The Holy Trinity of Modernity:  
Leisure, Suburbia and the Shopping Centre

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Writing about leisure in suburbia would be neigh impossible without including shopping centres. Leisure, suburbia and shopping centres might well embody the holy trinity of capitalist modernity. It was the consolidation of capitalism that established our modern sense of work, free time and leisure, and the shopping centre became its temple; a destination for the mid-twentieth century suburban masses to ‘consume’ their ‘leisure time’.

Already from its inception in the early 1940s, the shopping centre was intended as a place for social activities, including leisure. Victor Gruen and his wife Elsie Krummeck, who in 1943 first formulated the concept of a shopping centre, stated ‘… we expect to make the shopping center at the same time the centre of cultural activities and recreation … We feel that one such shopping center should serve an entire community … [It] would be the one important meeting place … and would be in some measure comparable to the market place or main square of the older cities.’

These utopian underpinnings were of course not pulled out of thin air. At the time Gruen and Krummeck formulated their shopping centre idea(l)s, José Luis Sert, then president of the Congrés Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) ‘was writing about the need to create new community centres and civic cores, where gathering among friends and strangers could take place and where a public life, presumably lost to modernization and media, could be found.’ In his 1942 publication *Can Our Cities Survive?,* Sert posited: ‘… organized community meeting places could establish a frame where a new civic life and a healthy civic spirit could develop.’ These ideas were further articulated in 1951, when CIAM invited architects to reflect on the theme the *Heart of the City.* The goal was to come up with different possible (symbolic) urban ‘cores’ – a prominent community building, a meeting square, or other central spaces or structures – capable not only of transforming the urban fabric into a holistic whole larger than the constituting functional zones, but also of creating a ‘community’ from a group of (individual) ‘inhabitants’.

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As a result, the search for a successful architect-designed public gathering space or ‘core’ became one of the major preoccupations of the profession in the mid-twentieth century. This was also Gruen and Krummeck’s objective. Their shopping centre concept was underpinned by socio-cultural ambitions and also had clear urban/planning aspirations.

The post-war socio-spatial history of America is well-known and well-documented. After *Little Boy* was dropped on Hiroshima in August 1945, the widely circulated images of urban devastation elicited intense reactions, calling into question deeply engrained historical settlement patterns. The media – both popular press and architectural journals – increasingly depicted big cities as death traps and portrayed decentralization as the key to Americans’ survival. Fuelled by the rising popularity (and increasing affordability) of the car as well as the ‘white flight’, the post-war years witnessed an explosive expansion of outlying areas, which resulted in a quasi unchecked sprawl. Many planning and architecture professional had of course long seen decentralization as a ‘healthy’ process, which had the potential to offer ‘oppressed’ city-dwellers the indispensable benefits of ‘space’ – air, trees and distance from neighbours – and developed spatial models to structure this suburbanisation. Ebenezer Howard’s *Garden City* and Frank Lloyd Wright’s *Broadacre City* are only a few famous examples that predate Victor Gruen’s shopping centre proposal. He envisaged the shopping centre to become a ‘suburban crystallization’ point or ‘satellite downtown’ that – once several were realised – could develop into a network of nodes, which would not only structure decentralization, but also safeguard the commercial viability of the (traditional) city centre: ‘These regional centers will by no means decrease the importance of the downtown business district but they will alleviate the unbearable traffic and parking conditions in the downtown area, thus improving shopping conditions’. Gruen furthermore – in response to the perceived threat of atomic attack – framed his concept in terms of civil defence. At the annual meeting of the National Retail Dry Goods Association held in New York City, he declared: ‘correctly planned regional shopping center[s] could become the backbone of our civilian defense set-up, by providing fireproof buildings, basements, subterranean tunnels that can in emergencies provide air raid shelters, and emergency shelters […]’.

We of course all know how the story ends. The eventual dominance of the shopping centre’s economic factors over all others – civic, social and urban – led to the flagrant corruption of Gruen’s ideals, spurring his disillusionment with the entire concept. Even though the shopping centre concept did reshape American commercial architecture, its social ideals had very little direct impact, and Gruen’s large-scale urban plans were all rejected. Concerned that the economically irresistible progeny of his (once) utopian plans would also cross the Atlantic and

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5 In his chapter ‘The Cold War Pedestrian’ David Smiley states: ‘From Life magazine to Progressive Architecture, the threat of conflagration deeply affected debates about urban policy building and the very concept of the city.’


contaminate Europe, Gruen flat-out disclaimed responsibility for the (by then) prevalent run-of-the-mill shopping malls, snarling, ‘I refuse to pay alimony for those bastard developments.’ But, to no avail. When Gruen’s ‘Frankensteinian’ steel and concrete creature eventually did wash up on Western European shores, it spawned a large offspring; numerous run-of-the-mill ‘big boxes’ lumpishly implanted in the fringes of cities and towns. However, at times the concept also adopted recognizably different socio-spatial characteristics that appear much more akin to Gruen’s original shopping centre ideal, including the social aims to provide for cultural activities and recreation. These instances seemingly occurred when the shopping centre was – just like schools, hospitals, cultural infrastructure, sports facilities, etc. – cast as an integral building block of the Western European welfare state.

In the decades following the Second World War, and in part in response to the Cold War, governments across Western Europe set out ambitious programmes for social welfare and the redistribution of wealth that aimed to improve the everyday lives of their citizens. Already in 1942 – in the throes of the Second World War – Churchill’s coalition government issued a report entitled Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services. Drafted by Sir William Beveridge, a highly regarded economist, this document, which is today commonly known as the Beveridge Report, rapidly became the blueprint for the modern British welfare state. It detailed five giant social evils that beset the British people – illness, ignorance, disease, squalor and want – and in extraordinary amplitude also set forth the remedies: national health care for all, full employment, universal secondary education, state insurance against sickness, unemployment and old age and, last but not least, subsidized housing. When the war finally ended, Beveridge’s words were translated into deeds. As many buildings had been damaged or destroyed during the war, one of first points for action for the incoming Labour government was to devise creative solutions to alleviate the pressing housing deficit.

To prevent unchecked, sprawling suburbanisation, the British parliament in 1946 passed the ‘New Towns Act.’ This act enabled the government to designate areas of land for the formation of new towns and regulated the establishment of development corporations, each of which was responsible for the building and management of one of the projected new towns. Over the following decades, three development ‘waves’ led to the creation of about two dozen new towns in England and Wales; twelve between 1946 and 1950, five between 1961 and 1964 and six between 1968 and 1971. The most ambitious was Milton Keynes, the last new town to be designated by the Minister of Housing and Local Government, Richard Crossmann, in 1967.

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8 Mennel, ‘Victor Gruen and the Construction of Cold War Utopias’: 142.
10 Peter Hall & Mark Tewdwr-Jones, Urban and Regional Planning (London: Routledge, 2010), 68-71.
Located in North Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes was to provide for overspill from the towns in the south of the County and also contribute towards the housing of London’s overspill. In May 1967 the Milton Keynes Development Corporation was established and preparations to develop a ‘strategic plan’ began in December that same year.\textsuperscript{13}

In early 1970, Lord Campbell of Eskan, chair of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation, presented the Plan for Milton Keynes to the Minister. The macrostructure of this plan was based on a grid of roads, spaced at about one-kilometre intervals, with land uses coarsely distributed across the entire designated area.\textsuperscript{14} At a local level the plan relied on an even distribution of so-called ‘activity centres’. These grouped together different services inside the grid and ensured that wherever you were in the city, you were never more than a six-minute (or 500-metre) walk away from the nearest public facility. Complementing these local nuclei was a large centre located at the heart of the new town which was to offer ‘[…] most of those services and facilities which serve the whole population of the city’ and – following the Development Corporation’s advice – needed to include a substantial shopping centre, cultural activities and a major recreation centre.\textsuperscript{15} This Centre was furthermore to function as a major regional commercial hub between London and Birmingham.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Figure 01: Drawing comparing the scale of Milton Keynes with the scale of Runcorn’s Shopping Centre.}

It was not unusual for new towns to have a shopping centre at (or ‘as’) their core. Cumbernauld and Irvine in Scotland and Runcorn in England, for example, all had such a commercial facility embedded in their centre. But the shopping centre in Milton Keynes was different. In May 1979, a few months before its opening, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) devoted a lengthy article, entitled ‘The Shopping Centre’ to Milton Keynes’ Centre in their annual report, noting: ‘It owes no allegiance to its new town brothers at Cumbernauld, Irvine and Runcorn’. Instead, the journal described the building as ‘… a strange animal in conventional shopping terms’ and explained: ‘[…] it is a far cry from the dumbell concept of earlier American centres or the prison-camp exterior/ seedy nightclub interior mode of many recent commercial ventures in France and England’.\textsuperscript{17} This was precisely the intention of the architects, as Stuart Moscrropp, who together with Christopher Woodward designed Milton Keynes’ Centre pointed out: ‘[w]e were determined we would not design a “shopping centre”. This building type of ours was the biggest in Europe when it first opened. But all other modern shopping places were modelled on Victor Gruen, the American architect who in the ‘50s came up with the “blobs” – tarmac machines for spending

\begin{footnotes}
\item Edwards, ‘City Design’: 88.
\item Milton Keynes Development Corporation, The Plan for Milton Keynes, 30-31.
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money, entirely enclosed. […] No, we thought […] [t]his is going to be the first place that we actually make for all the people in Milton Keynes.18

Figure 02: Typical cross-section through Milton Keynes’ Centre.

Taking inspiration form the 19th century European arcades or passagen, immortalized by Walter Benjamin in his Passagenwerk,19 Moscropp and Woodward structured the Centre around two large twelve metre wide, fourteen metre high pedestrian arcades that run east west along the length of the building and are connected by secondary pedestrian routes at ninety metre intervals. These lengthened walkways were extensively glazed, naturally lit and heavily landscaped. Each was given a unique personality thanks to carefully selected vegetation. The more shaded north arcades contained typical temperate forest and tropical plants with dark, dense foliage, while the south arcades (which get more direct sunlight) were landscaped with plants from hot, dry climates; the foliage of which is generally paler, smaller and less dense. These landscaped arcades effectively subdivided the building into three commercial strips. The outer two strips were designed to contain smaller ‘unit shops’ while the wider middle band was designated to house the large-space-use department- and variety stores.

Figure 03: Impression of one of Milton Keynes’ shopping arcades by Helmut Jacoby.

The middle band also comprised two large public squares: an outdoor garden court (Queen’s Court) and an indoor central hall (Middleton Hall). Middleton Hall was intended as a great ‘democratic space’.20 To that end, it was paved with travertine – a reference to the large public facilities in Italy – and given dimensions that enabled it to cater to micro-encounters as well as recreational macro-events. The Royal Institute of British Architects noted: ‘The use of the building as a perpetual theatre had been an obsession of the team … since inception, and this sense of theatre can be perpetuated with the correct entrepreneurial leadership in the garden court and the central covered square, which is equipped with sophisticated sound and lighting installations. They are conceived as centres for major exhibitions, public entertainment and a variety of happenings and events…’21 Moscropp and Woodward basically thought of the shopping centre as an extension of the city grid; a network of (covered) streets and squares; and, to ensure that it would function as such, decided not to install doors on the building, but to work with ‘air curtains’.22

Figure 04: Drawing of Middleton Hall by Helmut Jacoby.

19 Hill, The Story of the original CMK, 25-27.
20 Hill, The Story of the original CMK, 109.
22 Hill, The Story of the original CMK, 63-67.
The urban atmosphere that Moscrop and Woodward envisaged was also beautifully illustrated in the black and white drawings that renowned architectural renderer Helmut Jacoby produced. His illustrations invariably depicted the Centre’s squares and arcades crowded with people – young and old – walking leisurely, chatting happily... enjoying their leisure time. To emphasize that the Centre’s interior streets and square were no different from ‘traditional’ city streets and squares and underline that this shopping centre was – contrary to most of its shopping centre siblings – an environment first and foremost for leisure, where consumption is a possibility not a precondition, Jacoby prominently included a group of chortling children, playing with a ball, accompanied by a dog in the foreground of the drawing of the Garden Court.

Figure 05: Rendering of the Garden Court by Helmut Jacoby.

Milton Keynes’ Centre in more than one way realised to the utopian shopping centre proposal formulated by Victor Gruen thirty years earlier. Elaborated within the frame of the British New Town Programme, it was an important component of a large-scale model of structured decentralisation, that also in its social aspirations – a centre for culture and recreation – corresponded to Gruen’s original plans. Milton Keynes’ Centre furthermore presented an eloquent translation of the basic principles underpinning the discourse regarding ‘the heart of the city’: It was a large, car-free, publicly accessible indoor area, offering community-oriented leisure pursuits at the heart of the New Town, and, even though its principal underpinnings were undeniably commercial, its design unquestionably expressed the desire to form a novel ‘core’. Already before its opening, the Royal Institute of British Architects lauded the shopping centre as ‘… an amalgam of simple virtues – pedestrian emphasis, tree-lined streets, grade parking and obvious movement patterns [which] will symbolically become a centrepiece for community activity [and] will hopefully inculcate the right kind of civic pride…’²³ So, when on the 25th of September 1979 the newly elected Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher – under screaming protest of trade unionists – cut the proverbial ribbon of Milton Keynes’ new Centre, this act did not symbolize a fitting foreshadow of her subsequent governance, but in fact represented the epitome of the U.K.’s post-war consensus, an ‘egalitarian’ shopping centre that like no other approximated Gruen’s socially-responsive shopping centre ideal.

References

²³ ‘Central Milton Keynes: The Shopping Centre’: 213.


José Luis Sert, *Can Our Cities Survive? An ABC of urban problems, their analysis, their solutions based on the proposals formulated by the C.I.A.M.* (Cambridge Massachusetts/ London: Harvard University Press/ Oxford University Press, 1942)
