

All the world's a mall: Reflections on the social and economic consequences of the American shopping center.

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# All the World's a Mall: Reflections on the Social and Economic Consequences of the American Shopping Center

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*The American Historical Review*, Volume 101, Issue 4, 1 October 1996, Pages 1111–1121, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/101.4.1111>

**Published:** 01 October 1996

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### *AHR Forum*

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KENNETH T. JACKSON

THE EGYPTIANS HAVE PYRAMIDS, the Chinese have a great wall, the British have immaculate lawns, the Germans have castles, the Dutch have canals, the Italians have grand churches. And Americans have shopping centers. They are the common denominator of our national life, the best symbols of our abundance. By 1992, there were 38,966 operating shopping centers in the United States, 1,835 of them large, regional malls, and increasingly they were featuring the same products, the same stores, and the same antiseptic environment. They have been called “the perfect fusion of the profit motive and the egalitarian ideal,” and one wag has remarked, only partially in jest, that either America is a shopping center or the one shopping center in existence is moving about the country at the speed of light.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, the shopping center and even the shopping mall are not entirely American innovations. Merchandising outside city walls began in the Middle Ages, when traders often established markets or “fairs” beyond the gates to avoid the taxes and congestion of the urban core. For this privilege, they typically paid a fee to the lord or feudal authority who commanded the walls above the field. Similarly, enclosed shopping spaces have also existed for centuries, from the agora of ancient Greece to the Palais Royal of prerevolutionary Paris. The Jerusalem bazaar has been providing a covered shopping experience for 2,000 years, while Istanbul's Grand Bazaar was doing the same when sultans ruled the Ottoman Empire from the nearby Topkapi Palace. In England, Chester has been famous for centuries for interconnected second-story shops, protected wonderfully from the wind and the rain, which stretch for blocks at the center of town. London's Burlington Arcade, completed in 1819, was one of the world's earliest retail shopping arcades, while the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, which featured a nineteen-acre building that was entirely walled and roofed in panels of dazzling “crystal” glass, had many characteristics of the modern mall. Its designers brought the outdoors inside and

<sup>1</sup> On the number of shopping centers, see Witold Rybczynski, “The New Downtowns,” *Atlantic Monthly* 271 (May 1993): 98. See also William Severini Kowinski, *The Mall of America: An Inside Look at the Great Consumer Paradise* (New York, 1985); Howard Gillette, Jr., “The Evolution of the Planned Shopping Center in Suburb and City,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 51 (Autumn 1985): 449–60; George Sternlieb and James W. Hughes, eds., *Shopping Centers, USA* (Piscataway, N.J., 1981); William H. Whyte, *The City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York, 1988); and William Gleason, “The Heart of the City Now Beats in the Mall,” *New York Times* (March 27, 1992).

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Online ISSN 1937-5239

Print ISSN 0002-8762

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