Urban Suburban:
Re-Defining the Suburban Shopping Centre and the Search for a Sense of Place

By

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Abstract

In today's suburban condition, the shopping centre has become a significant *destination* for many. Vastly sized, it has become a cultural landmark within many suburban and urban neighbourhoods. Not only a space for 'purchasing', the suburban shopping centre has become a place to shop, a place to eat, a place to meet, a place to exercise – a social space. However, with the development and conception of a big box environment and a new typology of consumerism (and architecture) at play, the '*suburban shopping mall*' as we currently know it, is slowly disappearing.

Consumerism has always been an important aspect of many cities within the Western World, and more recently it is understood as a cultural phenomenon¹. Early department stores have been, and are, architecturally and culturally significant, having engaged people through such devices as store windows and a 'grand' sense of place. It is more recently that shopping centres have become a space for the suburban community to engage – a social space to shop, eat and purchase.

Suburban malls, which were once successful in serving their suburban communities, are on the decline. These malls are suffering financially as

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¹ Hudson's Bay Company Heritage: The Department Store. Hudson's Bay Company. Accessed online <<http://www.hbcheritage.ca/hbcheritage/history/social>>

stores close and the community no longer has reason to attend these dying monoliths – it is with this catalyst that the mall eventually has no choice but to close. With little additional *places* for social engagement in a suburban community, the mall becomes a contradictory example of what it was once intended to do. A place for social and civic engagement, as well as an economic triumph has now become an eye sore – a burden on the community it was once designed to serve. Citizens are forced to drive elsewhere – arguably to a regional mall, or a big box *power centre*.

What if a declining mall could be repurposed or re-defined to enhance the community it stands within by reimagining the shopping mall? Are there possibilities for a reimagined shopping centre – possibilities that will resist the single minded consumerist approach and will (through other means) instill a sense of place within the community it stands?

This thesis is aimed at determining a new typology for a failing approach to consumerism and architecture – an approach that focuses on civic engagement within the suburban condition and outlying community.

There have been a number of advancements and changes within consumerism in the Western World - a cycling of architectural styles, technological innovation and social indications. By focusing on the 'next shift' in consumerism (i.e. department store to shopping mall, to big box

store), this thesis opens up a new possibility of both consumerism and civic engagement acting harmoniously. Can these 'dead malls' help define a 'sense of place' within the community they were originally part of? Rather than discarding (literally tearing down) what once was a flourishing space of both consumerism and social engagement, can they be re-imagined to enhance the community beyond a reductive view of pure consumerism, and become a new *landmark* that will have the potential to enhance and engage the community, as well as contribute to the economic success of a city?

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Last, but certainly not least – Mom; you have always understood and supported 'the dream'. And for that, I will be forever thankful!

“Each building has its own personal timeline, its wealth of forgotten histories and contexts, each use somehow informing the next while altering the building in its wake. The structures we build have many stories to tell, generations of uses, scores of leases or deeds, an impressive share of successful enterprises, and a share of failed businesses too.”

- Julia Christensen, Big Box Reuse

Preface

Focusing on the architecture of civic buildings (banks, post offices, department stores) it can be observed that many of these building typologies are no longer considered with the same prominence as they once were. As an example, banks are no longer built to symbolize wealth, solidarity, or a sense of nationhood. It is argued here that buildings are no longer created with 'architecture' in mind, given that they are deemed to be disposable. Architecture arguably should be designed to be a sustainable proposition. Observing the phenomena of the big-box, it is possible to argue that the building is no longer imperative, rather the visibility of a particular 'brand' or economic means of construction is. These buildings, regardless of place, are erected anywhere, being duplicated and exported regardless of context, place and time. Because of this, it can be argued that a sense of place is no longer considered an essential part of the construction as was the case with the design and development of department stores, and therefore today's architecture of consumerism is becoming lost within the city.

Focusing on one particular building typology, I chose initially to narrow my focus to the shopping mall, through a comparison between a big box retail environment and main street. This led me to research the change in consumerism from the conception of department stores in an urban

condition, to the creation of shopping centres in a suburban condition, all while analyzing the progression of 'consumerism' – from an architectural, cultural, and social perspective.

Figure 1 – An example of a historic (above) and contemporary (below) bank in North America.

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*Living in the sprawl/
Dead shopping malls rise like
Mountains beyond mountains,
And there's no end in sight...*

—Arcade Fire, Sprawl II
(Mountains Beyond Mountains)
2010

Introduction

Consumerism Meets Architecture

The connection between architecture and consumerism has always been complex and fascinating. A defining condition, it has, and will continue to have an impact on our lives, and can shape (for better or worse) how we, as a modern day society function. Architecture has the ability to lift us up, or bring us down. Likewise, communities and **conditions** are ever changing, and architecture cannot remain static – it must be able to adapt and change. Good architecture must be responsive to a community or condition in which it exists. Everything starts from nothing and develops over time into something more complex and more meaningful.

It is said that, *'shopping is the medium by which the market had solidified its grip on our spaces, buildings, cities, activities, and lives. It is the material outcome of the degree to which the market economy has shaped our surroundings, and ultimately ourselves.'*³ No longer a need for 'necessities', shopping has become a social past time within today's consumer culture, and the act of branding an environment is undeniable, and is now forced upon society and can be observed within every urban and suburban environment. The creation of department stores, shopping centres, or big box stores has had, and will continue to have, an

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³ Chung, J., Inaba, J., Koolhaas, R., Leong, S. *Project on the City 2: Harvard Design School guide to Shopping*. Koln: Taschen, 2001. P. 129

increasing and fundamental impact on the way we live our lives.

Technological innovation, new ways of planning, and a shift in consumer culture have all helped facilitate this change. It is a basic fact that over time, things change. Therefore, we must be responsive to the changing needs of society or a community, and adapt a situation or typology in order to aid in the betterment of society.

Zukin writes, *'since the nineties, shopping has become our principal strategy for creating value. With the shift of the economy toward consumption, and our weaker attachment to traditional art forms, religions, and politics, shopping has come to define who we, as individuals are, and what we, as a society want to become.'*⁴ Likewise, consumerism within a community creates value. Value in the form of 'economic success' is inevitable – people purchase, and revenue is generated. However, along with economic success, something *more* can originate – value in the generation of place; the existing community fabric and the 'dead mall' have the ability to create value in an innovative way – one that will enrich the community, and the people who visit.

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⁴ Zukin, Sharon. *Point of Purchase How Shopping Changed American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2004. P.8

Development in Shopping & Shopping in Development

The Urban Department Store

Architecture and Consumerism Under one Roof

The department store is historically rooted in innovation and influence.

Department stores first appeared in North America in the mid 19th

Century, and the rise of the urban department store was an urban

Figure 2 – Hudson's Bay Company in Calgary, Alberta – The Hudson's Bay Company states, "An advertisement in the City Directory for 1913 described the features of the outstanding new store which had "over five acres of floor space, and a staff of 500." The new store was home to a rooftop playground for children and the famous Elizabethan Restaurant. In 1929, the Arcadian Court opened in Toronto as an extension to the Queen Street store and included facilities for a variety of events such as trade shows, art exhibits, music recitals, dances, public lectures and fine dining – all elements reaching beyond the 'idea of consumerism' and purchasing.

phenomenon.⁵ As

cities began to

expand, and

roadways, streetcars,

subways and a larger

concentration of

people began to

congregate and reside

within cities, retailers

began locating

business within these

heavily populated

areas. The Hudson's

⁵ HBC Heritage: The Department Store. Hudson's Bay Company. Accessed online
<<http://www.hbcheritage.ca/hbcheritage/history/social/CustomerExperience/departmentstore>>

Bay Company states, *'sometimes a strong retailer could actually influence the development of a city, and that Montreal showcased a prime example of this;'*

*"In 1866 Henry Morgan and Company was located on St. James St. at Victoria Square, then the city's financial district. By 1886 however a new generation of Morgan's had entered the business and saw an opportunity in relocating to the growing residential area along Ste. Catherine St. at the top of Beaver Hall Hill. Competitors were amused and skeptical, and confidently predicted disaster. But they were proven wrong. The brand new red sandstone store on Phillips Square opened in 1891 and within five years the retail district had been effectively relocated to Ste. Catherine - where it remains to this day."*⁶

In looking at consumer culture, the urban department store was a significant element in the development and emergence of such.⁷

Department stores acted as attractions for citizens and visitors to a city.

These attractions had a similar cultural character as banks, railway stations, stadium, or exhibition halls. As stated by Chaney, *'the department store was a significant element in the emergence of a consumer culture, that is a set of institutionalized values and forms of relationships based upon the purchase and acquisition of commodities.'*⁹

This led the creation of a store that was designed to 'entice' a visitor to purchase – through architecture, interior design, marketing, etc. Stores became centres of innovation and advertised new trends; innovations in architecture and engineering such as escalators, elevators, air

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⁶ I. Bid

⁷ Cheney, David. "The Department Store as Cultural Form" *Theory Culture Society*, 1,22. (1983) 22-31. p.25

⁹ I. bid, 27

conditioning, electric lighting, steel frame construction, and fire proofing – all on display (and catering) towards the general public.

Stores were often very large and many classic downtown stores were architecturally significant - such as the Hudson's Bay Company flagship stores in Montreal, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver. Their economic importance was also significant, and over the years, department stores were the biggest importers of goods, the largest employers of individuals, and had the greatest sales volumes of any sector.¹⁰ They completely revolutionized architecture, fashion, consumerism, and ultimately society.

Although department stores were innovative and an 'urban phenomenon', when cities began to expand, so did the population. Moving out of the urban centre, residents in the core of a city moved to the periphery and the suburbs, sparking a new form of consumerism – a form made possible through the suburbanization of cities.

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¹⁰ HBC Heritage: The Department Store. Hudson's Bay Company. Accessed online <<http://www.hbcheritage.ca/hbcheritage/history/social/CustomerExperience/departmentstore>>

Suburban Shopping

Malling the Suburbs and a Machine for Selling

In the 1920's and 1930's, the creation of a new planning model as an attempt to use physical design as a means to instill civic pride encouraged planners to place the shopping centre among additional civic buildings or activities, such as the school, library, playground, church or community centre. Clarence Arthur Perry stated that a planned neighbourhood district *'with its physical boundary, its planned recreational facilities, its accessible shopping centres, and its convenient circulatory systems – all integrated and harmonized by artistic designing – would furnish the kind of environment where vigorous health, a rich social life, civic efficiency, and a progressive community consciousness would spontaneously develop and permanently flourish.'*¹¹ Consequently, the linking of residential, commercial, social and cultural typologies would aid in creating the idyllic landscape for inhabitants of a suburban neighbourhood. By combining a number of developments that aid in the creation of a 'sense of place' within the suburban neighbourhood, it can be said that this was a means of bringing what could occur in the urban condition, to the suburban. A place for residents or visitors, it was to provide a refuge for individuals to partake in a number of activities that had the potential to become lost in the newly created suburban neighbourhood.

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¹¹ Howard, Gillette Jr. (1985) *The Evolution of the Planned Shopping Centre in Suburb and City*, Journal of the American Planning Association, 51:4, p. 450.

Victor Gruen alleged suburbs lacked what he believed was an appropriate cultural cohesion, so he characterized shopping centres with new terms such as *'satellite downtown'* and described them in civic terms through which they might satisfy the *'primary human instinct to mingle'*.¹²

Furthermore, like Gruen, Zukin believes that repackaging the city in a safe, clean, and meticulously ordered form allowed the mall added importance as a community and social hub. The enclosed mall supplied spatial centrality, a publicly centered focus, and human density – all necessary and fundamental elements lacking in the sprawling suburbs.¹³

The Shopping Centre Suburban Urban – Mall as City

Figure 3 - Victor Gruen – Often coined the 'inventor' of the modern day shopping centre

The history of shopping centres illustrates the ways planners have attempted to link physical design to social restructuring and prediction. Considered to be the leading theorists of the shopping

centre movement, Victor Gruen and James Rouse, encouraged the design of controlled environments as exciting as the city, but without (what

¹² Smiley, D. and Robbins, M. *Sprawl and Public Space: Redressing the Mall*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2002. P.191.

¹³ Zukin, Sharon. *Point of Purchase How Shopping Changed American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2004. P.8

they called) 'its usual attendant nuisances'. Malls embody the values and ideals of what they coined a 'commercial utopianism' – a perfected and faultless idea of freedom, abundance, leisure, happiness, individualism and community."¹⁵

As early as the 1960's, Victor Gruen wrote about what he thought was the 'future of the enclosed shopping centre.' Gruen believed that with increased technology and a shortened working week, the American public would have an influx of time - which could now be spent on leisure and a more socially conscious agenda. Based on this prediction, Gruen proclaimed a continued importance of the suburban shopping mall with an expansion and redefinition of its social areas. "...*the pedestrian area will gain in importance as the main shopping areas, while entrances and shop windows, directed toward parking areas may gradually disappear.*"¹⁶ This utopian reversal of interior and exterior was something new for the shopper, and the community.

With this shift inward, shopping mall design increasingly reinforced the domestic values and physical order of suburbia. Like the suburban house, which rejected the sociability of front porches and sidewalks in favour of private backyards - malls looked inward, turning their back on the public

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¹⁵ Scharoun, Lisa. *America at the Mall: The Cultural Role of Retail Utopia*. North Carolina: McFarland and Company. 2012. P. 232.

¹⁶ I. bid, 226

street and creating the perfect opportunity for 'perfection'. Set down in the middle of nowhere, or a 'commercial zone', these landscapes of parking and monolithic buildings reflected the profound skepticism of the street as a public arena.¹⁷ The now enclosed mall created a utopian dreamscape devoid of reality. Glass-enclosed elevators and escalators all added vertical and diagonal movement to the basic, and sprawling horizontal design of the mall. In order to create the aesthetic of downtown, architects manipulated light and sound to create a fantasy urbanism devoid of the city's negative qualities: bad weather, increased traffic, and the poor.¹⁸

Figure 4 - Southdale Centre's large and 'public square' focus, designed by Victor Gruen. Benches, fountains and trees occupy the space.

During this time, shopping centres were praised for creating 'a pleasant, landscaped

business street

free of traffic

hazard'; and Department Store Economist claimed that '*no construction is more dynamic than the shopping centre or as likely to influence a reform to the usual urban or suburban hodge-podge...A new generation of*

¹⁷ Sorkin, Michael. *Variation: on a theme park the new American City and the End of Public Space*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992. P. 21.

¹⁸ I. bid, 22

*department store men and women... are showing the same high responsibility to the communities that their grandfathers showed when they helped to create the great downtowns which we know today in hundreds of cities.*¹⁹ Likewise, a 1972 report in the *Architectural Record* declared *'the growing commitment to concentration and mixed activities in these malls are a very strong sign that people do not want to abandon their urban life – even in the suburbs.'* The report continues in stating, *'...shopping malls are taking on all the best characteristics of central cities... even achieving some of the idealized techniques of urban life that central cities have seldom achieved'*.²⁰ Therefore, the new shopping centre had found its success as a new and idealized urban form, ultimately taking on the role one carried by a downtown or central business district. Although retailing is key to its success – the mall has become a social, cultural, and recreational focal point of the community.²¹

Victor Gruen

Victor Gruen is widely known as the inventor of the shopping mall. For Gruen, the creation of the shopping centre was not about shopping, instead he believed the mall *'was a vehicle toward his real ambition: to*

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¹⁹ Howard, Gillette Jr. (1985) *The Evolution of the Planned Shopping Centre in Suburb and City*, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 51:4, P. 450.

²⁰ McGraw Hill Company. *The Mall at Columbia Maryland*. *Architectural Record*. Edition 3, 1972. McGraw Hill. P. 113.

²¹ Howard, Gillette Jr. (1985) *The Evolution of the Planned Shopping Centre in Suburb and City*, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 51:4, P. 451.

*redefine the contemporary city. For Gruen, the mall was the new city.'*²²

Following the Second World War, the first shopping mall was introduced to the suburban American landscape. Gruen believed that his designs would bring order, stability and meaning to 'chaotic suburbia'. He also believed extensively that the town centre was the 'heart, brain and soul of the city'.²³ However, if shopping centres were to be re-imagined 'town centres,' Gruen chose to draw only on certain aspects of the urban experience, leaving out selected (what he devised as negative) urban principles. While he sought the stimulation of a crowded streetscape – which, he suggested, satisfied a “primary human instinct to mingle with other human beings” – he looked to hide anything that was considered unhealthy, unattractive or corrupt within a city. It is because of these views that the suburban shopping centre reversed inward to mask the exterior environment and create the ideal and perfected inner street. He excused such introverted projects with the explanation that in cities ‘we have permitted anarchy and ugliness to take over to such a degree that good architecture has no place to express itself.’ In the suburbs, he hoped architects could achieve a balanced architectural approach that offered ‘variety without confusion, colourful appearance without garishness, gaiety

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²² Chung, J., Inaba, J., Koolhaas, R., Leong, S. *Project on the City 2: Harvard Design School guide to shopping*. Koln: Taschen, 2001. p. 381.

²³ I. bid, 387

without vulgarity.’²⁴ With a turn inward, the shopping centre ‘exaggerated the differences between the world outside and the world inside: a forbidding exterior has paradisiacal interiors.’²⁵ Although this seems idyllic and unproblematic, when the shopping mall fails, so does the community it stands within. The once ‘paradisiacal’ interior, which once captivated an audience, is removed - leaving a large and garish block devoid of character and floating within a sea of concrete.

Gruen’s Mall Design

In his designs, Gruen created an appealing stage and scale for retailing. He literally defined the prevalent vocabulary for retailing in North America. He informed merchants how to use art, courtyards, and parking lots to make their businesses more ‘beautiful’, and profitable. This is Gruen’s legacy – building and refining the arena of American Retailing and turning shopping into America’s favourite pastime.²⁶ Gruen not only concentrated on the sale of goods, but how visitors to his sites would feel when within his creations, and how they were to become enticed into frequenting his ‘palaces of consumption’. Gruen’s concept was extremely successful and by 1943, the idea that a shopping centre might serve as both a retail facility and a social centre was accepted. Four years earlier, architects

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²⁴ Howard, Gillette Jr. (1985) *The Evolution of the Planned Shopping Centre in Suburb and City*, Journal of the American Planning Association, 51:4, p. 453.

²⁵ Sorkin, Michael. *Variation: on a theme park the new American City and the End of Public Space*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992. P. 21.

²⁶ Hardwick, Jeffrey. *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004 p. 7.

recommended bringing theaters, playgrounds, schools, and other attractions into the shopping centre as a crucial piece of a larger civic improvement process. However, public amenities were not added simply out of civic-mindedness. Many experts viewed them as a way to make the shopping centre more profitable, as they would essentially entice people to stay, and remain 'captivated' within the centre. Individuals claim that 'amenities can help to create atmosphere' and as Gruen told store managers *'the challenge was to make his projects a cultural and community-minded centre and thus inducing the shopper to spend more time there than in the ordinary shopping areas.'*²⁷

Gruen's Northland

Figure 5 - Victor Gruen's Northland exemplifying his 'cluster scheme'. Outdoor spaces are formed, and provide space for individuals to gather.

²⁷ Hardwick, Jeffrey. *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004 p. 85.

Within Gruen's Northland, he believed that when designed correctly, the shopping centre could satisfy every suburbanites desire and need for *'cultural, civic, and social' interaction. While other American architects employed a 'simple' mall plan that planted grass on Main Street, in Northland Gruen surpassed this design – naming what was referred to as his 'cluster scheme.'* Rather than placing two rows of stores parallel to each other across a landscaped mall, he arranged Northland's buildings to form a number of park-like areas of different sizes and programs. The space between the buildings was Northland's single most important element, bringing a 'town square' element into its design.²⁸ In Northland's walkways and enclaves; sculptures, spacious courtyards, water features, and pedestrian-friendly malls emerged. With this, Gruen believed he had invented and perfected the suburban 'Town Square'. Gruen declared, *'Northland is a city within a city' and did not only want the shopping mall to 'seem' urban, but went as far as to say, he wanted the 'shopping centre to provide urban density for a suburban community.'*²⁹ Essentially, he believed that a mall is a public space...committed to intensive urban activity. In the suburban condition, I would agree with this. With larger plots of land, and an overall change in social interaction (disappearance of the front porch, contained and fenced yard, enter the garage and close

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²⁸ I. bid, 128

²⁹ I. bid, 130

the door) Gruen's attempt at making the mall the 'social space' was a fundamental step in establishing a social space for a community.

Southdale

Unlike Northland, Gruen designed Southdale to be a completely covered market, and part of a larger development. Southdale had 72 stores on two floors, 810,000 square feet of retailing, 5200 parking spaces, a garden court with atrium, and two full size and anchoring department stores - at a cost of 20 million dollars. It was the most ambitious project Gruen had undertaken to date. The creation of Southdale was an entirely new retail environment, a commercial palace for suburbanites.³⁰ The enclosed shopping centre had a 'new layout' (all indoors), with stores arranged around a huge roofed court, which provided 'July heat for January Shoppers.'³¹ This is what we have come to know as the 'mall' found within most North American suburbs. Gruen explained that Southdale's artificial climate allowed for the growth of California flora. The mall was adorned with magnolia trees, a eucalyptus tree and orchids. Gruen wanted people to 'feel' they were outdoors – to provide psychological, as well as visual contrast and relief from indoor shops.

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³⁰ I. bid, 144

³¹ I. bid, 148

Figure 6 - Victor Gruen's Southdale Centre - Blank Facades, windowless walls, parking lots, no decoration and an uninspiring exterior were common in many designs of this time. A 'sea of parking' was prominent.

After the introduction of Gruen's enclosed centre, suburban department stores quickly outshined the downtown department store locations.

Shopping centres stole market share from retailers in urban areas.

Architecturally, for Gruen there was no greater symbol of Southdale's

'utopian ideas' than its blank facades. Reviewers rarely noted the

windowless walls facing the parking lots; the interior was too distracting

and innovative. No signs, no lights, no show windows, and no decoration

– the exterior was supposed to be serene and uninspiring, a reaction to

the bright lights of the commercial strip. This was a strategic and

important part of Gruen's design.

The Decline

With successful sales figures and increased suburbanization throughout North America, malls have become overbuilt in the suburbs, some estimate by thirty percent or more.³² This means that there are a large number of failed malls, as well as empty stores in the 'successful' ones. People have grown tired of the monotonous undimensionality of the mall experience, and the average visit has declined from well over, to well under two hours – a significant decline in attendance. Kunstler believes that shopping malls as a typology for development have passed their prime, and that a new typology for North America is unknown. Urban planners are unsure of how the modern day shopping mall might evolve.³³ Although a new typology is uncertain, consumers are now seeking a greater authenticity in the malls they frequent. The Urban Land Institute (ULI) writes that *'customers are now seeing authenticity and a deeper sense of connection to their community, culture, climate and daily lives. A more authentic main street and outdoors experience is warranted, contrary to the synthetic and often 'idealized' environment of the enclosed shopping mall originally conceived by Gruen.'*

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³² Smiley, D. and Robbins, M. *Sprawl and Public Space: Redressing the Mall*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2002. P. 35.

³³ Scharoun, Lisa. *America at the Mall: The Cultural Role of Retail Utopia*. North Carolina: McFarland and Company. 2012. P. 105.

The International Council of Shopping Centres estimates that only one third of a total 1100 enclosed regional shopping malls in the United States are currently viable. Economists attribute the decline of this model to a change in attitude towards consumption as a result of the 2008 global financial crisis.³⁴ These declining malls will eventually see a reduction in patronage, a decline in sales revenue, and ultimately a mall closure, abandonment and/or demolition. Scharoun writes that the number of mall

Figure 7 – Once home to retailers and shoppers alike, the ‘dead mall’ is common among many North American landscapes.

closures in North America will likely outnumber new mall openings in the near future. These greyfield sites that were once home to a busy and successful mall (originally conceived during the building of the neighbourhood) are located in now established neighbourhoods and

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³⁴ I. bid, 108

shopping districts. Scharoun believes that the 'current economic climate is making it difficult to rehabilitate greyfields as viable retail space. A new anchor tenant or a redesigned or renovated interior is no longer the answer.'³⁵ This decline in existing neighbourhood locations opens up a new possibility for the design within these existing communities. What was once an area that was primarily focused on consumption and 'utopian thinking' has now shifted back outward, and the community and focus on a re-invention of the shopping mall is necessary.

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³⁵ I. bid, 110

The Big Box Consumerism Separation

The rigid, isolated object . . . is of no use whatsoever. It must be inserted into the context of living social relations.

- Walter Benjamin, 1934

Similar to the shopping mall, the big box retail environment caters to the car, and is located across large plots of land. Not enclosed, stores stand independently and focus solely on 'retailing', with little regard for community, or its physical location.

First introduced in the 1960's, with the inception of Wal-Mart and Target – the big box store has become commonplace in many cities and suburbs throughout Canada, and the rest of North America. The main premise behind the big box retail environment was to construct a building that was inexpensive and flexible. Just a shell, the space can be filled with mass-produced and low-priced items, marketed through 'discount means'.

Because the structure is so rudimentary, it gives shoppers the impression that little money was spent on design, materials or construction, and all of the savings are being passed on to them. For retailers, they are able to offer low-cost goods, in part, because the stores' construction is standardized. As example, it would require more time and money to develop an individual set of design and construction standards for each

new store than it does to have a single plan that can be applied to developments throughout the country. Although viable from an economic means, it further decreases 'desirability' in the suburban condition. Additionally, the big box structure is consistent with the suburban life-choice: easy access to shopping and free parking.

Today, the big box power centre, offering 'off-price' retailing, has overshadowed the shopping centre as a model for suburban retail construction. This development has led to a decrease in areas for pedestrian traffic and social spaces in the commercial environment. Most visitors attend the retail outlets via their automobile and visit solely to make a purchase. While this new typology comes a regression of the public space in suburban communities by shifting population from a shopping

Figure 8 - London, Ontario - North London Smart Centre. Common sites within many Canadian and American cities, these large big box stores are built on the outskirts of cities and occupy large plots of land.

centre to a big box environment, it also offers up opportunities for repurposing the use of privatized enclosed retail spaces as a replacement for genuine public space within established suburban communities. The decline of the shopping centre can also be seen as a factor in stimulating a new retail vision, one that more fully incorporates the community into the planning of the centre.³⁶

Finding a Sense of Place – a Suburban Town Centre Integration of Consumerism and Urban Design

Today, urban design profession is almost wholly preoccupied with the idea of reproduction, and the creation of urbane disguises – urban disguise being an inauthentic depiction of a ‘typical’ urban façade or architecture.³⁷ Seen from above, the mall resembles a pile of oversized boxes dropped down in the middle of an asphalt sea, surrounded by an endless landscape of single-family homes and/or apartment blocks. Inside, the mall presents a ‘spectacle of attractions and diversions.’³⁸ If we look deeper, there is a stark contrast between the realm of interior and exterior. There is virtually no in-between; you are either inside or out, enthralled in the spectacle of the interior, or observing a banal and unsightly exterior.

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³⁶ Scharoun, Lisa. *America at the Mall: The Cultural Role of Retail Utopia*. North Carolina: McFarland and Company. 2012. P. 227.

³⁷ Sorkin, Michael. *Variation: on a theme park the new American City and the End of Public Space*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992. P. xiv.

³⁸ Sorkin, Michael. *Variation: on a theme park the new American City and the End of Public Space*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992. P. 3.

For the purposes of this thesis, one can make a comparison between both the problem and solution of the shopping centre. Enthralled in spectacle, the post-war shopping centre uses a number of techniques - there are countless mediums in which the designers of shopping centres employ in order to attract customers and drive economic success. However, although these techniques are employed on the interior and are arguably successful in allowing a person to feel pleasure while in the mall, what happens when failure strikes? If the attraction of the interior expires, there is nothing the exterior possesses to enhance the community.

Today's architecture has lost its ability to provoke pleasure – buildings like the shopping centre leave a lot to be desired. To regain its social relevance within cities, the architecture of the shopping mall must relate to a larger field of association and emotions. Can architecture begin to appeal to the collective fantasy of a society, or better yet begin to shape it? For architecture to be appreciated, it must be able to build a relevant emotional experience at different points of contact with its users.³⁹ In today's present-day condition, architecture can no longer be associated by a spectacle-laden interior housed within a banal exterior. Therefore, the re-envisioned 'mall' and site will need to be shaped by the community,

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³⁹ Klingmann, Anna. *Brandscapes; Architecture in the Experience of Economy*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2007. P. 45.

capturing the interest and emotions of individuals frequenting the site. It could be argued that architecture has had a history of symbolic representation.⁴⁰ However, this historic representation of the shopping centre is its current fault. As has been noted, there has been a natural progression in shopping typologies. Instead of looking to historic examples like department stores, we must look toward the future (or present day) condition in order to determine the best possible course of action in determining a new use for this declining typology.

Site & Community

In determining a course of action for re-envisioning failing shopping centres, a look at the connection between site and community becomes essential. Over the years, there has been a dichotomy in how urban designers view design with a sense of place, or a quality urban environment rooted in the community. There are those such as Cullen who place greatest emphasis on physicality – design styles, ornamentation and featuring, the way buildings open out into spaces, gateways, vistas, landmarks, etc. This can be considered a classical view into designing spaces and places. Other designers stress a psychology of place – or the way and how space makes one ‘feel’, bound up in the notion of ‘mental maps’, which people use as internal guides to urban places. Here, they rely on the senses in order to dictate how a space

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⁴⁰ I. bid, 155

feels, looks, smells, etc. This is a more subjective and romanticized view of urban design. When objects (people, landscape, buildings, etc.) are combined in a thoughtful and suitable way, urban *quality* has the ability to be fashioned⁴² This can include, but is certainly not limited to architectural forms, scale, landmarks, views, open space, landscaping, materials and light quality.

Jane Jacobs was the first to explore urban quality from the premise that activity both produces and mirrors quality in the built environment. She identifies four essential determinants which govern or set the conditions for activity: a mixture of primary use, intensity, permeability of the urban form and a mixture of building types, ages, sizes and conditions. Jacobs argues that successful urban places are based predominantly on street life, and the various ways in which activity occurs in and through buildings and spaces.⁴³

Because successful suburban or urban environments are said to combine quality in three essential forms; physical space, the sensory, and activity, we can begin to assess how this has been successful and overlooked in the design of suburban shopping centres. Without any doubt, a downtown department store is more successful in engaging with the city.

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⁴² Montgomery, Charles. *Happy City*. Canada: Doubleday, 2013. P. 95

⁴³ I. bid, 96

Its outward looking windowed façade, density placement and architectural character are very common in most urban stores and create a solid and cultural landmark within the core of a city. When we look to the suburban shopping centre, these design decisions are often overlooked. Inward focused, a form within a sea of automobiles and a lack of historic 'charm' will all aid in creating a sense of placelessness within the suburban community.

It is believed that Americans will return to urban environments they once favored and will generate a new and improved American Dream. This dream would be one that offers up new implementation of public squares, parks and shared urban spaces.⁴⁴ Although the historic urban environment may become a commonplace prototype for many, with the creation of sprawling suburbs, an opportunity to create a new 'urban' landscape within a suburban setting will become necessity, and possible. In creating a 'new' typology and with a focus on sense of place, it is a relatively simple task to think of a successful place, and feel it is either successful or unsuccessful – we can all attest to having a favourite place. However, it is increasingly difficult to know how we would be able to generate this success, or why particular places are successful.⁴⁵ Like

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⁴⁴ Scharoun, Lisa. *America at the Mall: The Cultural Role of Retail Utopia*. North Carolina: McFarland and Company. 2012. P. 225.

⁴⁵ Montgomery, John. "Making a City; Urbanity, Vitality and Urban Design." *Journal of Urban Design*. 3:1, 1998. P. 94.

many things, architecture is subjective. What may be favourable to one can often be uninspiring and lackluster to another.

Redressing the Mall

“A stimulating new vision is called for: one that can help rescue the failing centres but also have them to be genuine places in the older areas of our spreading suburban environment. We need to develop a deeper sense of how to achieve these changes, and to work toward guidelines for action. This is the challenge...”

- Mark Robbins, *Sprawl and Public Space*

In the case of Westmount in London, Ontario (which will be explore later), and many other malls throughout North America, a new typology of ‘consumerism’ needs to be explored. Unlike the current trend in big box consumerism, there is no ‘one idea’. In looking at failing and dead malls, we have to consider their context, and what that community is in need of. Unlike previous malls that engaged us in a ‘utopian realm’ or other similar spaces that are designed wholly to make us good consumers and to engage us in fantasy, which includes the participation in what appears to be a public realm.⁴⁶

As a new form of shopping has taken shape, the focus of this ‘solution’ is not to invent a new form of shopping, rather advance what was once a

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⁴⁶ Smiley, D. and Robbins, M. *Sprawl and Public Space: Redressing the Mall*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2002. P. 6.

prominent form of retailing (the shopping centre) and develop it into something new, that has the ability to enrich a community, or city. Although it may not take on the form of retail exclusively, a suburban mall has the ability to cater to different needs within a community. “A democratic society needs what the philosopher Michael Walzer has called ‘open-minded spaces,’ places where a wide variety of people can coexist, places where a wide variety of functions encourage unexpected activities, places whose multiple possibilities lead naturally to the communication that makes democracy possible. Within the suburbs, these places tend to be dominated by what Walzer has called ‘single minded spaces’, that is, spaces so rigorously defined for a single purpose that they exclude the liberating openness of genuine public space.”⁴⁷ Suburbs and planned shopping areas like Westmount are so rigidly defined; it almost inhibits the ability for the community to grow organically or naturally. This hindrance on ‘natural growth’ has more problems than what meets the eye at first glance, and can ultimately lead to increased problems in the future – derelict spaces, decreased property values, an overall dislike of the area, etc. Despite a large number of single-minded spaces, this has created a vast opportunity for the reinvention or recreation of public space in the suburban realm.

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⁴⁷ I. bid, 9

These ‘opportunities’ of a decline of successful shopping malls present us with unique opportunities for an alternative. Can dead malls be transformed from eyesores and financial liabilities into civic assets? Can their rebuilding become a sign that a positive cycle of rebuilding and renewal has replaced our terrible habit of abandonment and replacement? In other words, can these underutilized spaces be redesigned as open-minded spaces that can nurture a wide range of functions now neglected in most North American suburbs? Can the dead mall be transformed into the 21st-century version of the town square?⁴⁸ As a substantial percentage of shopping centres have become architecturally, economically and socially obsolete, what can be done as a sense of ‘renewal?’⁴⁹ Like an old home with a number of small rooms, the design of malls have changed, stores are moving towards cheaper land and a big box environment, and people don’t necessarily ‘enjoy’ coming to the mall any longer – there is simply no need. There are so many contributing factors that point to the decline of malls, a new solution is apparent. The goal of this thesis is not to determine how to bring consumerism back to a suburban mall, but moreover – how can we as architects enrich a suburban community by transforming or reimagining a declining suburban shopping centre?

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⁴⁸ Smiley, D. and Robbins, M. *Sprawl and Public Space: Redressing the Mall*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2002. P. 10.

⁴⁹ I. bid, 14.

Smiley states that, *'according to conventional wisdom, the racial, ethnic, and class portraits of the communities that now surround older malls cannot sustain the profits and cash flow to maintain viable business.'* But conventional wisdom can be a brittle form of knowledge, and in the case of the older shopping centre, such thinking fails to acknowledge that population and census studies of inner suburban communities show bustling neighbourhoods filled with people who are employed, who own their homes, and are more than ready to shop and use these places for a variety of activities – they enjoy living in the suburbs.⁵⁰ Non-commercial activities have the ability to be combined with, or co-exist along the retail activity that is still considered successful within a shopping centre. Smiley questions, *'can the older shopping centre – from finance to design – be reconceived for a new, more complex, more community serving set of uses?'* My answer to this is, yes.

Stores, parks, plazas, squares, etc. have historically been home to many unanticipated and alternative uses.⁵¹ If shopping malls utilize these ideas within (or outside of) their walls, one can assume they have the ability to function in a different and unexpected way should the primary function of a mall change (for whatever reason). It is now estimated that the average

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⁵⁰ I. bid, 15

⁵¹ I. bid, 16

mall life is less than ten years.⁵² Because of this, enclosed malls are needing to undergo a complete transformations, and a redefinition. Many malls are removing their roofing, dismantling corridors, and punching through windowless walls to let in light and air. In many ways, this is a 'makeover' project that is hoping to buy the mall time, or make it appear as though it is trying to become part of a community – a new lease on life. This however, is not a solution, but a temporary fix.

Suburbanization has meant secession, sprawl, and the destruction of community. The 'new urbanism' has addressed the loss of vitality in the suburbs in a primarily cosmetic way, opting for the appearance of cities but avoiding those essential urban traits such as class and race mixing, the delight real urban dwellers take in the unfamiliar, tolerance and even affinity for disorder, and the idea of risk. Yet, these are precisely the rough and vital substance of real cities.⁵³

Place

There are countless definitions for describing and defining the word 'place', but generally speaking, the word place can be defined by being considered a bond between a person and a setting.⁵⁴ Places can often be

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⁵² Smiley, D. and Robbins, M. *Sprawl and Public Space: Redressing the Mall*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2002. P. 30.

⁵³ I. Bid, 34.

⁵⁴ Sime, J. D. *Creating Places or Designing Spaces*. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. Vol. 6, 1986. p.

referenced as a location that plays a distinct role in the behavior of people, and at a deeper level - mental health. Places, in addition to physical features include messages and meanings that people perceive and critique based on their own personal experiences, roles, expectations and motivations. Furthermore, a sense of place is an important and contributing factor in maintaining an overall quality of environment.

As architects, the role of design as a tool to answer human needs, community footings and expectations is especially significant. This thesis is not aimed at finding an alternative to suburban living, or criticizing it as a viable form of living within a city. Rather, it is aimed at enriching the current state of a suburban neighbourhood through finding a sense of place within an existing set of parameters and building types.

Norbert-Schultz explains that the changing of *place* to *space* is the existential purpose of architecture. Norberg-Schultz also believed in relating space to a person's physical and mental well being, while providing physical attributes.⁵⁵ In *phenomenology*, the environment is concretely defined as 'the place', and the things that occur there 'take place'. The place is not so simple as the location, but consists of concrete things, which have material substance, shape, texture, and colour.

Together, these blend to form an environmental character, or atmosphere.

49-63.

⁵⁵ Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *The Concept of Dwelling: on the Way to Figurative Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1986.

It is this atmosphere, which allows certain spaces, with similar or even identical functions, to embody very different properties, in accord with the unique cultural and environmental conditions of the place, which they exist.

Phenomenology absorbs the concept of subjectivity, making the thing and its unique interactions with its place the relevant topic and not the thing itself – a linking of site and object. The man-made components of the environment become the settlements of differing scales, some large (cities), and some small (a house). The paths between these settlements, and the various elements which create the environment, become the secondary defining characteristics of the place. Furthermore, the distinction of natural and man-made offers us the first step in a phenomenological approach. The second is the distinction between inside and outside, and the third is to assess character – how things are made and exist within their environment.

Sense of Place

Like Schulz, looking specifically at the work of Steven Holl, Holl advocates that *“when we sit at a desk in a room by a window, the distant view, light from the window, floor material, wood of the desk, and eraser in hand begin to merge perceptually. This overlap of foreground, middle ground, and distant view is a critical issue in the creation of architectural space.*

*We must consider space, light, colour, geometry, detail, and material as an overlapping experience. Though we can disassemble these elements and study them individually during the design process, they merge in the final condition, and ultimately we cannot readily break perception into a simple collection of geometries, activities and sensations”*⁵⁶ Alone, each of these elements exist, but together they merge to form a phenomenological experience of architecture - subjective and complex. Sight overlapping with sound, taste, smell and touch all come together to create one equivocally equal whole. Each sense informs another, allowing a subjective and multi-faceted experience to flourish. Holl writes, *“Anyone who has become entranced by the sound of water drops in the darkness of a ruin can attest to the extraordinary capacity of the ear to carve a volume into the void of darkness. The space traced by the ear becomes a cavity sculpted in the interior of the mind”*⁵⁷

By perceptually enriching your experience of a particular space through architecture and urban design will become essential (in my opinion) in creating a re-envisioned shopping centre. When we are connected to a space, or a space is connected to community, we as humans are more inclined to care for it, or enjoy it. It can be said that architects often focus

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⁵⁶ Holl, Steven. *Parallax*. Basel: Birkhauser-Publishers for Architecture: 2000, p.45.

⁵⁷ Holl, Steven, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Gómez Alberto Pérez. *"An Architecture of the Seven Senses." Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*. San Francisco, CA: William Stout, 2006. P. 28-37.

on designing objects instead of designing the perception of the objects.

Stephen Holl states in *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*, *“although cinema has a strong emotional potential, only architecture is capable of awakening simultaneously all the senses, all the complexity of perception”*.

The perception of an object is not static, and in fact changes over time. It varies depending on a point of view, the stimuli, changing conditions, etc. As stated above, the perception of an object (or place) is highly subjective, and a subjective approach to designing a single object becomes successful when considering the building being designed as a set of multiple objects overlaid and intertwined - creating one object with many perceptions. An object can be experienced in different light, at different times of day or year, or through different perspectives.

In the study of Westmount, phenomenological architecture is directly related to the building and its relationship to its site. As discussed prior, today the shopping centre has become less associated with site, and more concerned with branding, mass production and a reliance on consumerism and globalization. To reaffirm this, Jesus Hernandez and Helena Casanova state in *Scale and Perception*, that *‘Over the last century, Fordism promoted experimentation with generic structural*

solutions like concrete skeleton and architectonic prototypes as ways of solving global problems.' These solutions were then cloned around the world and very often conflicted with their locality. Like Gruen and his shopping centre, one design method is not the successful solution globally. What works here in one locale, is bound to fail in another.

Paradoxically, in our current Post-Fordist society in which industry has the capacity to personalize production, global architecture produces '*similar cities all around the world, this time not created by the repetition of almost identical prismatic buildings, but by the cacophonous accumulation of an infinite variety of shaped buildings structured in what Rem Koolhaas named the generic city.*'⁵⁸ This directly relates to the shopping mall, and the big box typology. Both architectural forms do not consider the relationship to site, but create spaces devoid of site, and are able to be replicated across the country – economically and with ease.

In our increasing urbanized world, phenomenological architecture and explorations in subjectivism can be used to as a tool in providing relief for buildings (such as derelict shopping centres) and aiding in helping fix areas of socio-economic decay present within these sites.

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⁵⁸ Casanova H., Hernandez J. *Scale & Perception: Rethinking Phenomenological Architecture in the Global Age*. Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth. March, 2014, p. 1.

Revisiting phenomenological architecture in our current society is an important task in trying to maximize the multisensory perception of our environment. A reloaded phenomenological architecture can play an important role in facing the challenges of the current and future process of urbanization on the planet, such as densification, environmental sustainability and social identity. Architecture, after all, must create better cities, a better society and a better world.⁵⁹

A Better Solution **Re-Defining the Mall**

Shopping, is frequently being reinvented, reformulated, and reshaped to keep up with the subtlest changes in society.⁶⁰ By re-defining the declining shopping mall as a new typology within a community, there can be a re-invention of space designed to suit the needs of the local and visiting community. No longer strictly ‘utopian’ in thought with a solely retail based mandate, the ‘shopping centre’ has the ability to function similar to a market square, park, or community gathering place – ultimately enriching the community it is located within. Derelict malls can be reinvented to become a successful suburban environment of mixed uses. Although every community has their own set of characteristics in which shopping centres could (and should) be reinvented, this thesis will focus on the

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⁵⁹ Casanova H., Hernandez J. *Scale & Perception: Rethinking Phenomenological Architecture in the Global Age*. Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth. March, 2014, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Chung, J., Inaba, J., Koolhaas, R., Leong, S. *Project on the City 2: Harvard Design School guide to shopping*. Koln: Taschen, 2001. P. 131.

search for a sense of place at 'Westmount' – a declining suburban shopping centre in London, Ontario, Canada.

The Project: Case Study - Westmount Re-Defining, Re-Imagining

"Like the idea of suburbia, which depends on a constant moving-up to a better location or home, the shopping mall was always positioned as a temporary structure. "[Malls] have been designed to be serviceable, nothing more...and once they no longer serve they'll have to be razed and replaced with... I don't know. Maybe something even worse."⁶¹

Suburban Centre

Figure 9 - Aerial view of London, Ontario with the current Westmount Mall pictured near centre.

- London, Ontario, Canada
- Population: 366,151⁶²
- Major Industries: Advanced manufacturing, Life Sciences,
- Information Technology, Food Processing and Renewable Technologies.
- Canada's 10th largest city

⁶¹ Scharoun, Lisa. *America at the Mall: The Cultural Role of Retail Utopia*. North Carolina: McFarland and Company. 2012, p. 105.

⁶² London Economic Development Corporation, 2014. Accessed online at <<http://www.ledc.com>>

‘Westmount’, an area located in the west of the city was to be envisioned as a ‘complete community’ within the city of London. A mid 1960’s suburban development, this community was to offer an ‘exceptionally wide range of housing, shopping and services, all built on a scale that no one in the community here had ever attempted.’⁶³ Westmount was the biggest and most complex development undertaken by renowned London Ontario developer Sifton Properties Limited. From the onset, the community of Westmount was projected to be something extraordinary – the ultimate project for Sifton. A transformation from farmland into a mixed-use suburban community, it was the largest and most complex project Sifton had completed. The project was estimated at taking fifteen to twenty years to complete in its entirety, and would eventually be home to over 20,000 individuals, housed in single-family dwellings, townhomes, garden apartments and mid-rise apartment complexes.

Although there are no found examples of what planned communities were visited as a reference for Westmount, Sifton seemingly took cues from other cities in the United States, making sure their dream was able to be realized.⁶⁴ As Sifton states, *‘Westmount was to be the culmination of all the knowledge and experience the Sifton company had gained in forty years of London building. It would encompass different kinds of houses,*

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⁶³ Dennett, Chris. *Bricks and Mortar: The Sifton Story*. London, ON: Sifton Properties Ltd, 1999. P. 159.

⁶⁴ I. bid, 160

*townhouses, apartments, offices, a shopping centre, churches, and schools.*⁶⁵ The design of the community is based on the provision of a dominant centre providing a focus for retail, cultural, educational, recreational and religious facilities. An office complex and cinema occupied the site, but has since been demolished.

Although Sifton was successful in combining a multitude of residential types, as well as community centres, churches and offices, the ‘ideal’ Westmount shopping mall was originally envisioned to have replicated a town centre with fountains, sculptures, parks and pedestrian walkways – this was not the case post development, or today. Furthermore, the original mall was to be u-shape in design, opening up towards the south. This would allow it to spill out onto an architecturally integrated public school, library/education centre and high school. At the other end of the development, Dennett writes that a community and recreation centre was originally conceived. In addition to the proposed buildings, a small four or five acre lake to the west of the shopping centre was originally proposed. This would have been home to an island tea garden, and townhouses flanking the shore, all connected by covered walkways and a network of pathways.

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⁶⁵ I. bid, 160

"I think it's a jolly good suburban community. And it provides jolly good housing for probably close to 20,000 people. There are many facilities that are in the right place and serve people well. (But) I don't think that the town centre is as good a town centre as it could have been or ought to have been."

– Max Bacon, Planner of Westmount

Figure 10 – The original Westmount Mall during the Sifton Properties neighbourhood construction. Large parking lots, 'branded' way finding and a landscaped entrance were all part of the centre's original design.

On March 24th 1971, the original Westmount Mall opened. Although not the spectacle originally conceived by Sifton, it was located in the northwest corner of the intersection of Wonderland Road and Viscount Road and occupied a site of 11.9 hectares, or 29.8 acres. Home to over 70 retail tenants, the new mall was home to Eaton's and a Dominion Grocer as its major anchor stores. The total leasable area was 26,113 square meters, allowing Westmount to be considered as a considerable 'shopping centre' within London.

From a 1979 Economic Analysis of Westmount mall, it was found that the mall ranked high in terms of retail attraction; including availability of merchandise, price advantage, physical comforts and convenience. The analysis states, 'Westmount Mall has a good tenant mix; it is well designed, and provides a wide range of goods in an exceptionally pleasant atmosphere. The centre is also well located to serve customers who reside in the trading area. After years of success, Westmount Mall began plans for increased expansion. The new Westmount Mall was to be 12.2 metres in height, and would occupy two floors. In 1981, the City of London and Sifton Properties conducted a community impact study in order to determine the impact the new expansion would have on the community, and the direction in which the new project should take. A proposed 22,665 square meter expansion to the mall was proposed, and the existing

relationship between the mall and the surrounding community was presented through resident questionnaires.

Figure 11 - Westmount Mall after the 1980's renovation. Turquoise painted steel, light wood, marble and large expanses of glass were all elements found within the renewed design.

In summary, the existing mall is generally well regarded by the residents and has been considered successful. Their main concern was the mid-blocking crossing of pedestrians on Wonderland Road. Four lanes of relatively high-speed traffic combined with numerous turning movements in and out of the mall are perceived as creating unsafe conditions. This crossing problem is particularly troublesome for the significant number of elderly who reside in the apartment building on Wonderland Road.

In addition to the large population of elderly residing within the Westmount community, the large school population and residential areas adjacent to the site, a number of shoppers walk to the mall. The teenagers' use of the mall was discussed. They stated that loitering bothered the shoppers and that it was a difficult problem to solve. However, they added that the mall provides a source of employment for the students and also provided an interesting environment.⁶⁶ One interesting opportunity identified through the community impact study was that through surveying teenagers, the teenagers thought that the addition of recreation facilities in the mall, or in the area, may help alleviate the problem; and that a place (or places) within the mall where teenagers were welcome to sit and converse would be welcomed. In addition to students surveyed, other questionnaire

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⁶⁶ The Proctor and Redfern Group. *The Westmount Mall: Community Impact Study*. City of London Planning Division, Prepared for: Sifton Properties Limited, 1980, p. 12.

respondents have indicated that they would like department store merchandise to be increased through the addition of another large department store and/or a discount store. They have also expressed a desire to have more restaurants, recreational facilities, and medical/dental offices. The latter request illustrates their perception of the shopping mall as not only a place to shop but as a centre for entertainment and community services.

The Project: The New Westmount Centre

Today, Westmount Mall is not observed with the same optimism. With the introduction of a big box retail environment minutes down the road, an increase in rental income among tenants, and outdated facilities, the mall has become economically unsuccessful. Throughout the years, varied attempts have been made at ‘revamping’ its look, adding additional services and attractions and re-branding its vision, however Westmount has

Figure 12 - Westmount Mall Today depicting closed storefronts and empty parking lots – a now ‘dead mall’.

failed to regain a successful share in London's retail scene. Once the centre of a newborn 'model' suburban community, Westmount has become a 'dead centre' of the community; offering little space for shopping, social engagement and overall enjoyment. The goal of this design project is to take a once viable and community driven retail environment that acted as a central force in the socialization of the community, and rediscover and adapt it to the modern day needs of a community. In the simplest sense, the existing Westmount Mall will no longer serve the community – as a retail, or social space. By using a subjective view of phenomenological thinking, a renewed Westmount has the ability to be experienced by the community in varying ways. By taking cues from the idyllic and pristine characteristics of the shopping mall, and creating a subjective display of these elements, Westmount Mall will become a renewed central force of this community - a fun, uniting, sustainable and social space. By using the abstract concept of 'sense of place', the re-design of Westmount will enrich visitors, and enhance their experience of this place, ultimately becoming the central place within their community. By finding a 'sense of place', it is my hope I can find an emotional response to the qualities of this currently lackluster space – interior, exterior, large, small. By combining unique and varying experiences through buildings, interior spaces, exterior spaces, landscape, sound and light, a complex and interwoven environment will be formed, affected by its patterns of use and the rituals and conditions of the

community it serves. Just as the site affected whether it is a cloudy or sunny day, the site would also be affected by whether or not a soccer game was won or lost on a sunny summer afternoon, or skaters on a brisk winters day.

Figure 13 - Westmount Mall situated in relation to its 'typical' suburban community. Note the suburban community to the north and west and institutional facilities (schools) to the south.

The Plan

Figure 14 – Site plan detailing the various uses/positioning on the existing Westmount site. Both pedestrian and vehicular access is favoured, allowing the outlying community to engage with the site. Furthermore, a number of ‘proposed’ uses inhabit the site, making it a focal point of the community.

Figure 15 – Diagrammatic analysis of the site in relation to its designated use. Water, flexible space, natural elements, retail zone and recreation are all primary elements within the newly re-designed site. By using these key categories as a catalyst for rejuvenation, Westmount has the potential to become a new mixed-use driver within the community.

Figure 16 i – The site of Westmount, and its location among main arterial roadways. Right – the relationship between the site in its entirety (orange solid) and the boundary of the existing building (orange dashed).

Figure 16 ii – The relationship between the Westmount site, and the community. Green represents the existing natural and open space, dark grey represents institutional facilities, and light grey represents mid to high density residential. By incorporating a new and re-developed 'centre' in the middle, it will act as the driving force of unifying the fragmented landscape.

The Main Concourse

Figure 17- Plan of the 'main concourse' roof design. This will be a prominent design feature of the new centre and will serve as the linking east-west axis. This is the main element that was preserved from the original mall. Acting as a 'spine' between east and west, this will act as not only a visual for the site, but will also be home to many communal activities – market, flex space, washroom facilities, etc.

The main concourse and atrium was (and is) Westmount's defining architectural feature. With the new design, it will be retained in its original form, and act as a landmark and beacon for the site. This feature originating out of the original mall will be retained at its original height, and act as the principle design feature for the redevelopment and create a strong east-west axis. As part of the original plan, the atrium served as the only real connection to the exterior while within the mall. Like many suburban shopping centres, they resisted the exterior and opted for a fully inward experience. Furthermore, the impressive skylight that ran the length of the building enhanced the lackluster architecture of the mall's exterior. By keeping this important design feature, it will serve as a 'connector' between past and present and not only allow previous generations to reflect on their

past experiences at the mall, but allow them the experience of enjoying the new development through a much different experience. Equally as important, the strong east-west axis the skylight commands, will aid in linking the residential communities on both the east and west ends of the site. Overall, the main concourse serves as the primary departure point for the redevelopment and will become a catalyst in the success of Westmount.

‘Historic’ Footprint Water Channel

Figure 18 – Image detailing the main water channel on the site. A ‘memorable’ spot to reflect on the history of the site, it will also aid in masking sound from the busy road nearby, and provide an intriguing spot for individuals to visit. The water channel will run along the existing footprint of the mall, and becomes the boundary for building.

The relationship between the existing site and the mall is undeniable. Although erected as a 'temporary' structure with little relationship (architecturally) to the site, the relationship between mall and site is now increasingly significant. By removing the outdated and unnecessary shopping centre and retaining the original footprint of the mall in a metaphorical way, the presence of time comes into play – a memory of the previous building. Individuals who had frequented the mall in prior years will be consistently reminded of their memories, while allowing a new use to take shape. Furthermore, by using water as a feature within the site, this adds an additional natural component to the site, all while adding sound, colour and smell – an important feature for the senses. Seasonally, the water can hold many different uses, and therefore yield a number of varying experiences – wading in the summer months, to skating in the winter. The importance of a wide range of phenomenological approaches is important in creating a sense of place at the site.

Subjectively Natural

What is a natural environment? Is it an area where individuals have the ability to choose their desired activity? Or, is it returning the site to its natural and undisturbed beauty? The idea of the 'natural environment' is subjective in its own right, and begs the reinvented mall to retain an element of subjectivity – and be less rigidly defined than that of the original shopping

centre. Part retail, part recreational, part natural – the area becomes that of a ‘town square’ in its ability to cater to a number of needs and become a catalyst in sparking a number of unknown uses – the organic unfolding of a community. A place to walk with a coffee on a summer evening or an area to shop for local fruits and vegetables on weekends – Westmount will become home to a number of planned and unplanned activities varied throughout the seasons, and hours of the day.

Figure 19 – The ‘natural’ areas of Westmount. The north-west corner of the site (closest to the single-family residential) will be planted with ‘natural’ vegetation – grasses, wildflowers and various trees – arranged sporadically. The retention pond will aid in collecting all neighbourhood runoff, while providing a place for wildlife and the community to engage. By having a contrast between the natural and the man-made, the site becomes more than a ‘manicured’ and defined space.

Of Colour, Texture and Material

Figure 20 - The relationship between colour and texture found within Westmount. By using the many different elements currently found at the site (glass, brick, marble, concrete), the new Westmount will reflect the original material palette, architectural design and colour choices.

Colour and materiality will be explored in a number of varying ways.

Extracted from the existing material pallet, colours and materials will be used to create a number of overlapping planes, allowing the site to change through time. The unique perception of colour from summer to winter and from dusk to dawn will create a memorable and enjoyable experience for visitors to the site. Transparent planes of colour on the 'main concourse' will aid in adding whimsy, and echo the existing experience generated through the original colour pallet. In my opinion, the original materials used at Westmount were successful in relating to the existing community. Single-family homes of brick are prominent in the area, and Westmount reflected this. Clad in a brown brick, the mall resembled a suburban home (especially when considering its peaked glass skylight.) By incorporating the original colours, textures and architectural elements found in Westmount, while adding new and exciting textures of water, glass, and concrete, Westmount

will become interplay of materials – creating a subjective experience for the visitor.

Spatiality of Night

There are too many spaces within cities that are closed or forgotten when the sun goes down – the mall is one of these. After hours, the parking lots empty out, and the doors are locked. The mall now becomes a ‘dead zone’ within the community – forcing people to retreat to their homes. By allowing the site to light up at night, and be accessible to a variety of uses, the previous mall site will not only become an enjoyable place to visit, but will aid in allowing the community access to an area once the sun goes down. Illuminated sports fields, public areas, and vibrant colour, the area has the ability to become a beacon within the community.

Water: a Phenomenal Lens

Water, both man made and natural will be a focal point of the site. The play between the two will create an interesting contrast, while alluding to the malls inception as the centre of a planned community. As originally intended, the site was to be home to a manmade lake, but was left out when designing the community. In the new Westmount Centre, a reflecting pool and pond will become skating rink – allowing both summer and winter use of the site. The connection between manmade and natural also

becomes apparent – an important element in creating a phenomenological experience at Westmount. One will remember the smell of the water, the shimmering reflection against the building, or the sound of skates scraping on ice, or water splashing.

Proportion, Scale and Perception

The importance of proportion and scale is especially evident in the reimagining of the site. The site is comprised of 11.9 hectares, and is surrounded by a variety of building types. The removed mall was immense in scale, and is important to retain as an element of time. By keeping the highest part of the mall (the main concourse) and removing the monolithic brick structure, the mall retains its height, while the glass roof and walls allow the community to interact with its interior. Furthermore, the idea of scale becomes apparent, without the monolithic experience of the heavy brick exterior of the previous mall.

Merging of Object and Field

The connection of foreground, middle ground and background is important and will be apparent. The design of the space will allow visitors to cut-through the site, and reach beyond. There is a strong east-west and north-south axis, all accessible through a variety of paths and 'experiences' – recreation, retail, and natural. The area will merge with the outlying community, and allow a greater connection between the many different areas.

With the mall as the centre of this community, there are a number of uses already situated throughout – open space, institutional buildings, varying densities of residential, etc. The new Westmount development will aid in providing a link between a number of uses. By creating strong axis north-south and east-west, Westmount has the ability to take a once fragmented area and link it together, creating a denser neighbourhood.

Recreation

The notion of recreation will be incorporated within Westmount. By doing so, the area will become a useful area for a number of age groups. Kids and adults will have the option to use the site together, or at different times of day or year. Tennis courts, soccer fields, a playground and skating areas will all allow for seasonal use of the site - during the day or at night. By

positioning the recreational activities on the south and west of the site, other areas of the site can be utilized while a game is taking place.

Figure 21 – By implementing recreational zones into the site, the schools (to the south) will have the option of using the fields, along with the community. This will not only bring activity to the site, but will become a place for the community to engage on an evening, as well as during the day.

Retail

Although retail will no longer be the primary use of the site, it will still be an important aspect of the success of the site. The northeastern portion of the site will be home to a transit terminal. What will become the main public transportation connection to the outlying community will be lined with a number of ‘necessity based’ retail shops. This area would be leased out,

and hold such functions as a bank, convenient store, and coffee shop – what the community deemed necessary. Directly adjacent to the Westmount site are a church, secondary school and a large population of senior citizens. These functions will all cater to the immediate population, as well as the general community.

Figure 22 – By implementing retail into the site, visitors taking public transportation and residents close to the site will have the ability to purchase. By only having a select number of vendors, retail will no longer be the predominant use of the site – eliminating any worry of ‘failure’.

Figure 23 – South and East elevation of the main building. The existing glass of the skylight has been maintained, along with the use of brick and a suburban typology (peaked roof, traditional brick, etc.)

Figure 24 – The overall relationship of colour and material as observed on the façade. Typical 'suburban' materials and textures are utilized.

Figure 25 – Exterior view of the newly re-designed and re-defined Westmount Centre. Top: Outdoor triangle (square), Mid: View of water channel and exterior spaces. Bottom: View of entire glazed 'spine' – the main community building on the site.

Figure 26 – Floor plans dictating the number of (potential) uses of the site. Although these are 'desired' community uses, the site would be designed to unfold and grow based on needs of the community.

List of Figures

- 1** An example of a historic (above) and contemporary (below) bank in North America.

Image Source:

<http://www.td.com/images/tdhistory/td-history-banner.jpg>

<http://www.hjarchitects.ca/work/td-canada-trust-concept-branch>

- 2** Hudson's Bay Company in Calgary, Alberta

Image Source:

<http://www.hbcheritage.ca/hbcheritage/branding-gallery>

- 3** Victor Gruen

Image Source:

<http://www.thefoxisblack.com/blogimages/victor-gruen.jpg>

- 4** Southdale Centre's large and 'public square' centre designed by Victor Gruen. Benches, fountains and trees occupy the space.

Image Source

http://www.eurozine.com/articles/article_2008-02-13-baldauf-en.html

- 5** Victor Gruen's Northland exemplifying his 'cluster scheme'. Outdoor spaces are formed, and provide space for individuals to gather.

Image Source:

<http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/GruenPlan/Northland.jpg>

- 6** Gruen's Southdale Centre - Blank Facades, windowless walls, parking lots, no decoration and an uninspiring exterior were common in many designs of this time. A 'sea of parking' was prominent.

Image Source:

<http://mallsofamerica.blogspot.ca/2007/02/southdale-center-daytons.html>

- 7** Once home to retailers and shoppers alike, the 'dead mall' is common among many North American landscapes.

Image Source:

<http://thoughtcatalog.com/matthew-newton/2014/06/photographing-the-dead-shopping-malls-of-our-youth-images-from-suburban-america/>

- 8** Figure 26 - London, Ontario - North London Smart Centre. A common site within many Canadian and American cities, these large big box stores have been built on the outskirts of cities and occupy large plots of land.

Image Source:

<http://www.callowayreit.com/images/Aerials%20Cropped%20Large/London%20North%20SmartCentre.jpg>

- 9** Figure 27 - Aerial view of London, Ontario with the current Westmount Mall pictured near centre.

Image Source: Google Earth

- 10** Figure 28 – The original Westmount Mall during the Sifton Properties neighbourhood construction. Large parking lots, ‘branded’ way finding and a landscaped entrance were all part of the centre’s original design.

Image Source: Dennett, Chris. Bricks and Mortar: The Sifton Story. London, ON: Sifton Properties Ltd, 1999.

- 11** Westmount Mall after the 1980’s renovation. Turquoise painted steel, light coloured wood, marble and large expanses of glass were all elements found within the renewed design.

Image Source: http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2655/3936340008_2b58296d6a_m.jpg

- 12** Westmount Mall Today depicting closed storefronts and empty parking lots – a now ‘dead mall’.

- 13** Westmount Mall situated in relation to its suburban community.

- 14** Site plan detailing the various uses/positioning on the existing Westmount site. Both pedestrian and vehicular access is flavored, allowing the outlying community to engage with the site.

- 15** Diagrammatic analysis of the site in relation to its designated use. Water, flexible space, natural elements, retail zone and recreation are all primary elements within the newly re-designed site.

- 16i** The site of Westmount, and its location among main roadways. Right – the relationship between the site in its entirety and the existing building.

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- 18** Image detailing the main water channel on the site. A 'memorable' spot to reflect on the history of the site, it will also aid in masking sound from the busy road nearby, and providing an intriguing spot for individuals to visit.
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