

'IT'S LIKE A MUSEUM HERE': THE SHOPPING MALL AS PUBLIC SPACE. *Summary*

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INTRODUCTION

The turn of the 21st century was an important junction for Russian cities. Russia's economic recovery became visible on the level of urban space: types of space that had not existed before, such as shopping and entertainment complexes and malls, began to emerge. As city dwellers explored and embraced these new forms of public space, the latter have taken an important place in the urban environment and have become points of localization of new lifestyles and social differentiation.

This study aims to identify the mechanisms of daily production of inequality in the new spaces of consumption and to examine the latter as a form of public space, as well as an arena of social distinction and identity. Data collected in St. Petersburg shopping centers in 2006–2008 is used to explore questions about the creation of social boundaries in an urban environment; privatization and commercialization of public space in a capitalist city; and the emergence of segregated, safe, quasi-public spaces for a particular group of people—the “middle class.” The middle class is construed here not as a theoretical concept, but as an emic notion, i.e. how the study informants and authors of publications in the media refer to shopping centers' visitors exhibiting a particular style of consumption. Spaces for the new type of consumer behavior are where the crystallization of this new stratum takes place.

The study is based on participant observation and interviews with shopping mall visitors. We interviewed 19 people between the ages of 16 to 60, of which only four were over 40 years old. This age distribution reflects the age composition of visitors to shopping centers; since we were interested in their attitudes, the majority of respondents were selected and interviewed in shopping malls. Observations and interviews were supplemented by “experiments” where one researcher displayed behavior unusual for a place of shopping, while another recorded reactions of the mall visitors and employees. Additionally, we analyzed print media (1999–2009) and official documents (decrees of the St. Petersburg city government, city and federal legislation, the General and Strategic plans for St. Petersburg development) covering the “civilizing process” of retail commerce: a centralized policy to eliminate street and open market trade in favor of “modern retail forms” such as shopping malls and supermarkets.

SHOPPING CENTERS: "THE APEX OF CIVILIZATION"

In former socialist cities, the rapid transition to a capitalist economy has led to a radical change in the organization of consumption as well as attitudes toward it. Shopping centers have become a symbol of these transformations, as well as the locus for city dwellers to experience changes in social stratification and consumer culture.

In St. Petersburg, the first shopping centers of the new type appeared in the early 2000s, replacing a variety of trading arrangements: in the wake of trade liberalization of the 1990s, the entire urban space had been blanketed with markets, kiosks, stalls, individual peddlers, and peculiar roofed markets, all of which gradually transformed into "trading centers."

Analysis of newspapers and documents covering the regulation of commercial activity in St. Petersburg in the 1990s–2000s shows that the gradual ejection of street and open-market trading from the city center and its replacement by "civilized" trade arrangements was not a spontaneous and natural process but a deliberate policy of the city authorities and large retail businesses, who had a shared interest in "civilized trade" and thus formed an alliance to promote "modern retail formats." Media reports and official statements of early 2000s often paint street and open-market trade as a relic of the "riotous '90s," as a part of a criminal and dangerous world, and "civilized formats"—shopping malls and supermarkets—as hallmarks of the "European city" and its prosperous citizenry.

IDENTITY: A PUBLIC "STATEMENT"

In the new organization of St. Petersburg's consumption spaces, the very choice of a shopping center is telling. Each shopping mall has its own image, determined by the goods it sells and customers it attracts. Therefore, by choosing a certain shopping center, a customer assumes and endorses the image associated with it.

The space of the shopping center itself can also be mentally segmented: particular sections may be associated with certain characteristics of their visitors. For example, one informant negatively assesses the "Pik" shopping center, claiming a higher cultural level than "Pik's" "average" visitor. She herself only visits the movie theater, located on the fourth floor, and the Chinese café at "Pik." She considers only these two establishments in the entire mall to be "decent" and tries to pass through the rest of the shopping center as quickly as possible to minimize contact with other visitors.

The choice of some shops and rejection of others become a mechanism to make a statement that others will be able to decipher. What is important is not the price of commodities, but their style and the image they project.

This idea comes through in many interviews, which allows us to conclude that the basis for the construction of group boundaries rests not so much on income as on taste and a certain style of life associated with it. Various social groups can use the same shopping center in different ways by consuming distinct products and services. For instance, young people who consider themselves "cutting-edge youth" (a term

used by some informants) use the “Pik” shopping center exclusively as a recreational space and are contemptuous of the “very average” members of the middle class who actually shop there.

INTERNAL BORDERS: OBSERVING THE OTHER

Many informants associate shopping centers with the “middle class,” whose members are recognized on the basis of appearances, practices, and demonstrated taste for certain goods: “At first, when [the mall] just opened, all trendy youths hung out there. But they have understood that there are no [hip] boutiques there, [the shops] are just for the middle class” [V., male, 26]. Here, the informant makes a distinction between “trendy youth,” whose consumption style must include going to boutique shops selling unique clothes, and the “middle class” who are relegated to shopping malls with an average assortment of brands and goods.

Shopping in certain stores and malls not only allows for social classification. Shopping centers serve as museums of fashions, tastes, and therefore lifestyles and habitus. “I really like the mall, it’s like a museum here. At the “Sennoi” [shopping center] there is a store “Vodoprovod” [Plumbing], it’s a nightmare, you go there to jeer. They sell rubber boots with spiky heels. All in all, clown clothes...” [A., female, 16].

The shopping center, like any public place, gives us a chance to observe different styles of life, patterns of behavior and consumption, constantly finding confirmation of existing distinctions and learning about new ones, as well as positioning ourselves in relation to the observed practices and lifestyles. In the best traditions of urban public space, shopping centers facilitate practices of aimless wandering, cruising, and people-watching.

MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES: THE DAILY REPRODUCTION OF SPACE

The literature on shopping malls often asserts that the public character of shopping centers is “illusory” because it is limited by the clear authority of its formal owner (Manzo 2005). Most of the time, this control does not manifest explicitly, therefore the visitors have the illusion that they are in a public place similar to a town square or park. But do mall customers themselves participate in boundary policing, to ensure that the malls are for “people like us,” and if so, how?

To explore the mechanisms of control in shopping malls, which are largely free from certain social groups since they are regulated public spaces, we performed a series of experiments. They were intended to test the responses of mall visitors and administrators to the behavior typical for and acceptable in an unregulated public place, such as sitting on the floor, reading, people-watching, and consuming food brought from the outside. Experiments were staged in the “Sennaia” and “Pik” shopping centers and two separate parts of the “Gulliver” mall and designed to uncover unspoken norms of proper mall behavior.

The breaching experiment, which involved a female researcher sitting on the floor with a mobile phone and a magazine in different sections of “Sennaia” and

"Pik," elicited reactions of various degrees (correlated with the intensity of foot traffic) from mall customers—between 50 and 90 percent of passers-by noticed and commented on (usually negatively) the researcher's deviant behavior. At the same time, the mall security ignored it. In this case the "unofficial" control from the shoppers was more significant than control from the administration. In the second experiment, a young man was reading a book on the floor of the "Gulliver" shopping center. Here, the mall security reacted quickly, asking the "offender" to leave. The customers were curious about the young man's unusual behavior, and in one case a shopper sided with the security guard ousting the researcher.

In general, experiments and observations in shopping centers have revealed that visitors and shoppers themselves substantially contribute to the creation of the strictly regulated public character of the closed (both physically and socially) space, demonstrating that official control and monitoring of compliance with rules are not the only active mechanisms, but are supplemented by informal condemnation of what is perceived as inappropriate.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, shopping centers in St. Petersburg are a manifestation of the post-Soviet urban culture's more general problems: on the one hand, social inequality and the obsession with consumer goods; on the other, an effort to create public spaces that could serve as communicative arenas for urban inhabitants, allowing them to obtain rich and diverse social experiences. Many study participants, as well as those quoted in the press, prefer the closed, controllable, and safe environment of shopping centers to an open public space, and they themselves participate in creation of this sense of predictability and control. On the other hand, as within any other space with strict rules, tactics of resistance to these regulations emerge. However, this inner "drama" is framed by the boundaries of standardized space, which exclude alternative cultural elements. Meanwhile, representation of diverse cultural and social identities in integrated public spaces is a precondition for their inclusion in the common urban culture (Zukin 1995: 254). In St. Petersburg, the ubiquitous shopping centers are becoming the main urban arena of representation, but not accessible and welcoming to all.

Shopping mall customers play an important role in the reproduction of the place, limiting the range of acceptable practices and patterns of behavior. Shopping center space is controlled not only by owners and management, visitors also carry out informal monitoring based on their own ideas of what constitutes "right" and "wrong" behaviors for this place. Because of preexisting notions about the place and its everyday interpretations, behaviors transgressing the perceived norms draw out surprise and even open censure.

Therefore, the shopping center is a place of a voluntarily limited urban experience in favor of security and comfort and of the relative homogeneity that the middle class seeks. Like gated communities in the sphere of housing, shopping centers are a segregated space of consumption and public life. The boundaries of the shopping center symbolize social boundaries.

Interestingly, however, the environment of shopping centers is not absolutely homogeneous. The need for distinction and individuation results in finding “others” even among “people like us” (bona fide mall customers demonstrating a certain level of consumption): subtle social demarcation among shoppers is made on the basis of appearance, “taste,” interpretation of clothing brands, and other consumer abilities. Meanwhile, a place that encourages such forms of public practices can hardly be called a public space. For members of the “middle class,” the shopping mall is a possible urban “third place” (Oldenburg and Brisset 1982), a spot to spend time between work and home, a buffer zone between office life, the state, and the domestic sphere. One can argue that the shopping mall is a public place for observation and self-representation, but not for contact with and exploration of diversity.

It is important to note that the previously described attachment to homogeneity and a lifestyle perceived as “civilized” and “European” was typical of the research period but sentiment has changed since then. Following the logic of consumer practices and the retail market, shopping centers and supermarkets have become the norm and are no longer perceived as principal tools in molding a “European” and “civilized” city dweller. The growing number of shopping centers has led to their increased differentiation: there are now, on the one hand, “elite” shopping malls with expensive boutiques and, on the other hand, retail centers specializing in sales and discounted goods. A trend of segmentation and segregation is thus developing: subtle social boundaries that emerged in the early years of shopping centers have acquired physical presence in urban space.

Authorized translation from Russian by Anna Paretskaya