**Remembering and forgetting in consumerism**

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The experience of the consumerist environment in contemporary society is so pervasive and intrusive in our daily lives (through mass advertising, internet shopping and the corporatisation of civic spaces) that it is difficult to appreciate its peculiarly and uniquely modern characteristics. What distinguishes these from earlier forms of commercial activity and transaction, whether in the ancient or early modern worlds, is the manner in which consumerism today creates conditions of amnesia – situations of individual and collective forgetfulness – which are reinforced by the insularity and placelessness of its built form. In this paper I attempt to demonstrate how this phenomenon is manifested spatially through the development of the modern shopping mall and commercial street. The creation of large retail zones in cities and out-of-town mega-complexes for mass consumerism invokes a certain pathological behavior among the general public. This is revealed in the innate ‘passivity’ of modern consumerism – its tendency to be experienced as a form of ‘therapy’ in urban and suburban life - in contrast to the participatory involvement of consumers/shoppers in the civic and religious spaces of pre-modern marketplaces.

**The ‘Memoricide’ of the Mall**

I begin this investigation with an observation by Beatriz Sarlo:

Once history has been evacuated as “detail”, the mall suffers an amnesia without which the smooth advancement of its business would be impossible. If the traces of history were too evident and went beyond their decorative function, the mall would experience a conflict of functions and meanings: the mall’s semiotic machinery has to be that provided by its project alone.

(Sarlo 2001: 14)

Quoted in Jean Franco’s keynote paper ‘The Politics of Memory’ at the conference *Sites of Recovery* (Beirut, October 1999), Sarlo’s comparison between historical traces and the shopping mall underlines Franco’s assertion that the modern mall is a “monument to amnesia” leading ultimately to “memoricide” (Franco 1999: 145).By evacuating history – or any registering of past undertakings – the mall produces a spatial-temporal vacuum in which the activity of consumerism is managed as a dominating force and insular experience without the otherwise ‘distracting’ influences of personal recollections or associations of place.

Examined in the context of the re-democratization of countries in Latin America, Franco and Sarlo highlight how attempts to erase the memory of the atrocities perpetrated by previous political juntas involved among other initiatives the construction of shopping malls on sites formerly used for incarceration, torture and even mass-execution. Sarlo’s reference to the mall’s ‘semiotic machinery’ is symptomatic of what Franco calls the “undermining of [the] relation of identity, place and memory which cannot be separated from the concept of modernity” (Franco 1999: 144).

Figure 1: Bellevue Square Mall, Washington, Aerial View. Wikimedia Commons (USGS copyright)

This phenomenon of collective forgetfulness, through the largely passive act of consumerism, could be described as an insidious condition of modernity in general, and Late Capitalism in particular. As Fredric Jameson asserts, the insularity of the contemporary shopping mall gives rise to “the consumption of sheer commodification as a process” thereby erasing any opportunity for reflection and therefore spatial-temporal continuity (1991:x). Indeed, the claims of Sarlo and Franco reveal a more general (and equality unsettling) condition of modern consumerism observed by Andrzej Piotrowski, “if disasters are considered as social or cultural phenomena, architecture’s ability to support recovery directly relates to the common understanding of the symbolic functioning of buildings, and this ability is increasingly diminished by the contemporary practices of capitalism” (1999: 311).

Not surprisingly, Piotrowski takes among his examples for investigation the Mall of America in Minneapolis to demonstrate how this diminishing capacity of architecture to aid recovery through symbolic meaning and collective memory (and thereby redeem the past) results in what he calls “Sites of Amnesia” (1999: 314). He contends that this out-of-town mall “selectively replaces the city”, in the scale and conceit of its enterprise as a reconstruction (in part) of a pseudo-vernacular style street of shops all under a single glazed roof. As is typical of other malls, there is a conspicuous absence of any material history in the “lifeworld” of the complex; retail businesses simply come and go without leaving a trace. I use the term lifeworld in the way applied by Marvin Trachtenberg in *Building-in-Time: From Giotto to Alberti and Modern Oblivion* to describe the duration of a building's existence, from its construction to its use/inhabitation (Trachtenberg, 2010). The Mall of America provides a perfect example of how a particular commercial environment of shopping can actually render “irrelevant questions concerning architecture’s role in culture and society” (Piotrowski 1999: 315).

**Transformations of the High Street**

This phenomenon however is not just peculiar to the contemporary shopping mall but is also increasingly evidenced in the commercial high street, exacerbated by the combined impact of the internet on shopping practices and the continuing effects of corporatisation and the protracted economic recession. Historically, shops have served a social as well as a commercial function, by providing settings where consumers can gather and converse in the process of selecting and purchasing goods. Familiarity with the commercial life of a particular place, through its once distinctive and ‘memorable’ shopping environment, has historically formed the backbone of many city centres. As places where members of the public return to repeatedly over many years (sometimes through generations of customers), and develop lasting relationships with shopkeepers, the high street shop has long provided a vital social function in towns and cities. Believing (or hoping), however, that such a tradition still pervades contemporary retail environments is based on the misguided assumption that shops and the services they provide continue to serve as one of the stable ‘registers’ of urban/community life, against the backdrop of rapid technological and commercial transformation. Evidence of commercial stability and continuity can of course still be found in some parts of the world, such as in the old family businesses of Italy. However, there is increasing evidence, particularly in highly competitive commercial environments such as in the United Kingdom, that the life expectancy of local shops has dramatically shortened, leading to an endless cycle of commercial failures, closures and new ventures (Coca-Stefaniak, et al. 2005: pp.357–71). At the same time, even when independent retailers survive in this fiercely competitive and precarious market, the pressures on businesses to regularly reinvent themselves by changing/updating their interior layouts, their merchandise and even those they employ to sell goods, creates situations of disorientation and even alienation among local shoppers. These changes reinforce the perception of the commercial high street as a place exclusively reserved for consuming goods (without any larger social function), in much the same way as their more contemporary out-of-town shopping malls.

The gradual demise of consumerist space as shared space in the history of cities, from the innately participatory settings of Medieval and Early Modern cities (where memorable experiences of communing citizens drew upon the symbolic relationships of buildings and their urban contexts) to unfettered and unmediated consumption devoid of recollective meanings, provides the historic raw material for Walter Benjamin’s examination of modern consumerism in his unfinished *Passagenwerk/Arcades Project* ([1982] 2002). Benjamin believed that “only a redeemed mankind [sic] receives the fullness of its past” which he argues underlies the experience of the nineteenth century arcade (Wohlfarth 1986:6). It is on the basis of this belief that it is generally agreed, among commentators, that *Passagenwerk/Arcades Project* is a Messianic work whereby the experience of shopping in the nineteenth century was replete with mystical overtones, in a radically immanent and aesthetic sense (Wohlfarth 1986:7). This understanding, moreover, is informed by two key theoretical perspectives of Benjamin: Firstly, his forensic examination of historical materialism (as an alternative to historicism); and secondly, his intense interest in the experiential qualities of colour (Caygill 1998: 109) that forms a key element in the kaleidoscopic experience of modern commercial space. Both are closely interconnected in Benjamin’s philosophy of modernity and relate to his concept of ‘profane illumination’, a peculiarly modernist aesthetic turn.

Whilst in many ways a modern precursor to the contemporary shopping mall, the arcades that formed the subject matter of Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* essentially territorialized and enclosed particular streets within existing urban contexts, thereby contrasting with the placeless out-of-town shopping malls of today with their artificially constructed foot-prints. Hence as sheltered passageways within existing urban fabric, arcades in many ways underscored the prevailing trajectories and navigable routes of public movement in cities, albeit selectively and with enhanced (and more intense) consumerist involvement. The contemporary (postmodern) shopping mall, by contrast, is designed specifically to disorientate and insulate the consumer, in relation to the outside world, as a necessary precondition to constructing ‘alternative’ virtual worlds that can be experienced on their own (primarily) visual or graphic terms and therefore without mediation (in respect of physical and historical contexts).

Figure 2: The Galerie Argentine, Paris, along the Avenue Victor-Hugo. Wikimedia Commons (Olybrius).

Significantly, Benjamin believed “that the devastation visited on the mystical tradition by recent history has also released forces within that tradition that make it possible to *register* the world-historical cataclysms of modern history” (Wohlfarth 1986: 12). It would be interesting to speculate how Benjamin would have reacted, in this context, to the contemporary shopping mall as a site of amnesia, in the way presented by Franco and Piotrowski, and whether resonances - or reminders - of the flaws of modernity can ultimately be redeemed in the way Benjamin argued in the context of the arcade.

**Symbolic and Participatory Dimensions of Monetisation**

In contrast to the synchronic environment of the contemporary shopping mall, the Benjaminian model of the nineteenth century arcade provides a link (albeit tenuous) to a deeper diachronic tradition of commercial/merchantile life, where the marketplace actually gave sustenance to participatory (civic/religious) involvement rather than systematically nullifying or erasing it. In the ancient world, for example, the invention of money, and the activities of trade and religious practice were deeply intertwined. As Richard Seaford observes, “Sacrifice is an early agent of monetisation. At least as early as the classical period some Greek sanctuaries functioned as banks or as places (during festivals) for tax-free trading” (2004:213).This activity, of what was exceptional tax-free trading in places of worship in the ancient world where there was mutual benefit to both the worshipper (customer) and the trader/banker, finds interesting parallels in the Medieval practice of religious indulgences during Christian pilgrimages to Rome (the Eternal City). As a means of reducing levels of temporal punishment (penance) for sins committed, indulgences were vitally important during the Middle Ages to attract pilgrims to the holy sites. During the Renaissance indulgences even took the form of financial donations to the papal purse, serving as one method of raising much needed capital to pay for the construction of the new St Peter’s Basilica (Cassone and Marchese 1999: 429-442).There existed therefore an implicit *redemptive* relationship between money and religion, a relationship that finds demonstrable expression in the role of number in each.

To give an indication of just how closely intertwined money, trade, civic space and religion were during the early modern period, I refer to a sermon delivered by an eminent humanist and Augustinian friar, Giles of Viterbo, in Siena in 1511. Delivered in response to a salt war with Ferrara, the sermon, which took place in the basilica of St Augustine, was aimed at a crowd of disgruntled Sienese investors. Sent directly by the pope (Julius II), Giles’ principal aim was to persuade the Sienese to remain loyal to the papacy in the face of falling profits and financial hardship against a rival principality. As someone who was ‘obsessed with the contemplation of number in its pure form’, Giles attempted through persuasive talk to reveal an inseparable link between the mystery of numerology, that embodied a cosmological order (in the Christian-Platonic tradition), and commercial arithmetic (Rowland 1995: 699). To assist him in this task he referred in his sermon to Scripture in which God declares: “You have arranged everything in terms of measure and number and weight” - *Omnia mensura et numero et pondere disposuisti* (The Bible, Wisdom 11:21 cited in Rowland 1995:701). Underlying this scriptural reference is the principle of an analogous relationship between forms of quantitative value (weight and measure), as applied in the marketplace, and the symbolism of number. As Karsten Harries argues, in the context of urban life in fifteenth century Italy:

Having proclaimed, citing Scripture, that wisdom cries out in the streets, the layman calls the orator’s attention to the activities that take place in the marketplace: money being counted, oil being measured, and produce being weighed. In each case a unit measure is applied to what is to be measured. And can we not observe something of the sort wherever there is understanding? The activities observed on the marketplace invite the thought that just insofar as he is the being who measures, the human being transcends the beast. Animal rationale comes to be understood first of all as animal mensurans (Harries 2006:119).

Delivered at a time when commercialisation was beginning to become more sophisticated and visible in urban life, Renaissance cities like Siena were still very much immersed in an onto-theological world-view, where symbolic meanings pervaded everything including financial transaction. Giles’ interpretation of arithmetic, in his 1511 sermon, would have “struck his Sienese audience somewhere between their carefully cultivated Christian piety, with its attendant number lore, and their skill at reducing the vagaries of nature and of human society to their quantitative effects on the supply and demand of the marketplace” (Rowland 1995: 703).

**The ‘New Religion’**

The intersection between the commercial and religious interests of the city, in the early modern world provides, I believe, a useful counterpoint when we consider the dominance of the former in our contemporary globalised society, so much so that the market is even being called the “new religion”. Richard Foltz asserts that:

[T]he dominant faith system of our times is rarely recognised as such, although it contains the complete ecclesiastical apparatus: a priesthood – the economists – whose formulaic mumbo-jumbo nobody really understands but almost everyone trusts to be effective, a missionary organisation in the form of the advertising industry, preaching the gospel of salvation through consumption, and a church – the shopping mall – where the rituals of the faith are carried out. The ethics of this faith system are summed up by the belief that the highest value is to shop (Foltz 2007: 136).

Whilst such arguments may seem persuasive to the contemporary reader, they completely misunderstand the historical relationships between commercial and religious life and the way in which the former can never be a substitute to the latter:

The sacred was then directly involved in the development of the European city. It was no mere pawn in the profit and power game, but a fundamental part of civic identity. Religion in practice was a union of utility and salvation: The pilgrim coming for the indulgence while selling his wares at the market did not lay aside his bargaining techniques when approaching the altar. The city became a center of trade in salvation as it did for material commodities. The gods who responded were city gods (Trexler 1980:7).

Quite how this transformation took place, from a predominantly civic/religious life (as Trexler observes above) to a commercially and technologically dominant one highlighted in the modern world, is partly revealed in Dalibor Vesely’s principle of ‘divided representation’ in the foundations of modernity (Dalibor Vesely 2004: 246-249). Vesely draws on the examples of different European cities to explain how this relationship gave rise to tensions between instrumental and communicative roles of architecture:

[T]he knowledge of architectural and urban history.....illustrates the tension and very often conflict between the civic and commercial interests. The case of the Medici in Florence at the time of the Renaissance, the preference for civic values in Nuremberg in the time of Dürer in contrast to the commercial interests of the Fugger bank empire in Augsburg at the same time......shows that our current dilemma has a long history (Dalibor Vesely 2015: 8).

Until the late eighteenth century, the commercial life of cities was always – in the end – subordinate to “civic values and interests”. Indeed, up to this point the market “operated within a plethora of other institutions [such as religious and civic bodies] that restrained it” (Cox 1999:20).

A good indicator of the transition to modern precepts of commercialisation and monetisation can be found in the changing modes of transaction and their meanings. In the early modern world, the purchase and trade of goods by the general public and mercantile classes took place using an instrument call an ‘*abbaco*’; a calculation board originally consisting of pebble counters for arithmetic reckoning. This method of manual calculation was easily translated into written records of financial transactions (the basis of modern double-entry bookkeeping invented by the fifteenth century mathematician Luca Bartolomes Pacioli). But as I have already indicated, numbers were rarely understood in purely abstract (or utilitarian) terms, but were loaded with cosmological meanings and associations. This is underlined by the responsibilities assumed by those instructors of arithmetic described, “as a kind of stairway to divine matters [...] ambitious teachers of “abacus,” or computation, glorified their professional activity by praising their discipline’s ability to elevate human action to a realm of higher principles” (Rowland 1995: 702).

The activities therefore of markets during this time formed an integral part of the civic and religious activities of the city, in which even financial transaction served as a constant reminder of higher (divine) things. This was especially apparent during the most venerated religious festivals or pilgrimages, such as the Feast of St. Giovanni Battista in Florence and the Holy Jubilee in Rome, when the purchase of goods (from religious souvenirs to everyday commodities) was accompanied by public sermons and ceremonial processions along streets and squares.

Figure 3: Piazza della Signoria, Florence, which formed one of the main venues for the Feast of St Giovanni Battista. Photo by author.

Markets were often located at strategically important locations along the processional routes, to ‘capture’ the flow of pilgrims/spectators, as we see for example in the famous market in the Piazza di Ponte (*Platea Pontis*) in Rome, at the bridgehead to the Ponte Sant’Angelo which led to St Peter’s Basilica (Temple 2011: 52-3). Through this coexistence between commercial and religious activities, the spaces of cities were experienced as multi-layered and multi-faceted in their symbolic meanings, requiring varying dimensions of involvement and participation depending upon the role (and station) of the citizen in society.

What we can learn from these historical examples of the ancient world and the Renaissance is that trade and consumerism served as essential ‘props’, in the everyday and mundane life of the marketplace, for religious observance and civic identity. Through arithmetic calculation, in the financial transactions of buying and selling, continuity between the everyday activities of purchasing goods and civic/religious occasions were transmitted symbolically and numerologically. In this context commercialisation was in every sense a ‘baseline’ of the lived city, for recalling previous festive/ceremonial occasions and for anticipating the ones to follow. Hence, far from being sites of amnesia, as we see in the experiences of the contemporary shopping mall, the historic market was a place for collective participation and recollection.

In our increasingly paperless and virtual forms of communication any semblance of the ritual formality of transaction through number and gesture, that once dominated the marketplace, has all but disappeared. Consequently, monetary exchange through personal contact between customer and seller has become little more than a mechanical/prosaic operation, facilitated through the sanitized facilities of computer screens and handheld (contactless) card readers. What persists is the repeated and monotonous instruction of virtual transaction, redeemed only by momentary human gestures (such as a brief smile) and a courteous ‘thanks’. Consequently, at the level of one-to-one contact in the operations of purchasing goods, contemporary consumerism is intrinsically amnesiac; there is simply no time or space for occasion or recollection as existed in the historic marketplace. One of the consequences of this ‘evacuation’ of place and memory is that the objects of consumerism (the purchased good) become fetishised as both the source of – and substitute to – this perennial condition of forgetting. What gratification the fetishised object generates is inevitably short-lived and is replaced by a sense of *ennui* (listlessness and dissatisfaction).

**Conclusion**

In our perennial search in the contemporary city for situations of memorable (collective) experience, expressed for example in modern ‘festivals’, public concerts or live street performances, the pervasive and numbing effects of mass consumerism serves an amnesiac function that erases what has gone before in the collective memories of civic and commercial spaces. In this paper I have sought to demonstrate why this modern development, with its vast and complex technological apparatus, is so dominant in the everyday life of cities today, and why understanding its deeper historical developments is instructive to architects, planners and urban designers seeking alternative forms of spatial and symbolic relationships.

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