

The Time of Shopping Malls

An Ever-Changing Role

People come, look around, hurry past, stop and examine the decorated shop windows. They sit down to take a short break from carrying heavy bags full of goods. They meet their neighbors by chance, laugh, make small talk, then rush away. They get an energy-boosting smoothie at the juice bar or a snack at the fast food shop. Movement, quick steps, a constant level of voices. Shopping malls work to their own beat, they run on and on, like clockwork, all the cogs turning along with them, many small things adding up to a big whole. Until you forget to wind the clock regularly. Subtly, hardly noticeable, the beat inside the clockwork slows down, the hand moves a little slower until it gradually stops. Or even worse, the clock stops working with a single blow because a pandemic falls on it like a stone.

In the early nineteenth century, the Parisian shopping arcades, in which goods were offered in narrow, covered passages, developed into a new business model for the newly emerging bourgeoisie after the French Revolution. The bourgeoisie had discovered the exclusive lifestyle of consumption for itself and fanned the flames of economic liberalism. The next step in the direction of the shopping mall were the department stores, like *Le Bon Marché* in Paris, whose inner world of consumption was demonstratively turned inside out. (fig #1) In the course of Hausmann's urban modernisation, boulevards were created to facilitate the exchange between people and goods.



fig #1: main staircase of *Le Bon Marché*, 1982

Emergence in the U.S.

As global consumer culture grew and voices for ease, joy and education grew louder in the post-war period, the construct of the shopping mall quickly became common, especially in America. Victor Gruen is considered the father of the American shopping mall. As an Austrian architect, he built the *Southdale Center* in Edina in 1956, the first completely covered and fully air-conditioned shopping mall. It was the „world's first introverted shopping centre“ and completely sealed itself off from its surroundings. Between 1944 and 1960, more than 500 department stores were built in the U.S.

Their aim was to create a mix between social and commercial exchange, following the example of European old towns. While malls were initially conceived as holistic, inward-looking places, often located in the suburbs and only reachable by car, their global attraction grew over the years. Whether it's Cedric Price's *Fun Palace* in the 1960s (fig #2), a first theory on how to develop an infinitely expandable grid into which plug-in cubes could be inserted, or today's approaches by star architects like Zaha Hadid, who turned shopping malls into places of experience with ski slopes or museums, the appeal and use of these locations varies greatly. This makes it all the more important to deal with the question of decline in visitor numbers that is becoming apparent in many of those hybrid used places.

The decline in the use of department stores can be observed since the 90s. The mixture of e-commerce and the current pandemic leads to a toxic acceleration in the decay of department stores. In the years from 2000 to 2014 alone, the market share of department stores in the retail sector in Germany fell by almost half, from 4.2 to 2.7%. Traditional stores such as Karstadt or Kaufhof, which have been an integral part of German city centres for decades, will close their doors, not least because of the current situation.

Changes in society

But even before the lockdown, this trend has been observed continuously. New social phenomena in particular are changing the everyday behaviour of many people. The working and living circumstances are becoming increasingly multilocal and flexible, as jobs no longer necessarily have to be location-dependent and the trend towards home offices and remote work - even after the pandemic - is growing strongly.

At the same time, sustainable and environmentally friendly opinions are on the rise; inner-city spaces in Europe in particular are often car-free or at least car-reduced, pedestrian orientated zones, and the young generation in particular is tending to consume less and focus more on secondhand and recycling. On the other side, of course, the emerging development of e-commerce and digitalisation is making shopping, browsing and comparing more convenient from home. While Amazon hired up to 1000 new employees daily due to the pandemic, the South China Mall as an example has had a vacancy rate of 99% and thus belongs to the so-called dead malls. That is, or could soon be, reality for many shopping malls and department stores worldwide.

**Therefore, a rethink is required.
A new winding of the clock.**

Especially in European cities, shopping malls are part of the inventory of a lively and active city centre. If these disappear, city centres slowly die out. Therefore, new approaches and ideas are needed to fill these structures with uses. The changeability of those hybrid spaces allows a multitude of possible conversions. Existing buildings can either be completely converted or their functions can be partly replaced by innovative, small-scale mixed uses. The new variety and the small-scale, hybrid uses can contribute to the revitalisation of the city centres.

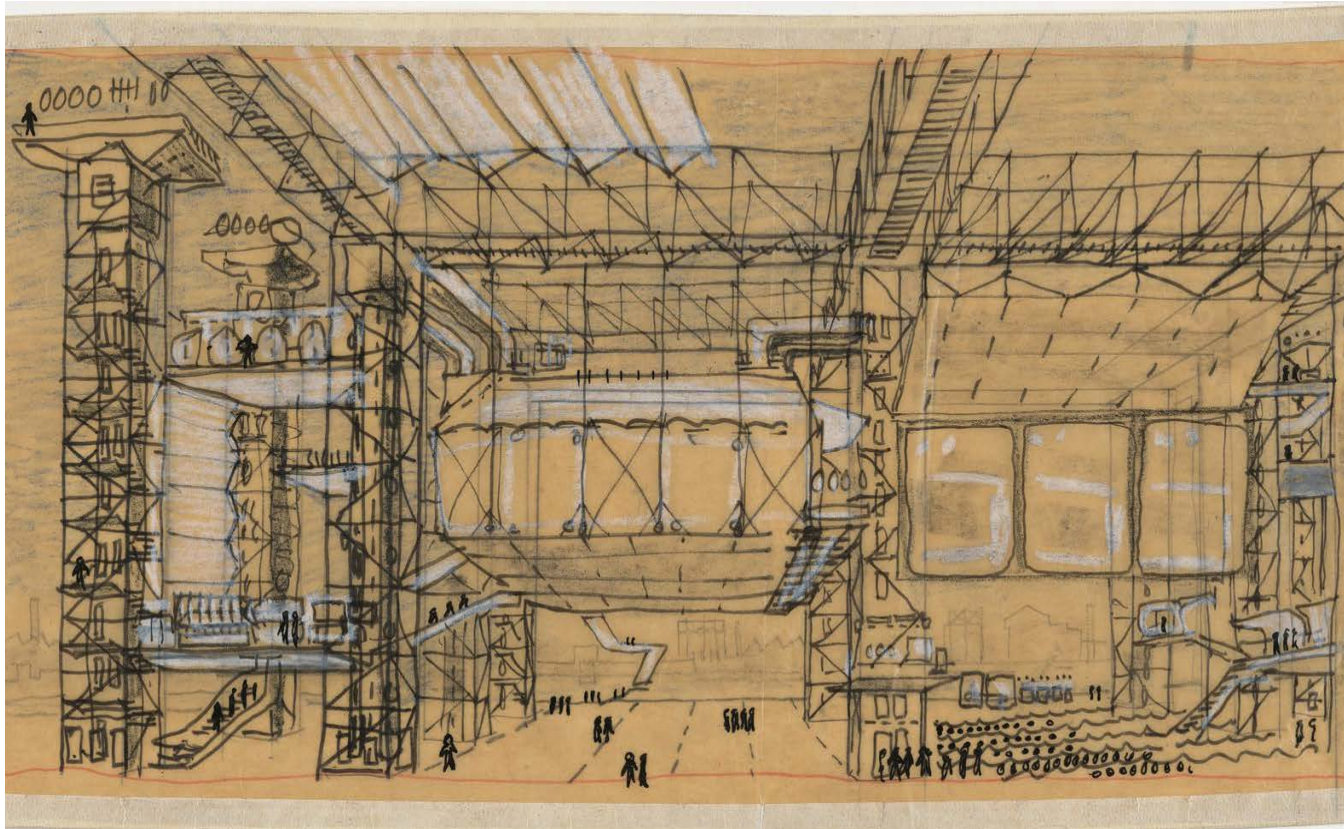


fig #2: Cedric Price: Fun Palace for Joan Littlewood Project, Stratford East, London, England 1959-1961

Challenges

The challenges are often found in the typology of these complexes. Shopping centres are often characterised by little daylight, strict grids constructed in reinforced concrete, wide corridors and extensive covered courtyards. Building services, fire safety, sound insulation and much more often have to be completely rebuilt. In some places, there are also requirements for the protection of historical monuments.

Conversion projects

One possibility is cultural offerings such as museums or theatres, as these often require little or no direct daylight. In 1998, the Neuss city council voted to replan the former *Horten* department stores' as a stage for the Rheinische Landestheater. There, the reinforced concrete building was completely skeletonised and spatially renovated so that the functions of the new use could be accommodated.

In Chemnitz, the State *Museum of Archaeology Chemnitz* (abbreviated to *smac*) opened in 2014 in the former *Schocken* department store. It was designed by Erich Mendelsohn in the late 1920s and presented an important economic factor for the city. (fig #3) The office responsible for the conversion, *Auer+Weber*, was architecturally strongly oriented towards the motifs by Mendelsohn. The curved façade was glazed and can be used as additional exhibition space. (fig #4)



fig #3: department store Schocken, by Mendelsohn



fig #4: Kaufhaus Schocken Conversion, Chemnitz 2014

In other projects, social and community uses are being placed in vacant department stores. The former *Breuer* department store in Eschweiler was converted by *BeL Sozietät für Architektur* in 2006. While the ground floor still contains commercially used retail space, the upper floors are used for senior citizens and the disabled who wish for an unassisted living in the city. Flexible sanitary cores as well as moveable walls pick up on the openness of the department store and allow individual or communal areas. There is a recreational room located on the first floor, where children can be looked after by residents of the building while their parents shop. This area can also be transformed into an office space. (fig #5)

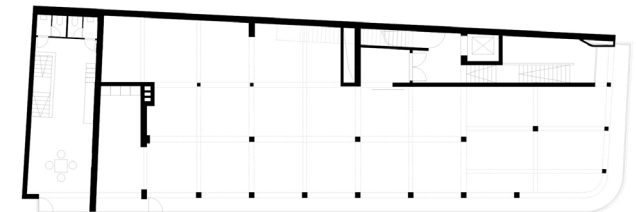
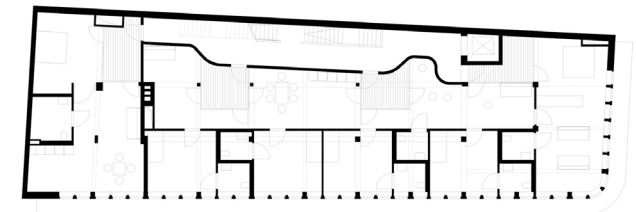


fig #5: First Floor (below) and Second Floor, Eschweiler 2006

A future-oriented project that has not yet been realised nor authorized comes from Ryotaro Bordini Chikushi, a German marketing expert with Japanese roots. On Karl-Marx Straße in Berlin's Neu-Kölln district, the former C&A department stores', which has been vacant for years, stands in the midst of the everyday hustle and bustle. The 12,000 square metres, explains Ryotaro Bordini Chikushi, are to be used to reanimate local retail and revitalise the neighbourhood. On the ground floor, sustainable, regional shops are planned that offer products beyond the normal online range. An existing kitchen is to be converted into a community kitchen and used both as an event venue and as a non-profit food bank. On the upper floors, start-ups and co-working could take place alongside a wellness area. Furthermore, a day care centre for kids from the surrounding neighbourhood is planned. In addition, the building is also to be refreshed in terms of sustainability. Chikushi plans to run the entire building in a biophilic way, with both the building's technology and the residents following a circular economy approach.

Outlook

The exciting thing about shopping centres is their constant transformability, their adaptability and their changing position in society. It turns out that many municipalities and cities are already working with the current problems of conversions and can offer a range of solutions.

For a more efficient and communicative exchange of ideas, Stefan Müller-Schleipen, an entrepreneur from Hanau, founded the website *Die Stadttretter* in June 2020. It aims to bring together as many stakeholders as possible, such as municipalities, traders and artists, to discuss and share ideas and to support each other in future orientated thinking.

Conversion and revitalisation of vacant department stores play an important role in the joint care for the city centres. The trend towards social and small-scale structures that can be used collectively is on the rise again. Calls for multifunctionality, hybridity and variability are becoming louder. How advantageous that department stores are the epitome of hybrid structures.

The reliable thing about clockwork is that even if it falters, it always finds its way back to the old beat. You just have to wind them up continuously.

Sources

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Figures

fig #1 Dietrich Erben, "Demonstrative Architektur. Ladenpassage, Warenhaus und Konsumkultur" in Andreas Lepik und Vera Simone Bader, ed., *World of Malls. Architekturen des Konsums*. (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2016), fig. 28

fig #2 MoMA, Fun Palace for Joan Littlewood Project, Stratford East, London, England (Perspective), by Cedric Price, 1959-1961 (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/842>, last visited March 10, 2021, 20:10pm)

fig #3 Altes Chemnitz, Das Kaufhaus Schocken, 2018 (<http://www.altes-chemnitz.de/chemnitz/schocken.htm>, last visited March 10, 2021, 20:18pm)

fig #4 Auer+Weber Architekten, Museum für Archäologie Chemnitz, Deutschland, 2014 (<https://www.auer-weber.de/de/projekte/details/museum-fuer-archaeologie-chemnitz.html>, last visited March 10, 2021, 20:16pm)

fig #5 BeL Sozietät für Architektur, 035 Kaufhaus Breuer Conversion, Eschweiler 2006 (<https://bel.cx/projects/>, last visited March 10, 2021, 20:20pm)