[RILEY OLSTEAD]

Panic in the Mall

As a young girl, I was always eager to flee the near-catatonic tempo of my suburban neighbour-hood and escape inside the local shopping mall. When I speak of the mall, I am not referring to the strip variety, but the all-in-one malls with their terraced store-scapes, immense food courts, art installations, lush gardens, and magnificent fountains. For my teenaged friends and I, the mall offered sanctuary from the dull press of impending adulthood. We were the ultimate flâneurs, strolling endlessly along the length of the walkways, admiring posters of porcelain models in prom dresses and designer jeans. We spent as much time as possible at the mall; a liminal place full of risk and anticipation, it took us beyond the concrete realities of our lives and made our fragile identities feel precious and full of potential.

Since then, my sense of self has changed and with it, my experience of the mall. Although I still go to the mall as an adult, I do so hesitantly. Now, it is an overwhelming world — too many people, too many line-ups, and the sensation that there is too little time. Mostly, I avoid the place.

Why the Mall?

Oh sure, I'd love to go and, you know, just buy some stuff or hang out… But generally, it's off bounds for me. I just don't bother going to the mall anymore because I know, for sure, I will have a panic attack (Ryanne, personal communication).

For some people, going to the mall is impossible. The mere suggestion of the place causes inexplicable anxiety. Over the course of a five-year research study (2002-07) of women's experiences of panic disorder in urban spaces, I was introduced to a group of women for whom 'going to the mall' brings about significant feelings of trepidation and worry. In fact, of the 13 women interviewed, all indicated that the mall produced repeated overwhelming

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Failures in Spatial Certainty: Psychology, Design and the Body

Even though the built environment is not in itself a cause of panic, it provides an important setting for the social interactions that take place there. Shopping malls, for instance, are often experienced as 'surface' or imaginary places that stand in contrast to the world outside. This is achieved through mall design: constructed in isolation from external geographic influences in an attempt to gain distance from a banal reality, the mall aims to offer an experience that is dream-like and utopic in quality.

For Ryanne, however, the mall provokes feelings of instability — a reaction to the plasticity and disengagement of the mall context: "It was really hard in stores, like malls — not strip malls — but you know, like Eaton's Centre or Yorkdale. Places that are interior and are, really... umm...busy and congested with people." Unlike strip malls and stores in general, shopping malls are hermetic, almost town-like environments that discourage passage to the outside world. By erecting a fortress-like exterior and surrounding it with parking lots reminiscent of moats,[4] the shopping mall is able to orchestrate fictional representations of real-space including place, time, and identity. In this way, malls distinguish themselves as fantasy-lands, unrelated to the central cities in which they are situated. Through fantasy, the mall dispenses with organic reality, and replaces it with provisional and simulated versions of social interaction and meaning. The interiority, separateness, and isolation of the mall from 'authentic places and people' are at the core of these women's discomfort.

Designing Insecurity: An Architecture of Impermanence

Malls are more likely to present obstacles to feeling 'situated' because they are often characterized by fleeting social associations, rather than contacts solidified between individuals over time. Notably, contemporary public gatherings in large, urban areas are usually collections of individuals that otherwise remain independent of one another.[5] Even though they assume a quality of social engagement, people in the mall characteristically practice public aloofness and social detachment.

For this reason, a visit to the mall can feel deeply alienating, and while it may offer subjects a feeling of anonymity and refuge from rules, traditions, and social regulation, it can also produce feelings of uncertainty which undermine one's sense of identity.[6] As Liz explains:

> I go to the mall to be near people and just to reconnect, you know, sit in the food court or just on a bench or something. But actually, I often feel totally alone there and maybe more alone than if I had stayed home. It's hard to strike up a ... connection even if you wanted to, because things just move too quickly and yeah, there's lots of people around but it's like we are all doing our own private, *shopping* thing.

Liz's comments reflect not only her personal struggles with connecting with others in the mall, but also underline how social interaction in mall space is shaped through its structural design. Malls are specially orchestrated spaces in which social bonds with others are discouraged and undermined. There is impermanence to one's place in the mall, apparent in the sorts of social interactions people have with one another there. For instance, food courts offer fast food, walkways inhibit sitting or loitering, and signage motivates a consumption — only atmosphere. There are few, if any, places in the mall for sitting, reflecting, or engaging others in meaningful talk. Here, the relationship between the built environment and social relations privileges capital exchange over diverse or meaningful forms of human intercourse.

Embodying Insecurity

People make sense of their place in the world and conceptualize subjectivity in relation to others. The mall undermines meaningful connections with others; for Ryanne, there is "nowhere where she feels she can be." Knowing not only where one 'is' in time and space, but where one exists in relation to others, is how a person is able to produce the kinds of inter-relations that counteract feelings of insecurity.[7] For the women I spoke to, feeling disconnected in the mall environment translated into feelings of self-doubt. Ryanne notes: "I worried, you know, about what I would do and whether or not today would be the day I made a scene. I keep thinking that I am going to just lose control of myself." Ryanne's comment describes a significant form of alienation that occurs in the loss of her own sense of corporeality as a feature of her self-identity, and speaks to a lack of continuity between her bodily and psychological self. This is what undercuts her ability to 'be herself' in the mall. Ryanne renders her worries about what she 'will do', into an experience of the mall as a space in which her body is somehow not her own.

The significance of the body is central to the constitution of selfhood and identity, for its symbolic and material capacity to 'be' in space. Questioning the trustworthiness of the body signals a breakdown in the integrity of selfhood. Maggie, for instance, describes how her fears of "doing something in public" make her feel abnormal and not herself: "I worry that I will do something like make a fool of myself — start doing something unacceptable and embarrassing and everyone will look at me…I am absolutely not myself. And it takes — it takes a lot of acting to be quote, unquote, normal." Here, Maggie is referencing the psychological significance of being 'normal,' a status that indicates she fits into and feels a part of the social order. Her social self is constrained by chronic self-repression aimed towards homogeneity and naturalness within the mall environment.

Maggie's comment is typical of the women to whom I spoke. Theirs is an issue of spatial uncertainty, related to both the materiality of the built environment and interactivity with the

social relations that occur in mall space. These women are integrating the impermanence and destabilization through which mall culture functions into their senses of self. This integration is expressed as a worry about 'normality,' 'accepted' spatial routines, and bodily self-control.

Doing 'Normal'

Maggie's comments depict the way in which panic disorder is the recurring condition of an uncertain selfhood, where the tools of 'normal' living inscribe values of rationality and control. In order for these women to occupy a space in the consumer universe, they must work at aligning their bodies to behave within it. Their ongoing difficulty in maintaining this awkward and conflicting 'balance' correlates with their feelings of bodily ambivalence and inability to feel comfortable occupying mall space. They speak of having to become guardians over themselves on behalf of the established rules of social order and acceptable behaviour. Says Maggie: "I just want to, you know, not have to think about it, and just go and be like, natural — just go and not be worrying all the time. I have to spend so much energy controlling myself and not being crazy, making a fool of myself." In managing her body in this way, Maggie is incorporating a view of the world that subordinates her own self-perspective. In this sense, women like Maggie are spatially located by others, and it is this perspective that informs the way they live. My interview participants describe this in terms of spatial uncertainty that amounts to extremely overwhelming feelings of disconnection and alienation, and refer to the mall as 'a place I avoid,' mainly because 'it just feels like too much to bear,' 'is over-stimulus for me,' and 'makes me feel like I am falling.' Colleen expands:

> [I am] anxious that I have nothing to hang onto, so I guess that is why I walk really
> close to the walls and am aware of where all the exits are located…[The walls] are solid
> and give me something to guide me through the building. Everything looks the same
> and it just overwhelms me: the frenzy of it all, and the noise.

The fact that everything looks the same contributes to Colleen's fears of losing spatial confidence. She requires "solid" things, such as "walls" to help lead her through what she experiences as impermanent and overpowering. As her own selfhood becomes too fragile to depend upon, and as she is otherwise disconnected from others, Colleen seeks out the materiality of the mall as a framework with which to negotiate moving through space.

Shopping becomes so problematic for women suffering from panic disorder because they fail to possess a well-defined impression of a concrete relativity and locatability in relation to others. As women, they are expected to 'behave', 'be in control,' and manage themselves

according to the implicit rules governing mall space. Even though social distanciation is painful for them, these women are expected to pretend otherwise. In the mall, this gets expressed as panic, a terrible fear of the spatial incapacity to delimit a social identity — that which relates us to others and ourselves.[8]

Identity Shopping

One of the ways in which social relations in modernity are organized is through the regulation of money flows.[9] Systems of capital exchange, fragment, distract, and unfasten familiar emotional and material contexts and meanings,[10] thereby challenging the boundaries of self-identity. This is a condition of capitalism, characterized by the sped-up pace of life and an increase in abstract ways of relating to one another.[11] In the context of the mall, speed, mobility, and individuation are emphasized modes of social intercourse.

I have already spoken of how notions of fantasy and unreality are accentuated through the built environment in the mall. Related to this is how subject identities are circulated, bought, exchanged, and transformed through consumer practices. The mall shopper enters into a fantasy environment to search for, and ultimately, purchase, elements of personal identity, thereby building a repertoire of commodified subjectivity. For some, this exchange and circulation of selfhood is exhilarating and exciting, but for others, it can be an overwhelming experience because it requires precisely what they do not have: adaptable boundaries of self-identity. Ryanne notes:

> I wanted to get a new handbag — and I used to love going there — but now, forget it. It's as if I'm being smothered or I'm floating off the ground. I can hardly breathe as soon I step inside and see all the shit, the stuff and just, it's, 'Whoa, get me outta here.'

Ryanne's experience of the shopping mall is one of extreme detachment from reality, of being set adrift amid the destabilizing impulses of consumer culture.

The mall seems to thrive upon these feelings of insecurity. Aisha notes:

> I wanted to go and get some jeans, just a pair of pants. I am not a big shopper to start with, but the idea of going to the mall and setting foot in that place, well, it made me feel weak in the knees. Actually, I wanted to go get some jeans because I just felt awful about myself. All my clothes were old and I just needed a pick me up.

Here, Aisha describes how her desire to shop is fuelled by her own sense of insecurity — feeling 'awful' about herself, she can, in a sense, purchase a new identity by buying a new pair of pants.[12]

The mall is a gendered space; much of its physical and symbolic architecture is directed at women,[13] and the way mall-space targets and interpolates women means that they are more likely to become involved in its de-situating, fragmenting, and destabilizing rhythms. In particular, women are besieged by campaigns advertising identities for sale, and "the [female] subject who ventures into the shopping mall or supermarket risks losing herself… [F]aced with so many disparate versions of what the self is or could be, she directs herself toward something she is not".[14] Capital accumulation, conspicuous consumption, and identity shopping rely precisely on insecurity ('I wanted to go get some jeans because I just felt awful about myself'). In this way, malls can be thought of as containers in which highly orchestrated psychological campaigns, aimed at aggravating insecurities, are mounted. At the same time, malls offer products that help the shopper forget herself in the momentary satisfaction of desires contrived by others. Instead of being one's 'self,' identity shoppers attempt to soothe fragmented subjectivities through consumption practices.

Many women enjoy identity shopping. In fact, several of the women I spoke to indicated that, pre-panic, they liked going to the mall. As Donna explains, "I used to, you know, go and just hang out, and I would go to these trashy stores like the Gap and buy things. But generally, I went, not too often, but just to go and see what was new and trendy." When Donna and the other participants developed panic disorders, the quality of their interactions in mall space changed. This is because the psychological and social statuses of subjects entering the mall play a part in determining how the mall will be experienced. For Ryanne, shopping in the mall is difficult because she engages mall space already "feeling like [she doesn't] have both feet firmly on the ground. The mall just makes it worse." Once inside the mall, Maggie feels as if she is "drowning in all the different pictures and those models with their perfect bodies … there's just too much going on." For the women I spoke to, 'being' in the mall is challenging because they are particularly sensitive to the ways identities circulate and flow freely in this space. The women report that being confronted by these flows of identity makes them feel 'really rattled,' 'terrified' and 'unsettled' and 'in shock.'

Identity shopping is one of the ways in which mall space is a particular kind of cultural environment that amplifies displacement and disorientation. In this way, 'mallness' is a provisional social environment, one that is especially difficult for those women for whom it intensifies feelings of alienation, insecurity, and vulnerability.

Remarks Before Exiting

Malls allowed my teenaged friends and I to loosen our thinking about the meanings and imaginings we were developing in relation to our bodies, the places that we occupied, and

this informed our senses of identity. The excitement we took in being set free in the mall was generated by both our desire to escape, and the rhythms of the mall that allowed us our distraction. As young girls, we were open to the seduction of glossy advertisements and identity shopping. Not only did we dream of buying our way into significance, we wanted to do femininity right — be good consumers and look great in designer jeans. As we got older, the dream gave way to the permanence of real life. As an adult, I no longer desire the mall the way that I did years ago. In fact, the mall disturbs me now.

For the women involved in this research project, the mall is so unsettling that they avoid shopping there at all; they are so deeply affected by the cultural practice of 'mallness' that they have become too afraid to risk entry into mall space. Their feelings reflect how mall culture aggravates insecurity, especially in women. Mall space accentuates feelings of disconnection and ambivalence about the status of one's selfhood, thereby activating the problem at the heart of panic disorder.

Women's panic narratives reveal how the mall is a gendered space brought to life through the routines that comprise everyday capitalist power relations. Without such an analysis, fear, and specifically women's feelings of panic, are pathologized and thereby depoliticized. Upon closer look, however, women's panic reveals how space is brought to life through the routines that make up the everyday. Further, because life is constituted in various spaces normally through the authorization of those in power, and their interests,[15] women's stories of panic illustrate how fear, when built into the mundane routines of everyday life, reproduce social hierarchies.

NOTES

1   APA, 1994.

2   The typical approach to understanding space is to imagine that it simply 'exists.' We often think of space in terms of its component parts — for instance, its architecture and design — and in this way, we conceive of space as innocent and authentic on its own terms. We fail, in this instance, to appreciate how space is an interaction between the built environment and the people who make use of it (See Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing). It would be equally inaccurate to regard space as a 'symbolic message' about the social relations that occur there. This means that we cannot simply describe the human activities that take place while shopping as a meaningful representation of what the mall 'is all about.' Instead, space is created only in as much as people are actively and meaningfully involved in its social production.

3   Lefebvre, 1991, 7

4   Ellin, N. Thresholds of fear: Embracing the urban shadow. *Urban Studies Review*, 38 (5-6) (2001): 869-883.

5   Urban Sociology has considered this phenomenon. See: Durkheim, E. *Suicide*. (G. Simpson, Ed.). (J. A. Spaulding and G. Simpson, Trans.). New York: Free Press, 1966; Giddens, A. *The consequence of modernity*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1990; Simmel, G. *The stranger*. Sociology. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1969.

6   See for instance, Gottschalk, S. The pains of everyday life: Between the DSM and the postmodern. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 21, (1997): 115-146.

7   Because of the way in which mall space destabilizes social connectivity, it has been variously described as a 'non-place' (Bauman, Z. *Globalization: The human consequences*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998). Non-places are not empty places, but are filled with symbolic meanings that have been organized to undermine spatial fixity, social identity and connectivity to the present time and place. Such conditions accentuate, and are crystallizations of, forces that cause people to feel insecure, isolated and distanced from others, thereby fuelling fears about a loss of trust and certainty in their own self-identity.

8   For further discussion of problems in identity formation, gender and panic, see Davidson, J. Fear and trembling in the mall: Women, agoraphobia, and body boundaries. In I. Dyck, N. Lewis, and S. McLafferty (Eds.), *Geographies of women's health*. New York: Routledge, 2001, 211-243.

9   Harvey, D. *The condition of postmodernity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1989.

10   Giddens, 1990.

11   See, for instance, Simmel, 1969.

12   Capitalist consumption promotes itself through ideological depictions of identity that reflect a way of life we 'should' aspire to (see Berger, J. *Ways of seeing*. Markham, ON: Penguin Canada, 1988). Such depictions fill the space of the mall as a landscape that plays upon fear of being undesirable and inadequate. Accordingly, the psychological geography of the shopping mall, with its orientation to consumption, reinforces individuation and insecure egos. For people in general, this systematic distribution of insecurity compels destabilized shoppers to 'buy more' so as to shore up feelings of failings in their sense of self. For my interview participants, however, the feelings of destabilization experienced in the mall are simply too much to bear and induce further disintegration of their 'already fragile selves.'

13   See: Davidson, J. Fear and trembling in the mall: Kierkegaard and consumer/consuming spaces. In. J. Davidson, *Phobic geographies: The phenomenology and spatiality of identity* . Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2003, 14-21; Bordo, S. *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture and the body*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995.

14   Davidson, 2003, 60.

15   Lefebvre, 1991.

Δ Kathryn Walter.