitates this latter form of avoidance, consider the malling of Halloween—the real-

world parallel of the horror film scenario mentioned above. The trend of taking children to a safe and “sanitized” mall on Halloween, instead of one’s own neighborhood, began in the 1980s (Where’s the Scare 2006). This was a decade in which urban paranoia increased in response to diverse historic factors, including continuing high levels of international in-migration in many urban places, declining real wages for the middle class, and dramatic increases in both homelessness and inner-city gang violence (the latter tied to the spread of the crack-cocaine trade). As stoked by the media, politicians, advertisers, and special-interest groups, these anxieties undermined parents’ trust in urban areas, often including their own neighborhoods. The memory of the Tylenol poisonings that killed seven people in Chicago in 1982 helped focus much of this anxiety onto Halloween, a ritual in which strangers gave out candies (Lavoie 2010). Researchers have proven the “Halloween sadist” who puts razor blades in apples to be an urban myth (Best and Horiuchi 1985, Glassner 1999). Nonetheless, across America, parents began taking their children to the mall instead of around the block on Halloween.

The block is part of what sociologists call the “parochial realm”—the area “characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbors who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within ‘communities’” (Lofland 1989, 19). In many metropolitan areas, writes sociologist Lyn Lofland, the parochial realm is “radically anemic” (19). This bodes ill for the future of the larger, public realm. The parochial realm offers a safe, controlled setting for children to explore the wider world. In it, children develop social skills and learn how to deal with individuals personally unknown to them (Oldenburg and Brissette 1994, 152). When parents distrust this realm, however, they close it off to their children. In this context, the practice of “trick-or-treating” on Halloween in a shopping mall is troubling. Consider the case of the Westside Pavilion shopping mall on Los Angeles’ suburban Westside. The mall has hosted Halloween festivities since it opened in 1985. Halloween has become the biggest single-day special event put on by the mall. A Westside Pavilion marketing director estimated that six- to eight-thousand people come to the mall to watch performances, compete in costume contests, and “trick or treat” on Halloween night (Public Relations Officer 2000). While such activities may be entertaining, the marketing director explained the mall’s popularity on Halloween not in terms of enjoyment but fear: “There’s a lot of weird people out there,” she said, invoking the myth of people giving “poisoned candy” to children (Public Relations Officer 2000). By contrast, she said, “the mall

is safe.” This message is echoed by local media. Santa Monica Place, a mall that has hosted Halloween festivities since 1993, was honored as a “Hero of the Week” for doing so in 2000 by a local television station.

The malling of Halloween reveals an ideology at work, a self-reinforcing phenomenon in which the mall’s advancement in the hearts and minds of a population is achieved by exploiting “paranoia” (Flusty 1994) that undermines trust in the parochial and public realms. “Fear proves itself,” William Whyte observed (Davis 1990, 224). The mall reinforces a neighborhood’s self-doubts, its belief that it harbors “weird people” who make it unsafe, by rewarding parents who remove their children from these threats. Numerous studies have concluded that a neighborhood thus abandoned, lacking neighborly contact, human presence, and “eyes on the street,” is more likely to *become* the target of criminal enterprise (Jacobs 1961, Newman 1972). And, of course, any resultant crime would “confirm” residents’ suspicions about their neighborhoods, motivating deeper psychological withdrawal (see Andrejevic 2007).

The above scenario impels us towards a more-radical position than that implied by the Agora Coalition. To effectively vitalize public space in contemporary exurbia, we must do more than “overhaul” the mall to make it more civic (Barber 2001, see also Sennett 1970). We must get people out of the mall and into genuine public spaces.

Vulnerabilities in the Mall

A second reason for “taking on” the mall is simply that we can; the mall is not an invincible institution to which we resignedly must accommodate our civic culture. For example, a survey I conducted in San Fernando Valley shopping malls suggests considerable levels of user dissatisfaction. In contrast to the assumptions of critics, many mall users are not entirely comfortable “surrendering” themselves to the commercial pleasures of the mall (Fulton 1997, 343). About forty percent of mall users surveyed reported that they would rather spend their free time in a public park than in a mall. The survey was conducted outside of two malls (management having evicted our research assistants from inside of both). The first was in the primarily white, middle-class district of Northridge and the second was in the overwhelmingly Latino, working-class one of Panorama City. Slightly less than half (forty-eight percent) of the Northridge respondents reported a preference for the mall, while sixty-nine of the Panorama City respondents expressed this preference. The higher percentage of Panorama

City respondents favoring the mall may be explained by security concerns. This inference is supported by the finding that twenty-six percent of the Panorama City respondents reported that they would be more likely to visit a park if it had a gated entrance or a security guard.

User dissatisfaction has combined with the current economic recession to weaken malls in any competition we may posit between them and other forms of public space. Over four hundred malls closed in the U.S. between 2007 and 2009 (Vanishing Shopping Mall 2009). The bankruptcy of mall mainstays such as Mervyn's, Linens 'n Things, and KB Toys, and the closure of a suite of mall-format bookstores owned by Borders and Barnes and Nobles (Waldenbooks, Borders Express, Borders Outlet, and B. Dalton Booksellers), in addition to the closure of numerous JC Penney and Sears stores that serve as mall anchors, presages for some pundits the end of the age of the shopping mall (Vanishing Shopping Mall 2009, Wood 1999, Rosen 2009). This is sensationalistic, of course, and contrary to the logic I advance: any meaningful spread of *feuillemorte* spaces inside the mall will be caused by the urbanization of the external environment—the positive growth of the urban economy and landscape, not the decline. And yet the current economic crisis has undeniably taken a toll on malls. It has done so in part by strengthening the position of “Big Box” stores like Target and Walmart that offer basic commodities that point up the frivolity of most shopping-mall goods. Invoking scented candles and back-massage chairs, one social scientist noted that “The most important fact about our shopping malls is that we do not need most of what they sell” (*Vanishing Shopping Mall* 2010). Even so, vacancy rates for U.S. strip malls—which include Big Box stores—have reached seventeen-year highs (Rosen 2009). If malls appear as bustling as ever in spite of these trends, it may be because start-up advertising agencies have found a niche by plastering vacant, unconventional spaces—food-court tabletops, windows, security vehicles, even the lines dividing parking spaces—with advertisements (Hudson 2008).

While the closure of a mall can cause economic woe to a city by reducing sales-tax revenues and real estate values and eliminating jobs, it is unlikely that locals will mourn it as the loss of a beloved community landscape. The tax-increment financing that is often used to fund mall construction tilts the economic structure of a municipality in favor of the mall at the expense of independent, mom-and-pop businesses, siphoning the vitality away from what are more likely to be a town's emotionally valued spots (Farrell 2003, 219). Inside the mall, the predictable assemblage of national chain stores

makes for a placeless, generic environment (Relph 1976). It is not just the tenant businesses that make mall environs emotionally thin, however. Mall design, music, and programming are chosen to induce a narrow range of emotions and behaviors that reinforce a norm of guilt-free, luxury-item consumption (Goss 1993). The ruling imperative is “let go and spend,” a mindset encouraged by a liminal atmosphere and fun, frivolous décor. Couples who exchange wedding vows in shopping malls stand to be gently mocked for their vapidty by witnesses in the mainstream. A *New York Times* reporter (Segal 2009) described a wedding ceremony held in the Mall of America’s “Chapel of Love” this way:

...Brianna and Jesse Bergmann are standing here under a white wedding arch, beside an ordained minister, having promised to cherish each other in sickness and in health. There was a homily about forgiveness, an exchange of vows and finally a kiss and some applause.

Before everyone heads past the Foot Locker and down the escalator to the Rainforest Cafe, the bride — a cherubic 19-year-old — leans against a wall in her billowy white dress and explains why she chose this spot for her big day.

“I love shopping,” she says, giggling. “Mostly clothing. I love Macy’s, Aero’s, American Eagle, Maurice’s.”

Presumably, with a few exceptions, a mall’s closing would be unlikely to cause anyone deep emotional suffering. The idea that malls have become “authentic” community spaces and objects of topophilia is put further into doubt by noting that Victor Gruen’s Northland Center, one of the most historic of them all, was recently bought by a New York-based company that is attempting to revive it from near-closure by launching a redesign project and offering to sell its naming rights (Youssef 2008). If the Web site <http://www.deadmalls.com/> is an indication, then onlookers may more typically greet the shuttering of a mall with a mix of fascination and *schadenfreude*.

Sun Tzu: The Art of War is of Vital Importance to the State

In light of its introductory maxim, it seems ironic that Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* has become *de rigueur* reading in MBA programs nationwide (McCormick 2001). The 2,400-year-old treatise on military strategy, esteemed by Eastern war planners who read the text brushed onto bamboo slips in past historical periods, drops effortlessly into contemporary business-school curricula that reflect the privatistic ideology of late modern capitalism—an

ideology that wages an unyielding assault against the state. Here I suggest re-appropriating Sun Tzu's text on behalf of the state (or the civic realm) against adversarial capitalism.

Inspiration for doing so comes from the fact that, although malls have suffered during the current economic recession, they have achieved remarkable success over the past half-century. This makes them worthy models for designers of other public spaces—such as public parks—to emulate. In other words, instead of working *with* the mall as its subjugated, prodding civic conscience, advocates of a robust public realm could adopt the principles of ruthless competition that animate the corporate realm and use the mall's own strategies against it. Doing so would be supported by the classic text itself. In Chapter 11, “The Nine Situations,” Sun Tzu includes these aphorisms:

Success in warfare is gained by carefully
accommodating ourselves to the enemy's purpose.
By persistently hanging on the enemy's flank, we shall
succeed in the long run in killing the commander-in-chief.
This is called ability to accomplish a thing
by sheer cunning.

Whether bearing Sun Tzu in mind or not, mall developers have stayed close to the urban “flank,” exploiting its weaknesses and mimicking its strengths. They have appropriated city forms while screening out diversity and apparent disorder. Seeking to turn this strategy against malls, I surveyed mall shoppers in the San Fernando Valley, probing for vulnerabilities in our “adversary,” and found one in the fact that almost half the respondents reported that they would rather be in a park. The high level of stated preference for a park may partly be due to “contamination”—the respondents' choosing the answer that they believe reflects most flatteringly upon themselves, whether or not it is an honest one. An occurrence of contamination would suggest that people view being at the mall as less favorable to their image than being at a park. Ironically, though the “commodity fetishes” sold in the mall typically promise consumers benefits of social acceptance and admiration, being in the mall apparently is not itself ego-enhancing. Municipal agents invigorated by a perusal of *The Art of War* might find a way to utilize this information to their advantage. Corporate advertisers, for their part, do not hesitate to brand the products of rival companies as inferior, inadequate, in poor taste, etc., so as to drive status-conscious consumers toward their own products. With *War* in mind, we may easily

imagine a similarly structured campaign. For example, a poster could be created with “Father of the Year?” written across the top in large, red letters. Beneath the phrase is a black-and-white photo of a man, in a dingy corner of a mall, placing a toddler on the seat of a decrepit mechanical pony. Inset is a second, full-color photograph in which a man is handing a kite to a smiling child in the sunshine of a beautiful, green park. The poster could go on bus stops and other visible public spaces leading toward the entrances of a mall. Sun Tzu (1910):

Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where
you are not expected

To continue this somewhat fanciful exercise, we note that municipal strategists would need to attain knowledge of the “battleground” itself. To illustrate the potential benefits of such knowledge, we created a map (see next page) of the San Fernando Valley, showing the locations of our two “adversaries”—parks and shopping malls.

The first point to note is that parks and malls occupy roughly the same quantity of space in the Valley. This, by itself, is heartening, for “If equally matched, we can offer battle” (Sun Tzu (1910)). Focusing on the settled interior of the Valley, the spaces of everyday life where both parks and malls vie for visitors, we come upon “Ground the possession of which imports great advantage to either side.” Sun Tzu calls this “contentious ground.” What strategies might our map recommend to us in “contentious ground”?

First, the map illustrates that malls tend to align along the linear axes of major commercial strips and boulevards, while parks tend to be more scattered (and therefore hidden) in residential areas. The linear pattern for malls is especially evident along Topanga Canyon, Sepulveda and Ventura Boulevards (although the latter boulevard is less linear). The “stealth” of the parks—especially the smaller, community-oriented ones—can make them excellent, quasi-secret resources for the surrounding locals, as long as they know they exist (Flusty 2003, 72). To ensure that they do, the city could post signs in the parks’ service areas advertising their presence to an appropriately sized segment of the local population. These would function like the “Coastal Access” signs that the state Coastal Commission places at beach access points in residential areas. Such signs might additionally indicate special facilities available at the parks, such as tennis courts, swimming pools, and so on.

The map also reveals the very different ecological relationships that parks and malls share with transportation corridors. With corridors, malls have a commensal relationship; the malls sit heavily upon the thicker branches of the road network and benefit from the convenient automobile access provided. By contrast, transportation routes—most notably freeways—have been parasitic on the Valley's parks. In the 1950s and 60s, State Highway Commission officials routed the Golden State and then the Simi Valley-San Fernando Freeways through several parks as a way to avoid conflicts with private landowners and decrease construction costs (Parley 1955). This deducted hundreds of park acres from the Valley when open space was already shrinking at a rapid rate due to the post-war boom in housing construction (City Park Board 1954). Perhaps the most-significant loss of parkland in this trade-off occurred in Ritchie Valens (formerly Paxton) Park in Pacoima. Originally a forty-acre park, it fell victim to the two freeways merging in a massive interchange on the site. Even though several acres and a pool were later added, the minced remains of the park remain distinctly non-serene. Vegetated slopes shield from view, from most angles, the twelve lanes of high-speed traffic, but they don't quiet the roar. Several long fingers of the park lie trapped between the lanes, hostage to Angelinos' need for vehicular mobility. The sacrifice of the park's serenity and continuity is especially unfortunate, given its location in the eastern San Fernando Valley. This is one of the poorest, youngest, and most densely populated parts of all Los Angeles. The need for outdoor recreational space is acute in this area. The National Recreation and Parks Association recommends that cities provide six to ten park acres per thousand residents, and in the eastern Valley the ratio is about 1.5 park acres per 1,000 residents (Sister, Wilson, and Wolch 2007). Still, a park is a park. The Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks hosts camping excursions in the park, hoping to connect "city" youths with nature. "There are a lot of kids that have never been in a sleeping bag, that have never spent one night out," said the program's director (Mascaro and Kandel 2002).

One lesson to derive from this begins from the observation that, like malls, parks can and do benefit from freeways since they facilitate convenient user access. What parks need are ways to shield park users from the freeways themselves. Malls accomplish this by creating totally introverted, often—following Victor Gruen's breakthrough designs—indoor environments. Parks cannot follow this model without losing their connection to nature. However, they can be partly "interiorized" by adding walls of dense

vegetation, “walls” of appropriate sounds (as created by fountains and other forms of running water, birds, trees and bushes that rustle in the wind, and so on). In addition, localized sound barriers could be constructed in strategic areas to create nooks of acoustic respite, as around flower beds or recesses suitable for quiet activities such as reading or meditating.

Perhaps, as a final theft from the mall’s arsenal, park departments could lease space to some of the more-popular establishments that typically occupy food courts. It may be that, having spent much of their lives in malls, Americans now expect convenient access to a range of refreshments that are typically found within them and not at parks. This hypothesis was somewhat borne out by our survey. We asked San Fernando Valley residents what changes would have to be made in parks before they would visit them more often. After first conducting a pilot survey with open-ended questions about this, we administered a closed-format survey to over one hundred residents in both malls and parks. By far the most-popular answer for both groups was a café or restaurant. For residents surveyed at malls, the second-most-popular answer was a gated entrance or security guard (for those we surveyed in parks, this was the third-most-popular answer, after plays or concerts). Thus, it may be that malls effect a degree of cultural hegemony, instilling particular expectations for security and convenience in public spaces. Park managers could use this “against the mall” by inviting some of the same elements into parks.

Conclusion

Shopping malls do not and cannot be expected to serve adequately as civic spaces. Faced with this proposition, I believe that the Agora Coalition’s strategy of working “with the mall” to make it more civic is unsatisfactory. Therefore, I have suggested that advocates of the public realm explicitly position themselves as working “against” the mall. While this zero-sum stance overstates the inherent antagonisms between malls and public spaces, it fosters a healthy awareness that the mall (rather than just the public) is “malleable” (Goss 1993, 30). Before the mall we need not prostrate our civic culture. This culture is, I argue, worth fighting—against the mall, amongst other identifiable adversaries—for. Moreover, as competitive, capitalist enterprises, malls are already engaged in adversarial, survivalist thinking, and so offer inspiration—as through the embrace of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*—for an in-kind response by those on the opposite front.

Notes

1 The International Council of Shopping Centers estimates that seventy-one percent of teenagers shop in malls, while one study found that in 1998 sixty-three percent of U.S. teenagers visited a mall at least once a week (Satterthwaite 2001, 113).

2 Blame for the Galleria being detached from the community does not rest entirely on its side. After the mall sustained damage during the 1994 Northridge earthquake, local homeowners opposed a redesign proposal that would have linked the mall to the neighborhood with pedestrian access ways (Wood 1999).

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