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# Shopping Town USA: Victor Gruen, the Cold War, and the Shopping Mall

By Anette Baldauf

In the course of his life, Victor Gruen completed major urban interventions in the US and Western Europe that fundamentally altered the course of western urban development. Anette Baldauf describes how Gruen's fame rests mostly on the insertion of commercial machines into the decentred US suburbs. These so-called 'shopping towns' were supposed to strengthen civic life and structure the amorphous, mono-functional agglomerations of suburban sprawl. Yet within a decade, Gruen's designs had become the architectural extension of the policies of racial and gender segregation underlying the US postwar consumer utopia

Southdale Shopping Center

Image: Southdale Shopping Center, Minnesota

In 1943, the US American magazine *Architectural Forum* invited Victor Gruen and his wife Elsie Krummeck to take part in an exchange of visions for the architectonic shaping of the postwar period. The editors of the issue, entitled *Architecture 194x*, appealed to recognised modernists such as Mies van der Rohe and Charles Eames to design parts of a model town for the year '194x', in other words for an unspecified year, by which time the Second World War would have ended.[1] The architects Gruen & Krummeck partnership were to design a prototype for a 'regional shopping centre'. The editors specified that the shopping centre was to be situated on the outskirts of the city, on traffic island between two highways; it was to supplement the pedestrian zone downtown. 'How can shopping be made more inviting', the editors asked Gruen & Krummeck, who, at the time of the competition, were famous for their spectacular glass designs for boutiques on Fifth Avenue and for national department store chains on the outskirts of cities.[2]

The two architects responded to the commission to build a 'small neighbourhood shopping centre' with a design that far exceeded the specified size and function of the centre. Gruen later explained that the project reflected the couple's dissatisfaction with the city of Los Angeles, where long distances between shops, regular traffic jams, and an absence of pedestrian zones made shopping tiresome work. Gruen and Krummeck saw in Los Angeles the blueprint of 'an automotive-rich postwar America'. Their counter-design was oriented towards the traditional main squares of European cities. Hence, they suggested two central structural interventions: first, the automobile and the shopper were to be assigned two distinct spatial units, and second, space for consumption and civic space were to be merged. Working to this premise, Gruen and Krummeck designed a centre that was organised around a spacious green square –with garden restaurants, milk bars, and music stands. The design integrated 28 shops and 13 public facilities; among the latter were a library, a post office, a theatre, a lecture hall, a nightclub, a nursery, a playroom, and a pony stable.[3]

The editors of *Architectural Forum* rejected Gruen's and Krummeck's design. They insisted upon a reduced 'regional shopping centre' and urged the two architects to rework their submission along these lines. Gruen and Krummeck responded with an adjustment that would later prove crucial: they abandoned the idea of a green square in the centre of the complex and suggested building a closed, round building made of glass. They surrounded the inwardly directed shopping complex with two rings. The first ring was to serve as a pedestrian zone, the second as a car park. This design also failed to please. George Nelson, the editor-in-chief, was scandalised and argued that by removing the central square, the space for sitting around and strolling was lost.[4] For him, the shopping centre as closed space was inconceivable. Eventually, Gruen and Krummeck submitted a design for a conventional

shopping centre with shops arranged in a 'U' shape around a courtyard. Clearly, those that would celebrate the closed shopping centre a few years later were not yet active. Only ten years later was Gruen able to convince two leading department-store owners of the profitability of a self-enclosed shopping centre. Excluding cars, street traders, animals, and other potential disturbances, and supported by surveillance technology, the shopping mall would embody the ideal, typical values of suburban lifestyles – order, cleanliness, and safety.[5] Public judgement of Gruen's 'Architecture of introversion' fundamentally changed, then, in the course of the 1950s. What was it, exactly, that led to this revised evaluation of a closed, inwardly directed space of consumption?

### **Consumerism and the Policy of Containment**

The transformation of shopping spaces designed by Gruen and Krummeck – in formal terms, from the principle of openness to that of enclosure, in material terms, the move from glass to concrete – can today be interpreted as a manifestation of the tectonic shift that gripped the political and cultural landscape of postwar America. Gruen's second wife and partner of many years, Elsie Krummeck, who until the birth of their second child and their divorce shortly thereafter was involved in the development of this new type of design, hardly features in the official Gruen historiography. Today, Victor Gruen is considered to have been the inventor of the shopping mall.

Between the mid-1940s and 1957, in the course of the emergence of a radically bi-polar world, the collective morale of the American nation turned from self-affirming celebration of the end of the Second World War into anxious expectation of total war. The common fear of the Third World War was often compared with a 'low-grade fever that the nation could not shake'. [6] In a context so much saturated by fear, the 'philosophy of containment' offered an instrument for empowering control as well as for the continual feeding of this collective fear. The hermetically sealed shopping centre delivered this philosophy with a concrete symbol that combined these two functions: inwardly, in other words to the shoppers, the centre signalled safety, shelter, and retreat. It provided the 'uprooted' resident of the rapidly growing suburban landscape with a sense of meaning and an affective anchor. Outwardly, to the rival Soviet Union and to communist sympathisers, the shopping centre signalled the superiority of capitalism; it stood as material proof of the principles of social egalitarianism and for the freedom of choice inherent in consumerism.

The shopping centre, with its iconography of the bunker, offered a spatial translation of the foreign political strategy of 'containment' and thereby established the material prerequisites for further, more subtle forms of social and cultural 'containment'. For example, the shopping centre underpinned the 'containment' of women, who after the return of the male soldiers after the Second World War had withdrawn from the employment market and invested their labour energy in raising children, housework, and consumption. It also offered the white residents of the suburbs a supervised safety zone that, while simulating urbanity, simultaneously guaranteed homogeneity. Because of this constellation, the history of the shopping centre is inevitably linked to the history of racist politics.

Northland Center, Minnesota

Image: Northland Center, Detroit by Victor Gruen

Victor Gruen, born in 1903 as Victor David Grünbaum, grew up in Vienna; in 1938, four months after the annexation of Austria, he managed to escape to the USA. When the Jewish immigrant began to promote his concept of the 'regional shopping centre', he argued that all big European cities were built upon a stable combination of commercial and social space. In contrast, the American suburbs, Gruen insisted, represented mono-functional sprawls consisting of agglomerations of individual private homes. In order to boost civic and social life in this barren sprawl, Gruen suggested introducing so-called 'shopping towns'. A man of vision, the self-appointed 'people's architect' propagated the

construction of gigantic projects that combined commercial and civic activities and that offered isolated housewives, lonely pensioners, and free-ranging teenagers a place to pass the time.[7]

It wasn't easy to find sponsors for projects of this scale. Gruen had to sell his ideas. He exploited Cold War fear and marketed the shopping mall as a bunker and evacuation zone in the event of attack, despite the fact that in pre-war Vienna, as an engaged socialist, he had been active in political cabaret; he promised the materialisation of consumer dreams, even though he personally hated shopping.[8] Later, when Gruen was able to realise his architectonic dreams, the shopping mall stood for something much bigger than what he had anticipated. Between Gruen's first design from the year 1943 and the boom in shopping centres a decade and a half later, the role of consumerism in the USA altered fundamentally: consumerism was no longer a driving force but the driving force in postwar America. For that reason, Gruen's biography is closely linked with the tragedy of capitalism: within fifteen years, all the civic and social spaces that Gruen had originally included in the design of the shopping mall were absorbed by commerce and the property speculator's greed for profit. The poly-functional 'shopping towns' gave rise to gigantic retail machines that served the two axioms that defined the age: consumerism and the 'policy of containment'.

### **Fear and Suburbanisation**

In the period after the Second World War, the US ambassador to Moscow, George Kennan, recommended counteracting the apparently alarming spread of communism with a so-called 'policy of containment'. Consequently, US foreign policy attempted to restrict communism by means of political diplomacy, military intervention, and the seductive power of consumerism. While foreign policy was oriented around the principle of 'containment', civil defence on the home front concentrated on the principle of 'dispersal'. This domestic policy tied in with the existing process of urban development already initiated in 1944 with the passing of the 'GI law', or Serviceman's Readjustment Act (SRA). The SRA was intended to stand as a special recognition of the service performed by the 16 million or so GIs during the Second World War; moreover, the law was an attempt to counteract the threat of a housing crisis and stimulate the postwar economy. The SRA offered former servicemen a state credit guarantee that enabled them to buy their own homes without cash payment. Five million veterans came into home-ownership via this channel. In practice, however, this 'democratisation' was subject to clear restrictions: until the late 1950s, the exclusory practices of property firms and house owners, which were very often sanctioned by the state, hindered the expansion of Afro-American residents of inner cities into the suburbs. Public subsidisation such as the SRA was ultimately deployed in order to consolidate racist segregation.

According to urban historians, aside from the aforementioned racism and state funding, the flight from the inner cities into the suburbs was driven by low property prices and growth in the economy and in the population. It is often argued that while the SRA provided the financial basis for the 'conquering of the suburban front' by the veterans, the mental and psychological conditions that drove middle class families out of the city were manufactured via a political climate in which talk of urban vulnerability and the risk of nuclear attack was incessant.[9]

The extent to which urban life was problematised in the public sphere is illustrated by an article published in Life magazine on 18 December 1950, entitled How US Cities Can Prepare for Atomic War. US American cities were the most vulnerable targets in the world, it warned: first would come the immediate and total destruction of a wide area, with hundreds of thousands of victims; then transport would be paralysed, electricity and water cut off, and food supplies interrupted. People would flee the cities in panic.

The magazine printed an interview with Norbert Wiener, the inventor of cybernetics, who advocated setting up 'life belts' on the edges of cities. In peacetime, these belts would support suburbanisation; during war they would aid civilian defence. The maps that served as illustrations of Wiener's argumentation showed the 'life belt' of an anonymous city; it joined up numerous hospitals, warehouses, factories, oil depositories, a train station, and a shopping centre.[10] The shopping centre thereby became a component of the civil defence programme.

Duck and Cover classroom drill

Image: Duck and cover classroom drill

While Life magazine busied itself with the question of how cities should be reorganised in order to minimise the number of casualties after a nuclear attack, public schools in areas considered to be at risk reached for more drastic measures: between August 1950 and April 1951, schools in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Fort Worth, San Francisco, and Philadelphia carried out regular aerial bombardment drills. These 'duck and cover' drills were intended to sharpen the awareness of danger and to naturalise the children's reactions. In New York, teachers in public schools handed out necklaces to pupils in order to facilitate identification after an attack.[11] A politics of fear was ubiquitous: fear was inherent in the routines of urban everyday life.

Duck and Cover

Image: US civil defence information poster

In 1951, duck and cover climaxed with the introduction of the Federal Civil Defence Administration (FCDA). Its chairman, Millard Caldwell, called for a programme that would coordinate on a national level the construction of public bunker installations and encouraged the 'shoring up' of existing buildings on a private basis. Equipped with a ludicrously small budget, the programme eventually had to reduce its mission to publicity work. In order to spread the philosophy of duck and cover, travelling exhibitions, ten million comic books, and 55 million pocket-sized cards were produced, carrying information about steps to take following a nuclear attack. The FCDA also produced 'Bert the turtle', an animated film intended to show viewers how to protect themselves from a nuclear explosion.[12]

While duck and cover continued to dominate the popular imagination of the civil defence, the economically conscious Eisenhower government had long since moved from bunker to evacuation procedures. Around the same time, Victor Gruen and his new partner Karl Van Leuven found themselves standing on huge field ten kilometres outside Detroit city centre: 'There are all those monstrous earth moving machines pushing and shoving and changing the face of some 200 acres', remembered Van Leuven, who before joining the firm Gruen & Krummeck Partnership had worked at the Disney Corporation. While they watched the bulldozers flatten the site, Gruen turned to Van Leuven and said, 'My God but we've got a lot of nerve'.[13]

### **Northland Center, Detroit**

According to Gruen, he first established contact with the leading department store firm J. L. Hudson Company in 1948. After paying a visit to the Hudson department store in downtown Detroit, Gruen wrote an urgent letter to the company president Oscar Webber urging him to take seriously the migration into the outskirts and to open outlets in the expanding suburbs of Detroit.[14]

Northland Center, Detroit

Image: Northland Center, Detroit by Victor Gruen

Three years later, Victor Gruen's architectural practice presented the company with a 20 year programme.[15] In order to be able to hold on, in the context of suburbanisation, to the leading position that the department stores had until then had in city centres, Gruen and Van Leuven had designed a concept that coordinated four regional shopping centres. The Eastland, Northland, Southland, and Westland Centers would, they ventured, be much more than a collection of shops; the regional shopping centres were conceived as 'crystallisation points for suburbia's community life ... located at the fringe of now built up suburban development'. They were situated approximately ten kilometres outside the inner city, in the centre of the booming suburbs.[16]

A few months later, Gruen explained in an edition of the architectural magazine *Progressive Architecture* the background to this geography he was advocating. 'Does safety lie in dispersal?' asked the editors and invited Gruen to present his plans for Hudson. His design, he emphasised, 'like four massive shopping centres, localised far away from industrial targets, satisfies general needs during peace, and in times of war can, if necessary, be deployed as defence centres for rehabilitation, relocation, and first aid.'[17]

The shopping centre and, subsequently, the shopping mall were conceived on the point of intersection between Cold War politics and postwar capitalism. They are offspring of postwar fears and consumerist dreams and illustrate, as such, the tension between the fear of total annihilation and the euphoria of the consumer utopia.[18] It is no coincidence that the first shopping centre in the USA was built at the moment the nation had reached its economic climax and while citizens were discussing passionately the pros and cons of bunkers versus evacuation zones. In 1953, 145 thousand Americans had a new telephone installed, 600 thousand Americans purchased a new television set, and half a million a new car.[19]

Already during the Second World War, president Roosevelt had repeatedly mobilised consumerism on the home front for military ends. In Europe, US American soldiers were not only fighting against the National Socialist regime, but also for the assertion of the 'American way of life', in other words for television sets, washing machines, and automobiles. After the war, the ideology of consumerism formed the central ingredient of the American lifestyle. The postwar ideal of the US citizen, or better said, that of female citizens, was born in this context: consumption came to be defined as private pleasure and civic duty.[20]

This specific nexus of forces visibly inspired Gruen to think big. The Northland Center was the first of the four centres to be realised on the outskirts of Detroit. The thirty million dollar complex, in which a department store and up to one hundred shops were housed, was based on a so-called cluster scheme. The complex consisted of five buildings arranged in a U-shape around a courtyard, which was fitted with fountains, benches, sculptures, and colonnades. On the intersection between the courtyard and the shop windows, the arcade created, Gruen explained, an 'essential urban environment'. [21] In the Northland Center, he realised a number of architectonic elements that he had designed with Elsie Krummeck for the shopping centre in the context of the project *Architecture 194x*. A huge car park and private highway were located in front of the complex; the centre itself housed, alongside commercial outlets, numerous civic facilities including a nursery, conference rooms, and a zoo. It was, Gruen enthused at the opening on the 22 March 1954, the 'first shopping centre of the future'. [22]

Northland Center, Detroit

Image: Northland Center, Detroit by Victor Gruen

It was no coincidence that Detroit was the city in which Gruen was able to realise his vision of a shopping town: the city with a population of two million was home to the three biggest US automobile manufacturers –Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors. Throughout the 1950s, these had created an affluent middle class with significant spending power. Detroit was known as an economic paradise; but at the same time, because of its concentration of industry, was considered to be a potential target of nuclear attack. The Ford company had its own bunker, while the local civic defence offered regular courses and training units for preparation in case of emergency. And the city pursued an aggressive decentralisation plan.[23]

The combined result of these efforts was that Detroit was regarded as a prototype of suburbanisation. Prosperous, white inner city residents moved out to the suburbs, where they settled in ‘safe’ districts, in other words districts segregated along ‘racially specific’ lines. The streets necessary to create access to the suburban projects were often built straight through Afro-American working class districts – city planning aimed to create new living spaces and at the same time to wipe out long standing problem zones. In 1953, President Eisenhower nominated Charles Erwin Wilson, the president of GM, as his defence secretary. In 1955, GM was the first US American company whose turnover exceeded the one billion dollar mark; in the same year, GM proudly announced the destruction of the public tram network, thereby making a decisive step towards the privatisation of the transport industry.[24] During the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Northland Center in 2004, the Detroit Free Press recalled the mayor and estate agents that had obstructed Afro-Americans and other ethnic minorities from settling in the new suburban districts. If black residents did make an attempt to move to Detroit’s suburbs, their houses were often attacked by neighbours.[25]

Situated in these anxiously protected communities, the first regional shopping centres provided the white suburban dwellers a safe and clean microcosm that permitted them to withdraw completely from the inner-city shopping streets. The shopping centre as hermetically sealed town, circled by a wall, thereby clearly marked the limits of the concept of an urban node in the suburbs that Gruen had advocated for so long.[26] In his preliminary designs, Gruen had always postulated the productivity of a competitive relationship between suburban and inner city shopping zones. His diagnosis of an acute need for sociability in the suburbs had been correct, however he had completely underestimated the ‘racially specific’ implications of this need. While the shopping centres were indeed designed against the backdrop of Cold War fears and the euphoria of the consumer utopia, their expansion was fuelled by the need for geographic insulation and the attendant need for the strategic ‘containment’ of Afro-Americans in the inner cities.

Public subsidies blatantly supported these trends. When in 1954 the nationwide abolition of racial segregation in schools precipitated a massive exodus – the ‘white flight’ – and a corresponding building boom in the suburbs, the Eisenhower government rewarded the owners of shopping centres with a bonus: the federal ‘accelerated depreciation’ programme enabled owners of commercial buildings to deduct building costs from tax and thus cover completely unrelated costs. The opportunity to take advantage of state support for new buildings provoked an unprecedented increase in shopping centres. Immediately after this programme was approved, 25 new regional shopping centres were built in the USA.[27]

### **Little Mrs Shopper**

This extension of consumer space had a distinct effect upon the spatial economy of the sexes. In connection with his plans for a shopping town, Gruen had from the start resolved to build for women. The new centres were supposed to alleviate women’s everyday lives. ‘[B]esides spending a lot of time in the kitchen, the housewife spends an awful lot of time shopping’, Gruen commented in a radio

programme in 1953. Equipped with building blocks and model trees, he illustrated for the studio moderator how 'our little Mrs Shopper' could find tranquillity and comfort in a shopping centre, which was removed from the 'dirty main road' and repositioned in a 'peaceful park'. [28] According to Gruen's definition, shopping was based on a combination of work and leisure. [29] The shopping centre was intended to provide women with a place for social and cultural life and to counteract the isolation of the suburbs. It was to relieve the lives of those women who had no access to public transport or childcare facilities – the woman who had the feeling, said Gruen, 'that her life was empty and boring', because 'there was nothing to do in the suburb'. [30]

Today, it is practically a commonplace that gender policy in the 1950s was based on polarised differentiations. Historical documents suggest that, faced with the threat of war, women sought shelter in private space. While they apparently withdrew into their own homes, another form of self-protection was available to men: when the men's magazine Playboy first appeared in 1953, editor-in-chief Hugh Hefner opined that the erotic photographs of Marilyn Monroe offered men 'a little diversion from the anxieties of the Atomic Age'. [31]

Empirical data tend to confirm the thesis that the 1950s were the golden age of the American family: in the postwar years, young American women and men married more often and younger than Europeans. They started big families and were divorced far more rarely than the generations before and after them. 'The current of the mainstream was so strong that you only had to step off the bank and float downstream into marriage and motherhood', remembered Brett Harvey in the book, *The Fifties: A Woman's Oral History*. [32] Embedded in the bliss of the nuclear family, housework was not seen as work but as personal fulfilment. The obligation to expressive housework came hand in hand with a battery of consumer goods that promised to make housework a satisfying labour of love. [33]

There exists a common assumption that women during this decade were exclusively occupied as housewives and mothers, however women's participation in the labour market increased successively throughout this period. By the end of the 1950s, women made up just over 35% of the national workforce. [34] Lizabeth Cohen and other feminists argue that the image of the subservient woman that is widely attached to the 1950s is primarily the result of the depression, in other words the 1920s and 1930s, when unemployed husbands and fathers longed for gender-specific empowerment and their daughters and wives encouraged them by confirming the image of a strong, male breadwinner. [35] In parallel to this, the inferiority of women in the 1950s in the US was legally underpinned: women themselves could not take out loans or insurance, could not buy a house, and could not sign contracts.

### **Southdale Center, Minnesota**

In 1952, while Gruen was still working on the total reconstruction of the city of Detroit, he was commissioned by the owners of the Dayton's in Minnesota to develop a type of department store that complied with the suburban lifestyle. Gruen subsequently presented an even more adventurous concept than that which he had developed for Detroit. He suggested building 'a completely new community', a whole town in other words. Despite warnings, the Dayton family purchased a large plot ten kilometres outside the centre of Minneapolis. Gruen designed a project for the site consisting of apartment blocks, private houses, a park, medical centre, lake, street network, and a unique shopping centre. [36] Modelled on the 'Galeria' in Milan, Gruen developed what would go down in history as the first completely hermetic and artificially air-conditioned shopping mall. The complex was organised around a covered, brightly illuminated, two-storey atrium, which housed two department stores and 72 shops.

Southdale Center, Minnesota

Image: Southdale Center, Minnesota by Victor Gruen

When the Southdale Center opened in 1956, the press celebrated the 20 million dollar project as a world success. The local newspapers welcomed the ‘complete living environment’; Architectural Record praised the attractive way exterior had been ‘Better Outdoors Indoors’.[37] A year after it opened, however, the Minneapolis Minn. Tribune ran an article that drew attention to a contradiction in Gruen’s conceptual triad of women, commerce, and communal life. Entitled ‘Suburb or Loop? Which direction is Mrs. Shopper going?’, the article noted that, with the introduction of the shopping centre, ‘Mrs Minneapolis Housewife’ was presented with several shopping options. The housewife could dress up and go into the city centre or ‘pile the children in the car and go shopping – with her hair still in curlers.’ Because the shopping centre was both ‘conventional, casual’, concluded the magazine, ‘the future belongs to the shopping centre’.[38]

The article, with its emphasis on the pragmatic functionality of the shopping centre, indicated the limits of Gruen’s vision of a collectively shared agora. The shopping centre made everyday life easier for the residents of the suburbs; yet for neither owner nor shopper was the collective investment in a communal public sphere a priority. ‘[A]ll dressed up and no place to go’ was how Gruen described the *misère* of the suburban lifestyle a few years later.[39]

With his concept of the shopping centre, Gruen finally succeeded in creating a place for housewives to socialise. Housewives and others positioned outside working life – pensioners, children, and youths – found an escape in the shopping centre and later in the shopping mall: according to empirical research by Jerry Jacobs, shopping malls represented a place to pass the time, to meet friends, and to experience continuity (‘nothing unusual happens’).[40] However, the shopping centre, embedded in the link between gender policy and the fear driven agenda of the Cold War, ultimately provided women as much with ‘containment’ as with shelter. It offered literal shelter to those afraid of a bomb attack; and it promised emotional shelter to those suffering from suburban loneliness, uprootedness, and boredom. There is no doubt that the shopping centre alleviated the lives of women occupied as national reproductive labourers, but it also strengthened the traditional definition of women as housewives and carers and confirmed their location in the space of consumption. Gruen was correct in pointing out the growing isolation and frustration of women, but once again he had massively underestimated the political force that powered gender-specific spatial polarisation. ‘Suburbia had become an arid land inhabited during the day almost entirely by women and children and strictly compartmentalised by family income, social, religious, and racial background’: that was Gruen’s diagnosis in 1960, in his book *Shopping Towns USA. The Planning of Shopping Centers*. [41]

### **Kitchen etc.**

The specific link between shelter and spatial delimitation in the field of women’s policy becomes particularly clear when analysed in the context of Cold War politics. On 23 July 1953, Vice President Richard M. Nixon visited Russian leader Nikita Krushchev in Moscow. It was Nixon’s job to guide Soviet politicians through the American National Exhibit – the latest models of single family homes, tools, cars, fashion articles, and freely distributed Pepsi were supposed to illustrate ‘what [...] freedom means’. Standing in front of a model of a fitted kitchen, Nixon philosophised about the semiotics of household appliances: ‘To us, diversity, the right to choose, [...] is the most important thing [...] We don’t have one decision made at the top by one government official. [...] We have many different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that the housewives have a choice.’[42]

Two years before Nixon's visit to Moscow, the Soviet Union had sent the first satellite, Sputnik, into space. From then on, relations between the USSR and the USA had been strained. 'Would it not be better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strength of rockets?' asked Nixon. Krushchev rallied: 'You are a lawyer for capitalism and I am a lawyer for communism. Let's compare.' Nixon boasted that two thirds of the 44 million American families owned their own homes, as well as 56 million cars, 50 million television sets, and 143 million radios. 'The United States comes closest to the ideal of prosperity for all in a classless society', Nixon concluded. The 'model house', he explained, was not a villa but a simple ranch style house, thoroughly affordable for an average worker. The home, he said, was fitted with modern appliances that 'make easier the life of the suburban wives'.

While the two statesmen differed heatedly the definition of freedom, they were able to agree when it came to the position of women. As Nixon was assessed with admiring gaze the young Russian women modelling swimming costumes and sporting attire, Krushchev commented, 'You are for the girls too.' And as Nixon inspected a machine that cleaned the floor by itself, he quipped, 'You don't need a wife'. [43] Nixon's postulate of consumption promised the elimination of class differences, the utopian aspect of consumerism offered men the prospect of equal access to the suburban dream home. This dream guaranteed to save women time in doing the housework. Nixon's comment implied that consumerism aimed at eradicating of class differences while simultaneously strengthening sexual differences. [44] Nixon's class policy strived for equality, however his gender policy aimed for the spatial limitation, in other words the 'containment', of women.

### **The World as Shopping Mall**

In 1957, a year after the opening of the Southdale Center, 940 shopping centres opened across the USA. By 1960, the number had doubled and continued to do so annually until 1963. By then, many critics of suburbanisation, including Gruen, had long since recognised that the ideal typical mall-matrix had failed in two of its goals: rather than supplementing, as predicted, the economy of the inner city, it siphoned off valuable resources; moreover, its contribution to the range of civic-social activities in the suburbs was limited. Over the years, civic-social facilities were visibly axed from the profile of the shopping centres and replaced by commercial facilities that often only simulated public life. As the new consumer typology spread, the concept of the world in the shopping mall gave rise to that of the world as shopping mall. Principles developed in the context of the shopping mall – for example 'adjacent attractions', 'hyperconsumption' – increasingly determined apparently non-commercial facilities such as cultural centres, leisure zones, or museums. [45]

The dissemination of the shopping mall passes as materialised proof of the hegemonic assertion of the consumerist ideology: the shopping mall, argued William Kowinski, the culmination of the American dream, 'both decent and dement; the fulfillment, the mode of the postwar paradise.' [46] In the shopping mall, housewives of families who had fled the inner cities found the props to fit out the home with. Ever since, Lynn Spigel hypothesises, the latter has functioned as a form of theatre – 'a stage on which to play out a set of bourgeois social conventions'. Postwar advertisements, magazines, and manuals provide the scripts of these dramas and comedies. They suggest the perception of the family home as showcase and recommend forms of staging that encouraged spectacular scenes. [47]

In such a context, the shopping mall offered a kind of mega-stage upon which the drama of the 'American Way of Life' could be played out. As enthusiastic master of ceremonies in Viennese political cabaret from 1926 to 1934, Gruen had gained experience with the tricks of staging; working in anti-Semitic Vienna had taught him the art of the poetic metaphor, refined symbolic language, and subtle suggestion. During the day, the trained bricklayer and master-builder was busy modernising the flats and shops of Jewish friends; in the evenings, he devoted himself to the art of the pun. On one

occasion, Gruen weighed potentially risky words on a set of market scales, after a policeman had warned him that in the future he should weigh his words more carefully.[48] Gruen wrote poems, popular plays, and pamphlets, and compered evening shows. After escaping to the USA, he first tried translating the cabaret of the Refugee Artists Group for Broadway; despite success, he then opted for a return to architecture. He became interested in designing spectacular stages that, by means of an abstract modernism on the one hand and a groundbreaking degree of spatial manipulation on the other, offered an ideal projection surface for an 'imaginary elsewhere', promising unimagined opportunities for performative self-staging.[49]

## **Implosion**

In the late 1950s, while the shopping mall was still considered a symbol of American postwar posterity, social movements increasingly began drawing attention to the 'containment' of women and blacks that was necessary in order to maintain this dream. Like in other moments of distinct subordination, oppositional forces suddenly emerged from a context of apparent listless compliance. The description of the 1950s as a decade of hyper-conformity and successful spatial limitation makes little sense in view of the fact that it was precisely during this decade that a civil rights movement managed to force a far reaching abolition of institutionalised 'racial segregation'. A series of white, male authors criticised the isolated lifestyle of the suburbs and articulated their frustration with the conditions of a normalised mass-society.[50]

The end of the 1950s saw criticism from feminist authors who tried to turn the 'orgy of domesticity' on its head. The *Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan's exposé of restrictive domesticity, was a bestseller. Friedan defined domesticity and consumerism as the two central instruments for the limitation of women – they kept housewives busy while hiding a 'growing emptiness'. To keep women focused on collective duties, wrote Friedan, 'makes sense (and dollars) when one realises that women are the chief customers of American business. ... [T]he really important role that women serve as housewives is to buy more things for the house.'[51] A whole generation of feminists, in their insistence that the private is the political, laid bare the inherent misogyny inherent in the policy of spatial 'containment'.

It is difficult to establish when exactly Gruen recognised his own misjudgement. In 1964 he criticised the USA for destroying the essential virtues of urban life – intimacy, diversity, and variety.[52] In 1968, as US American cities went up in flames, Afro-Americans demanded integration, anti-war activists demonstrated against Vietnam, and feminists publicly attacked patriarchal institutions, Gruen decided to return to Vienna. For the rest of his life Gruen claimed that real estate businesses had hijacked his concept of the shopping town and reduced them to 'machines for selling.' He 'disclaimed paternity once and for all' and refused to 'pay alimony to those bastard developments.'[53] He became interested in ecology, concentrated his attention on the concept of the 'self-sustained city' and the 'cellular metropolis' and was active in the anti-nuclear power movement. Building for women no longer concerned him.

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## **Notes**

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