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A LOVE LETTER
TO
THE AMERICAN MALL
ABSTRACT

In 1956, Victor Gruen designed the first climate controlled shopping center in the United States, giving birth to the regional mall. Gruen’s wish for the Mall was to provide a civic center to participate in modern community life which was traditionally served by the urban downtown. But the origins of the mall do not come without developers. And developer performa became synonymous with the mall. Expansive parking, anchor stores, mall kiosks and, most importantly, the aestheticization of High Architecture, all became the staples of the mall. Because even though High Architecture did not want anything to do with the mall, the mall wanted everything to do with High Architecture. The mall became a mash up between the aestheticization of High Architectural forms and the cheapest building technologies of the moment.

For a while the regional mall had its success. But by 1991 mall construction had dropped by half from the previous year and continued to slow until 2006 when the last enclosed mall was built. But where did the mall go? Increased competition from bigger retailers and a shifting client base transitioning to digital forms of consumerism left the mall unable to compete as a retail strategy. Essentially, shopping left the mall. But Amazon wasn’t the only one to blame. The suburbs of the 1950’s are not the contemporary suburbs. The baby boomers are still there, aging in place, but they are now joined by a younger more diverse group of minorities that make up the majority of the population in 17 metropolitan regions. In addition, the suburbs are now home to 3 million more households that fall under the poverty line than in cities. Without the “ideal” demographic within the suburbs there is no money in the mall and without the money there is no developer. But now that the developer has left, THIS is the time for the mall!

The thesis seeks to question the urban legacy of the mall and ask how does one take the architectural logic, urban logic, and even capitalist logic of the mall and turn them inside out? How can architecture activate these spaces, activate the forms they deploy, and activate the mash up nature of these different kinds of interior logics in a way that completely subverts the original intention?

The research situates itself in contemporary conversations about typological familiarity and estrangement. The thesis uses the site of Northridge Mall in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a prototypical regional mall, as a testing ground to explore the re-imagining of the American mall. The thesis sees the mall as a new type of public space for contemporary suburbia through the deployment of typological mall logics.
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Introduction:
The Mall and its Constituents
Victor Gruen and the Optimism of the Mall

In 1956, Victor Gruen designed Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota, the first climate controlled shopping center in the United States, and gave birth to the regional mall. Gruen’s wish for the Mall was to bring communal gathering to the American Suburbs through a mix of social amenities, commercialism, art, and entertainment. As an immigrant from Austria, his original inspiration for the shopping mall was the town center of his home in Vienna. For Gruen the Mall was a civic center that would provide a needed space to participate in modern community life which was traditionally served by a town square or urban downtown. He wanted to promote human idea exchange, the exchange of goods, freedom of human expression, the greatest amount of choice between solitude and privacy on one hand and sociability and gregariousness on the other.¹ The Mall would be a reprieve for the suburbanites normal environment of the spaces of home, work, and the automobile.

Southdale Shopping Center, 1956
Photo: Victor Gruen Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
Midtown Plaza, 1962
Photo: Victor Gruen Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.
Woodfield Mall, 1971
Photo: Chicago Daily Herald Photo Archive.
Developer Logics and the Evolution of the Mall

The history of the mall is also the history of development. And development does not come without developers. For developers the mall was a means to take advantage of federal tax policies on commercial real estate. Beginning in 1954, the United States Government began a program call "Accelerated Depreciation". This program allowed developers to write off new construction, as a loss, on their taxes. These loses could then be claimed against unrelated income, essentially making malls an efficient tax shelter for investors. In 1945 there were 45 malls across the United States, by 1958 the number had grown to 2,900. The Mall became a profit making machine that would morph and grow. But this growth was not always outward. One has only to look inside the mall to see the spread of developer thinking.

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Schaumburg, Illinois Mayor Bob Atcher, center, and developers break ground for the new Woodfield Mall, 1969
Photo: Chicago Daily Herald Photo Archive.
Everything is for Sale

In the developer logic, everything in the mall is for sale. A logic which gave us the mall kiosk. The kiosk as a type has much older roots that date back to early 18th century Islamic architecture. But it's contemporary form, adopted by the mall, was first deployed in 1976 at Boston's Faneuil Hall. This form of "micro" retail was deployed in the common spaces and public through ways of the mall. It serves as a reminder that under the developer model of the mall, every surface is quantifiable and leasable. But the mall kiosk alone could not evolve the mall to scale we know today. Developers needed a much larger tool to drive the mall evolution.

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Park City Center Mall Kiosk, 1979
Photo: Lancaster Historical Society, General Collections.
The Anchor Store

Bringing the urban department store to the suburbs, anchor stores were a means to bring financial stability to the mall and generate retail traffic. Anchor stores were a way to attract suburbanites from far distances to come and gather at the mall. In this way, anchor stores are representation of who will come to the mall and who will stay at the mall. Since they are the main generators of traffic and money, they must reflect an “ideal” demographic within suburbia. In the anchor store developers found a tool to drive the mall machine. And by merely adding more anchor stores and increasing the amount of parking, developers discovered they could generate an incredible amount of profit. The anchor store became a typological staple of the mall.

Sears in Canoga Park 1964
Photo: Pleasant Family Shopping Collections.
Part 1:
A Study of the Mall Through Typology
The Regional Mall Defined

The mall in its various forms has infiltrated and colonized urban and suburban spaces around the world. It’s made its way from its roots in the arcade to urban town centers and to the sprawling figure of the regional mall in the suburban fringes. Its form has been adapted from Rome to Paris, Milan, Moscow, the United States, China, Lisbon, Barcelona, Seoul, Japan, etc. The mall is a global typology and is associated with public gathering and consumption. Located on the periphery of the city the regional mall completely displaced the urban downtown as a destination for all but routine shopping needs in a large number of American cities. The regional mall was set apart from its downtown counter-parts and situated itself in the vast expansive tracks of the emerging suburban context of post-war America. Unlike the urban core, the regional mall was focused inward, segregating a pedestrian walkway from a sea of automobile parking along its outer edge, an irony when considering the only way to access these suburban destinations is through the expansive highway network in your personal automobile. However, you must leave your car at the gate to fully immerse yourself in the experience of the “walkable” regional mall. Because of its context the regional mall situates itself separately from other retail typologies.

The Evolution of the Mall: Snapshots of Architectural Moment

There is a history of the alignment of developers tied to certain mall typologies that compete with one another and succeed each other over time. There is a periodicity to mall design that aligns with how to shop fashionably and go out in public. And there is a particular coincidence between an totalizing indoor environment, a particular type of architecture, and the public moving through it. Through time one can see the forms of the mall morph from one type to the next but also, as you move through time, each mall carries the formal flavor of the moments in which they were designed. There is a clear deployment of High Architectural style deployed through exterior and interior signifiers.
Market Square
Chicagoland, Illinois
1917
30,000 sqft

Mall of America
Bloomington, Minnesota
1992
4,200,000 sqft
Market Square
Chicagoland, Illinois
1917
30,000 sqft
Genre: Midwestern Tudor

New Market Square, 1917
Photo: Library of Congress, Illus. in NA1.W4 (General Collections).
Country Club Plaza
Kansas City, Missouri
1923
804,000 sqft
Genre: Spanish Colonial
Connecticut Avenue Park & Shop
Washington DC, Maryland
1930
59,000 sqft
Genre: Tudor Strip Mall
Greenbelt Center
Greenbelt, Maryland
1937
18,200 sqft
Genre: Bauhaus CO-OP
Linda Vista Plaza
San Diego, California
1943
82,000 sqft
Genre: Mid-Century Modern

Linda Vista Plaza, 1943
Photo: Online Archive of California, Huntington Library Photo Archives, Maynard Parker.
Atkinson Plaza
Midwest, Oklahoma
1945
35,000 sqft
Genre: Mid-Century Modern

Atkinson Plaza Skytrain Theater, 1945
Photo: Atkinson Heritage Center

Atkinson Plaza Midwest Motors, 1945
Photo: Atkinson Heritage Center
Shopper’s World
Framingham, Massachusetts
1951
778,000 sqft
Genre: The Modern Dumbbell
Southdale Center
Edina, Minnesota
1956
800,000 sqft
Genre: Regional Brutalist

Southdale Center, 1956
Photo: William Bird.
Randhurst Center
Mount Prospect, Illinois
1962
1,000,000 sqft
Genre: Mid-Century Modern
Woodfield Mall
Chicagoland, Illinois
1971
2,000,000 sqft
Genre: Supersized Landscape Brutalsim
Northridge Mall
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
1972
800,000 sqft
Genre: Mid-Century Modern

Northridge Mall, 1972
Photo: Steven Wilson, Great American Parks.

Northridge Mall, 1972
Photo: Steven Wilson, Great American Parks.
Metrocenter
Phoenix, Arizona
1973
1,400,000 sqft
Genre: Retro Futurist
Mall of America
Bloomington, Minnesota
1992
4,200,000 sqft
Genre: The Jerde Experience Overload
Mall Interiors and the Re-deployment of High Architecture

Through the morphology of the mall one can see particular stylistic deployment of architectural moments. But these deployments are always recreations and imitations. There is an aestheticization of High Architecture that is displayed through the mall. But High Architecture wanted nothing to do with the mall. Daniel Herman writes, “The refusal of architecture’s elite to engage in retail has, as a result, disqualified designers from participating in the twentieth century’s biggest contribution to urbanism.”

But the exteriors of malls and their forms only say so much. After all, the mall is an interior architecture. A key characteristic of the regional mall is its all encompassing, climate controlled environment. Also, besides plentiful skylight, the regional mall has no outward facing windows. The mall is an inward environment, devoted to its own public display. It is a closer look at the interior of the mall that makes it clear what the history of the mall is truly about. Because although High Architecture didn’t want anything to do with the mall, the mall wanted everything to do with High Architecture. But because of its developer logics, expediency, and economy of scale the mall could never create a one to one relationship with the architecture to which it aspired. The mall became a mash up between the aestheticization of High Architectural forms and the cheapest building technologies of the moment. The mall is a manifestation of the desire to put capital “D” design in the middle of thing that is produced from performa and developer logics. The Classical, the Modern, the Brutalist, and the Post-Modern, used and misused, all became staples of the mall, just as much as anchor stores and plentiful parking.

Johnson Wax Headquarters, 1939
Photo: Barbara Stewart

Yorkdale Shopping Center, 1964
Photo: City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 217, Series 249.
Although High Architecture wanted nothing to do with the mall...

...the mall wanted everything to do with High Architecture
National Palace Mexico City
16th Century

Palacio Nacional, Mexico City
Photo: George Delange
Los Arcos Mall
1969

Los Arcos Mall Atrium
Photo: David Cobb Craig: Selections From My Collection of 1960s Mall Post Cards: “Waiting for Godot” Series
Cinderella City Mall
1968

Cinderella City Mall Atrium
Photo: Ron Pollard
University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth
Paul Rudolph
1966

Group I lobby, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth
Photo: Joseph W. Molitor, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library in the City of New York.
Fairlane Town Center
1976

Fairlane Town Center
Photo: Jim Dozne
Piazza D’italia
Charles Moore
1978
Lawrence Square Shopping Centre
1989

Lawrence Square Shopping Centre
Photo: Greg Stuart
Part 2: The Site
Northridge Mall:  
A Prototypical Mall as a Site of Experimentation

Built in 1972, Northridge Mall is the prototypical Mid-Century Mall. Like other regional malls Northridge is located in the first ring suburbs, fifteen miles outside downtown Milwaukee. Like other regional malls, it sits on the intersection of two major roadways. Like other regional malls, Northridge’s location represents a shifting transition between expanding development from the urban core and the cul-de-sac suburbs that are so recognizable of the sitcom suburbs of the 1950s. This prototypical mall acts as a site of experimentation that is characteristic of all regional malls.
Northridge Mall sited on space of transition between expanding development of from Milwaukee’s urban core in the Southeast and suburban cul-de-sacs.
Like other regional malls, Northridge is composed of 800,000 sqft of retail area.
Like other regional malls, Northridge has 3,000,000 sqft of parking.
Like other regional malls, Northridge has four anchor stores.
The Vendors
(Small Retail)
65,000 sqft (35% storage)

Like other regional malls, Northridge has four blocks of interior retail.
Like other regional malls, Northridge has a central axis that organizes the mall atrium.
Like other regional malls, Northridge has a central court which provides circulation to its two levels of stores that will always bring you back to where you started with the use of escalators.
Northridge Mall: A Prototypical Mall Story

Like other regional malls, Northridge Mall rode the success of the mall craze of the late 70’s and early 80’s. But as time went on, bigger and better malls began to pop up, pulling patrons away from Northridge. In the early 80’s Northridge’s sister mall, Southridge Mall, received a full renovation, attracting even more of the Northridge base to its new shiny stores. As stand alone Big Box stores and online retailing emerged in the 90’s Northridge began to slow even more. By 2000 Northridge lost a major anchor store, and once one anchor store leaves, the others follow. And in 2009 Northridge shuttered its doors. But what happened to Northridge happens to many malls. The Northridge story is just a small piece of the much larger story of the contemporary mall.
The Anchor Store Exodus
5 is always better than 4

BBM
(BIGGER BETTER MALL)

BBB
(BIGGER BETTER BOX)
BBM (BIGGER BETTER MALL)

BBB (BIGGER BETTER BOX)

NORTHRIDGE MALL
So Where Did the Mall Go?

The mall has been displaced to zones that pry apart more effectively social activity from economic activity. Big Box stores, Online retailing and Airport retail can all sell goods at a higher rate in a smaller period of time to wealthier audiences than any conventional retail model. Amazon alone has quintupled its sales in the last 6 years from $16 billion to $80 billion. And 2017 there have already been nine bankruptcies of major retail chains.\textsuperscript{10} Essentially, shopping has left the mall. The mall used to be public space that was privately held, but now its rationale for being privately held has collapsed. No matter how hard private investors try, they cannot recreate the motive for this big profit making machine at the mall scale. But Amazon isn’t the only one to blame.

WHERE DID THE MALL GO?

- Mall Retail Area: 800,000 sqft
- Anchor 1
- Anchor 2
- Anchor 3
- Anchor 4
- Power Center
- Interior Retail 1
- Interior Retail 2
- Interior Retail 3
- Interior Retail 4
- Food Court
- BBB (Bigger Better Box): 173,000 sqft
- Walmart: 60,000 sqft
- Amazon Fulfillment: 1,200,000 sqft

Costs:
- Anchor 2: $1,375 per sqft
- Anchor 3: $375 per sqft
- Anchor 4: $375 per sqft
- Power Center: $375 per sqft
- Interior Retail 1: $375 per sqft
- Interior Retail 2: $375 per sqft
- Interior Retail 3: $375 per sqft
- Interior Retail 4: $375 per sqft
- Food Court: $375 per sqft

Total: $1,375 per sqft

BBM (Bigger Better Mall): 80,000 sqft

BBB (Bigger Better Box): 80,000 sqft

Sky Mall: 179,000 sqft

WHERE DID THE MALL GO?
The Suburbs of the 1950’s are not the Contemporary Suburbs

The collapse of the regional mall is also a reflection of the shifting demographic changes of the contemporary American suburbs. Tom McNamara writes, “A Brookings Institution preview of the 2010 census released last year shows that the nuclear family out in suburbia with its kids and white-picket fences and two-car garages has been a mis characterization for at least the last decade, if not longer.” The baby boomers are still there, aging in place, but they are now joined by younger more diverse group of minorities that make up the majority of the population in 17 metropolitan regions, including Milwaukee. In addition the suburbs are now home to 3 million more household that fall under the poverty line than in cities. From 2008 to 2012 the number of suburban poor living in distressed neighborhoods grew by 139%, almost 3 times the pace of growth within cities. The suburbs are a more varied place than they used to be. But without the “ideal” demographic there is no money in the mall and without money, there is no developer. However, now that the developer has left, THIS is the time to seize the architecture of the mall!

House Model, Levittown, New York 1947
Photo: Tom Linck for LIFE Magazine
The Hidden Suburbs: A Portrait
Artist: Laura Migliorino
Minneapolis, Minnesota
The Hidden Suburbs: A Portrait
Artist: Laura Migliorino
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Northridge Mall Vacancy: A Look into a Mash Up Architecture

In Northridges Vacancy we are able to take a second look at the mall interior. Here we see all our favorite architectural characters deployed in the strangeness of the mall. Northridge Mall has all the characteristics of the prototypical regional mall, including its aesthetization of High Architecture.
A Venetian Landscape

Northridge Center Court
Photo: Erin Labor of Frontroom Photography
Sunken Conversation Pit
Photo: Erin Labor of Frontroom Photography
The Re-appropriation of the Avante-Garde

Former Northridge Food Court
Photo: Erin Labor of Frontroom Photography
...now, with the developer gone, THIS is the time for the Mall!
Part 3:
An Alternative Future for Northridge Mall
Northridge Mall: New Program for the Mall

In 2017 the City of Milwaukee, in partnership with the Milwaukee Art Museum, purchased Northridge Mall for $21 million dollars and converted the Mall into a major node on the new Milwaukee suburban rail line. Two lines were installed in the mall. One on the ground floor, that is part of a ring line that connects other malls through the Milwaukee metropolitan area. And another line on the second floor, that is part of an intercity rail line connecting Milwaukee to Chicago and Greenbay. The remainder of the mall interior has been converted into a public park with recreational program filling what used to be the small retail of the mall.

In order to generate money back into the project the city put the vacant anchor stores back on the market. Within the first six months a Mega Church, a Nightclub, and a Clinic had purchased the spaces for lease. These anchor stores plus a renovation of the former food court have become the main drivers of the Northridge transformation.
Milwaukee Art Museum Announces Offer to Buy Northridge

May 20, 2017

The Milwaukee Art Museum will attempt to revive Northridge Mall with the world’s longest footbridge.

PHOTO: OnMilwaukee/Meredith Bell (CC by SA 2.0)

A few weeks after announcing an offer to purchase O’Donnell Park along the lakefront downtown, Milwaukee Art Museum has said it also intends to purchase the former Northridge Mall on the city’s far northwest side.

According to documents released Thursday, the art museum has officially tendered a $21 million dollar offer
Northridge Mall: A New Node on the Milwaukee Suburban Transit System
On the ground floor the ring line cuts through the back end of former small retail programs. The remainder of the small vendors have been converted into recreational programs.
On the second floor the inter-city line cuts through two of the new anchor programs. Similar to the first floor the remainder of the small vendors have been converted into recreational programs.
Four Scenes from Northridge Mall

Presented here are four scenes from the new Northridge Mall. Each scene depicts a major intervention of the new anchor program or food court renovation. The perspectives frame pieces of the existing mall against the new interventions. Each view takes on a type of temporality in order to represent a mash up of architectural moment within the mall and, in the process, make explicit that there is a disciplinary interest in the use of High Architectural form in an expedient way. In addition, every character depicted within the scene is also represented as a mash up. Each individual is composed of a different head, torso, and legs that refer to different times, races, genders, ages, etc. This is an attempt to speak to the stranger more varied place suburbia has become and also decouple identity from demographic while still allowing both to be present. The plans and sections are zoomed in areas within the new program to show the deployment of the architectural strategies.
New Order Church

In the North end of the mall is the New Order Church. Aligning itself with the grandeur and authority of Rome, the Church is designed with tall vertical columns and entablatures that frame the existing structure of the former big box department store. Column covers shrink and stretch to fit their new purpose. Occasionally they split to make room for enormous televisions to project the pastors face to those in the back of the 2,000 seat auditorium. Its grand altar rests above the new transit line and its strong symmetry is reinforced by super-sized columns on the church’s periphery. A tilted column houses an escalator while its truncated neighbor frames a view to the train beyond.
Xpressions: Night Club and Lounge

On the East side of mall is Xpressions: Nightclub and Lounge. At its entrance, the club’s octagonal openings are framed against the tiled Venetian streetscaping of the old mall. Coffers run along the existing ceiling of the mall, but eventually pull away, revealing themselves only as superficial screens. The exaggerated coffers and sunken dance floors of the interior are meant to amplify the club’s public monumentality. The train running above is placed within the thickened floor of the mezzanine, creating tight and intimate spaces below. The four dance floors all share a central elevated bar which surrounds a Monolith at its center. However, the monolith is hollow and serves as the DJ booth.
Pedestrian PoMonade

In the site of Northridge’s previous food court is the Pedestrian PoMonade. Golden archways line the central through way. The archways prove deceiving for their arches have both a top chord, meant to carry load, and a bottom chord, used only as a graphic signifier. Bays previously hosting food vendors have been replaced with mirrored archways that double as entrances to the adjacent public art galleries. Within the archways are pedastools that offer efficient staging for the act of selfie taking. Along the center there is raked seating, making the Pedestrian PoMomnade a venue for those looking to see and be seen.
PEDESTRIAN POMONADE
PLAN
1/4" = 1'-0"
Lastly, on Northridge’s West side is the Seamless Healthcare Clinic. At its entrance the white tile and wire seating of the old mall is framed against the smooth surfaces of the Health Care Clinic. Matte continuous surfaces are used to create a bright soft interior. Columns seem to peel effortlessly from the ceiling and floor-plate. Their forms occasionally change, sometimes becoming bench seating and other times becoming stand-alone lighting. Pocket doors are utilized whenever possible in order to reinforce the curving geometry of each clinic. Open public courtyards organize the interiors in an attempt to bring natural light into the waiting areas.
SEAMLESS HEALTHCARE PLAN

1/4" = 1'-0"
Bibliography


