Title: The “Magic of the Mall” Revisited: Malls and the Embodied Politics of Life

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Abstract.

This article reviews recent literature on shopping malls that reaffirms their importance for human geography. Taking Goss’s seminal work on the “magic of the mall” as a starting point, we trace how recent works attuned to emotion and affect have updated and inspired a re-conceptualization of this potential “magic”. Synthesizing the linkages between consumer architecture with spatial politics and emotional and affective sensibilities in those spaces, the article seeks to help set the agenda for further research in this field by emphasizing how *social difference* infuses the retail atmosphere and the way it reveals the workings of geopolitics.

**Keywords:** Consumption, affect, emotion, shopping mall, subjectivity, geopolitics

**A I Introduction**

Since the construction of the first indoor, fully enclosed shopping mall outside of Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, in 1956, these architectural spaces have expanded around the globe and continue to do so today, albeit unevenly, and despite the growing challenge of online shopping. There is now a wide literature that details the uneven development of these consumer spaces, focusing on how such spaces are built, contested, inhabited and/or abandoned in some places and not others, and how politics are lived and experienced through such spaces. Interestingly, there has also been close engagement in recent years with theories of affect and emotion in the emerging politics of these commercial spaces. It is somewhat surprising, then, that the shopping mall is largely absent in recent literature reviews and volumes on the “geographies of consumption” (Goodman et al. 2010; Hall, 2015; Mansvelt, 2008, 2009, 2010), reflecting the growth of other conceptual and theoretical approaches that are in some cases less concerned with the manipulative architecture and design of contemporary capitalist consumption. In focusing this article on shopping mall geographies specifically, we seek to highlight recent contributions that push forward a critical understanding of capitalist architecture that is affective, emotional and simultaneously differentiated by vectors of identity and politics. Malls, in other words, will always be technologies of retail capital, but they are also suffused with multiple other power relations. It is to this simultaneity and overlap that we attend to in this article.

We contend that the shopping mall continues to bear great relevance for urban studies and human geography more broadly, especially as it becomes emblematic of the mundane ways that political, economic and socio-cultural contestations seep into our everyday existence. *Malls matter.* They matter economically, of course, as spaces of capital that facilitate the flow of commodities, as well as being spaces of labour themselves (Brody 2006; Tomic et al. 2006), but also politically and socio-culturally insofar as they are places where power relations more broadly are lived, reproduced and transformed. Recent research has explored the politics of the mall as a ubiquitous and mundane site where multiple identities are forged and contested, from the imperatives of retail capital to the play and contradictions of difference, understood in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, citizenship and even geopolitics. We aim to inspire more research on emerging politics as a way of life (Anderson 2017) at shopping malls and other built environments oriented towards retail and consumption, especially as malls continue to expand across Asia (Al 2016; Jewell 2015; Lee 2015; Mathur 2010), Latin America (Dávila 2015; de Simone 2015; Bermúdez 2008; Way 2012), the Gulf States and the Middle East (Larkin 2010; Le Renard 2014; Shtern 2016; Smith 2010), in cities across Africa (Abaza 2001; Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo 2009; Miller et al. 2008; Smiley 2010) and in post-Soviet contexts (Keller 2005; Patico and Caldwell 2002; Salcedo 2003). Shopping malls continue to appear in social research in North America, Europe and Australia as well, as places that now face the specter of “dead malls” (Barata-Salgueiro and Erkip 2014; Ferreira and Paiva 2017) as investment is directed elsewhere and usage declines, with some notable exceptions (Parlette and Cowen 2011)[[1]](#endnote-1).

This article, then, tracks the life of the shopping mall since the early 1990s when it was a topic of some debate for critical human geography. Jon Goss’s (1993) “Magic of the mall” exemplified a popular neo-Marxist critique of the capitalist manipulations built into the mall’s architecture and design (also see Hopkins 1990 and Shields 1989). Goss’ conceptualization was strongly criticized by Gregson (1995) and others who found it to be too one-dimensional. We contend, however, that the key theme of emotional investment in the mall introduced by Goss (1993) is significantly reshaped in recent approaches that incorporate affect and emotion in the retail environment. These approaches have proven capable of advancing new theories of retail space and its “magic” as an affective experience, while also remaining open to emotional geographies of difference and feminist interpretations of spatial politics as embodied, intimate and often visceral domains of existence. Tracing this literature, we identify three broad research trends that we bring together in an analytical framework for conceptualizing the shopping mall today: (a) consumer-oriented architectural space and design, (b) emotional and affective dimensions of shopping malls and the built environments of consumption more broadly, and (c) the embodied politics of difference. The proposed framework seeks to set the agenda for further research in this field and advance the theoretical linkages between different strands of research on malls. Our main argument is that by focusing on affect and emotion as part of a broader (socio-cultural, political and economic) landscape, we can also attend to the specificities of life at the mall and consider how its sensory fields intersect with the formation of identity and difference. We draw on an empirical example a shopping mall in Bosnia and Herzegovina to illustrate the proposed analytical framework at work, giving further nuance and weight to the theoretical arguments.

Below are three main sections. The first outlines Goss’s (1993) “magic of the mall” and then turns to other work that includes a stronger focus on difference, politics and retail space. This section proceeds to review outstanding work that looks toward life at the mall as important for questions about broader social, cultural and political relationships across space. This work in many ways highlights the importance of embodiment, however emotions and affect are not the central focus of this research, and therefore not explicitly theorized as such.

Second, we turn to recent work that engages specifically with emotion and affect in the mall in different ways. Here, we review new analytical and theoretical resources that range from feminist geopolitics to non-representational theories of bio-political affect, and “new materialist” approaches that add further nuance to the new potential “magic” of the mall. We outline the meaning and consequence of this new vocabulary for discussing and researching socio-spatial relations at the mall.

Finally, we present a comprehensive analytical framework that synthesizes the three main analytical components (the built environment, the affective and emotional dimensions, and the spatial politics of difference), through an illustrative analysis and interpretation of life at a mall in the city of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. This worked example employs the proposed framework by veering into the geopolitics of everyday life at the shopping mall in a post-conflict society where new urban consumer landscapes intersect with the aftermath of war and violence. The study brings into sharp relief the embodied dimensions of life at the mall as a way to illustrate the potential benefits of considering affective and emotional dimensions of the mall as keys to understanding the intimacies of everyday space and the politics therein.

**A II Spatial politics of the mall: from manufacturing illusion to politics of difference**

In some ways, the affective and emotional dimensions of the built environment have always been of interest for critical theory approaches to the shopping mall. More than merely pointing out the many techniques that make the built retail environment “persuasive and coercive” (p. 31), Goss (1993) suspects another kind of meta-power flowing through the mall that somehow works to “assuage the collective guilt” of today’s consumer society. Through a series of rhetorical strategies, spatial design and environmental management, the shopping mall produces a kind of “magic” that does insidious work on those that are drawn into its clutches. Goss (1993) is clear:

“This paper argues that developers have sought to assuage this collective guilt over conspicuous consumption by designing into the retail built environment the means for a fantasized dissociation from the act of shopping. That is, in recognition of the culturally perceived emptiness of the activity for which they provide the main social space, designers manufacture the illusion that something else other than mere shopping is going on, while also mediating the materialist relations of mass consumption and disguising the identity and rootedness of the shopping center in the contemporary capitalist social order. The product is effectively a *pseudoplace* which works through spatial strategies of dissemblance and duplicity” (p. 19; emphasis in original).

The mall, then, fulfills an ideological function by hailing the consumer subject, in its inclusive and exclusive dimensions. This perspective also resonated with other critical work on the privatization of public space, as well as broader concerns around post-modern geographies (Crawford 1992; Soja 1989)[[2]](#endnote-2). However, as Gregson (1995) and Domosh (1998) pointed out, these approaches were often unable to pursue other important questions around the spaces and geographies of consumption, primarily around gender and sex (also see Morris 1993). Along with these feminist critiques, researchers pursued various ethnographic studies of shopping malls that are informed by a more diverse political and epistemological cannon open to race, ethnicity, class and other vectors of identity and subjectivity (Chin 2001; Miller et al. 1998; Stillerman 2006; Stillerman and Salcedo 2011, 2012; Thomas 2005; Whitson 2018). As we will see in the following section, work on the affective dimensions of the built environment signals a new kind of magic that is less ideological than it is embodied and visceral (Allen 2006). The remainder of this section, though, reviews outstanding work that connects the built environment of the mall to questions of social difference and broader (geo)political struggles in ways that gestures toward the importance of embodiment in understanding this relationship. Here, we highlight recent contributions that position the architectures of capitalist consumption amid broader relationships and geographies of difference, as these have been elaborated and deepened beyond familiar Global North locations (Qian 2014). Interestingly, these malls are entangled in geopolitical contexts that include violence, conflict or war, thereby introducing additional nuances into their everyday functioning and political potential.

First, Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo (2009) take us inside a large mall in contemporary Cape Town and draw on Henri Lefebvre as a way of attending to the embodied everyday life at the mall. This mall arrives at a moment of complex transformations that include the imperatives of neoliberal development and the racial politics of post-apartheid landscape. Through their close empirical work on life at the mall, they reveal an intricate tapestry of fear and optimism in the ongoing unfolding of “publicization” (351), the term they coin to describe once strictly segregated spaces becoming more open to public access. They conclude with the following: “But regardless of how salutary, even therapeutic this place can feel after the segregated reality of the surrounding city, it is more than just a fantasy – there is a large chunk of social reality being produced in the same environment” (373). The mall, then, becomes a space for post-apartheid difference to play out. Rather than just a machine for producing the ideological fantasies of capitalist consumer culture, the mall is in fact full of embodied experiences through which race relations are transforming in post-apartheid Cape Town, thereby extending the purview of what kind of politics take place there (compare with North American accounts of race and ethnicity in the shopping mall: Chin 2001, O’Doughtery 2006, Parlette and Cowan 2011, Preston and Lo 2000).

Similar dynamics inflect critical analyses of the geography of shopping malls in South America, especially Chile, Argentina and Uruguay, insofar as the geopolitical trauma of recent military dictatorships *conditions* and makes possible neoliberal consumer society, such that a trace of political violence runs throughout today’s global flows of commodities and their corporate retail environments. The outstanding work of Susana Draper (2009, 2012) elucidates the geopolitics of the mall as an architecture of the Cold War and the transition to neoliberalism, thereby linking the new consumer space of the mall with the embodied affects of trauma and state terror. For Draper (2012) and others like Sarlo (1994, 2009) and Moulian (1997, 2014), these spaces generate affective and emotional experiences as they have the capacity to assuage the tensions and contradictions of post-dictatorship and neoliberal consumer society. As a product of the Cold War, the shopping mall urban landscape works against the memories and experience of trauma during the dictatorships that brought them into being. Interestingly, ethnographic work in the shopping malls of Santiago, Chile by Stillerman and Salcedo (2011, 2012) also point to the mall’s capacity to provide significant public access (cf. Allen 2006), perhaps more so than much critical theory approaches to the mall often assume (see Author).

Others have also explored how the urban politics of shopping malls are often located at the intersection of embodied sensation and the social and political production of difference. Larkin (2010), for instance, finds the spectacle of neoliberal urbanism in Beirut unfolding amid a broader landscape of difference and post-civil war trauma. For one mall located along a traditional ethnic boundary in the city, the developers respond by attempting to create “neutral spaces” that seek to attract a diverse public by way of “a modernist architectural design, while deliberately avoiding politically symbolic colors and accommodating religious sensitivities through the location and layout of certain goods (i.e., alcohol)” (p. 428; cf. Shtern 2016 on shopping malls in West Jerusalem). These are the kinds of details of the architectural built environment that scholars have highlighted as having powerful affective capacities (Kraftl and Adey 2008). It is important to note that while the embodied politics of difference is highlighted and the potential of embodiment is often evident in these approaches to life at the mall, emotion and affect are rarely analyzed specifically, either theoretically or methodologically (with the exception of Draper). The following section, then, turns in that direction.

**A III Embodied geographies of the shopping mall**

The range of work on affective and emotional geographies in the last few decades is vast and sometimes contentious. Foremost, the conceptualization of affect and emotion has been the subject of some debate in geography and elsewhere. Without getting into the details of these discussions, suffice to say that affect has been understood by some as a kind of sensory field emerging in the encounter between bodies and spaces that may not always be consciously identified, while emotion signals consciously articulated sentiments (see Pile 2010). Many feminist and other scholars work to complicate the relationship between the two by exploring how these affective atmospheres infuse emotional subjectivities specifically, thereby linking embodiment to the politics of difference directly (see Colls 2012). Embodiment here signals both emotional and affective registers of experience, and this article proceeds to refer to embodiment as a concept that links emotions and affect together.

We outline three broad modes of explanation that include various degrees of affect and emotion in the shopping mall space: (i) non-representational theory (NRT) and its relationship to bio-politics; (ii) a “new materialist” approach that draws on NRT and broader theories of “assemblage”; and (iii) feminist geographies of embodied subjectivity and their role in mediating design politics. These three modes create a pathway for a feminist (geo)politics of the shopping mall landscape that we then deploy in our discussion of the Mepas Mall in Mostar.

*B 1 Non-representational theory and biopolitics*

Nigel Thrift’s well-known “non-representational theory” (NRT) is a vast project with numerous offshoots and potential consequences. One obvious and important connection to the geographies of retail and consumption is found in one of his central claims: the alleged “engineering of affect”. It is easy to read Thrift as a necessary and essential update to Goss’s “magic of the mall”. However, their theoretical approaches are distinct in important ways. As discussed above, the neo-Marxist critique of the mall has limited potential for imagining transformation, difference and multiplicity, due to its reliance on representational frameworks of explanation. For Thrift (2004), though, NRT is needed because contemporary power is increasingly flowing though domains of embodied experience that remain “non-cognitive”. If true, power (and resistance) can exceed the domain of representation entirely. For the built environment of consumption, Thrift’s claims carry significant weight, insofar as he argues that in capitalist development there has been:

“an increase in the practical knowledges of affective response that have become available in a semi-formal guise (e.g. design, lighting, event management, logistics, music, performance, etc), and the enormous diversity of available cues that can be worked with in the shape of the profusion of images and other signs, the wide spectrum of available technologies, and the more general archive of events. The result is that affective response can be designed into spaces often out of what seems like very little at all. Though affective response can clearly never be guaranteed, the fact is that this is no longer a random process either. It is a form of landscape engineering that is gradually pulling itself into existence, producing new forms of power as it goes” (Thrift 2008: 203).

If the shopping mall obviously uses these kinds of strategies, the “magic of the mall” now becomes the “engineering of affect” through non-, or “more-than-representational” (Lorimer 2005) means. Malls remain ideological spaces, no doubt, but their functioning is now brought into the realm of everyday practice, sensation and intimacy, the domain originally charted by Morris (1993) and other feminist scholars. Reading Thrift (2004) and others, though, there is a sense of a growing bio-politics in this “engineering” of affect through the built environment and architectural design (also see Anderson 2011; Berlant 2011; Best 2011), thereby maintaining the neo-Marxist edge of Goss’s “Magic of the mall”. Affective interventions in the retail environment have been discussed as “biopolitical” because of the ways that they regulate (and often perpetuate) not only the circulation of commodities, but also broader social relations (Miller 2015). These spaces of retail and consumption (and their affective and emotive potentials) have something to do with the ongoing maintenance of consumer-oriented practices even in the face of neoliberal reforms that have transformed the traditional middle-classes (Berlant 2011).

As noted in the section above, one apparent strategy has been to broaden the scope of how shopping malls are integrated into the city. In other words, in addition to producing highly surveilled and exclusive spaces for the middle- and upper-classes, some shopping mall strategies seek to incorporate a wide and diverse public. These emerging logics are part of what make the contemporary geography of retail and consumption biopolitical in a profound way. Allen (2006) draws on similar theoretical resources as Thrift (2004) (mainly Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari) in his analysis of the Sony consumer complex in Berlin, Germany, and connects these trends in manufacturing new kinds of spatial experiences with commodities and their atmospheres (Healy 2014; Thibaud 2015). For Allen (2006), the space embodies biopower precisely in its invitation to circulate and actively engage the environment. In these embodied circulations, a consumer subjectivity is formed, with increasing distance from the capacity to actually shop at the mall. Most visitors of these “open” malls are not there to shop, but for other reasons.

Affect theory, then, has helped reimagine the manipulative “magic” of the mall in new ways. Yet these approaches have also generated much debate and criticism on how appropriate non-representational theories of affect are for questions of difference and “power geometries” (Tolia-Kelly 2006), critiques that are discussed further below. One alternative view is that NRT also opens up towards other horizons – such as a “new materialist” approach – and not only toward new theories of bio-political capture and domination.

*B 2 New materialism*

Anderson and Harrison (2010) are clear that they find hope for alternative futures in the “promise of non-representational theory” as much as they find new resources to theorize emerging forms of power (see Miller 2014b, p. 49). Others like Jane Bennett (2010) work non-representational theories of affect into a broader theory of more-than-human “assemblage”[[3]](#endnote-3) that includes the mediating force and life of non-humans. The goal of this work is to find new inspiration and enchantment in everyday experiences that often go unnoticed, while also resisting the hegemonic epistemological constraints of post-Enlightenment thought. These insights have fed into the emergence of a “new materialism” in which affective atmospheres emerge relationally and form a constantly shifting terrain from which subjectivity emerges (Laketa 2018; Saldanha 2007).

For Pyrry (2015), these theoretical insights are crucial in maintaining focus on the “micro atmospheres” that constitute the mall for a group of teenage girls in San Francisco, California. The materiality of the mall as a space of encounter for these girls is what strikes Pyrry (2016) as most important in understanding what this space means and does for them. The girls engage with the space in a way that signals a kind of “wonder” and “enchantment” (cf. Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013), rather than capture and control. The mall becomes a space of transgression, where these teenagers appear to “rebel” against the rules of the adult world. Pyyry (2016) acknowledges the temptation of explaining the mall as a perpetual trap of commercialized capture. The ethics of a new materialist approach, in fact, point to other possibilities that already exist there, such as “fun”, “joy” and “release”:

“Whilst hanging out, girls temporarily rework the atmosphere at the shopping mall in lived experience that exceeds the relations of consumption. This reworking is spatial-embodied and can happen without verbal reflection: bursts of joy can produce openness to different ways of being and result in new subject positions” (p. 12).

“Following Rose (2012: 758), hanging out can be understood as an event of space, a spacing by which ‘a world is built and named as one's own’. Hanging out breaks the rhythm of consumption. It is a different way of being-in-the-world, a different ‘way of operating’ (de Certeau, 1984: 100). By interfering with the rhythm of the consumption community, the girls are making the space more ‘public’” (p. 14).

Similarly, Roberts (2012) visits an IKEA store in England with a new materialist methodology that reveals how the retail space exceeds itself at every turn, it seems, as the now “more-than-human” components overwhelm any hypothetical subject that could apprehend them. Seemingly in line with Woodward et al’s (2012) experiment in “suspending the subject”, Roberts (2012) goes the furthest in questioning the status of “consumer subjectivity” in theory and methodology. There are also recent studies that seek to incorporate affective enchantment into critical theories of capitalist “spectacle” (Lee 2015; Mendes de Almeida 2008), thereby adding additional nuance to the politicization of affective atmospheres (also see Thibaud 2015).

While these approaches present new conceptual approaches to the shopping mall, they risk relegating the status of subjectivity to obscurity, in favor of a new trend of attending to non-human objects and their relations (Krarup and Blok 2011). Degen et al. (2010) and Rose et al. (2010) engage Bruno Latour’s assemblage theory directly in their research on the everyday life of shopping centers in England. For them, subjectivity and space are co-emergent in the assemblages of space and practice that they observed through ethnographic techniques. While Roberts (2012) and others put forward an ethical argument around attending to forces beyond the subject, Degen et al. (2010) and Rose et al. (2010) make a different ethical argument in favor of continued development of how subjectivity emerges through and along-with affective assemblages. These researchers have led the field in developing innovative methodological approaches to the embodied dimensions of shopping malls. Their work points us to the intersection of affect with embodied subjectivity and the psycho-dynamics of emotion as a constitutive aspect of everyday space and place. As such, they mark an important segue between recent theories of more-than-human spaces and how these are complicated by feminist theories of embodiment and geopolitics in the built environment of consumption, another critical approach that has reimagined shopping malls in recent years and to which we now consider in more detail.

*B 3 Feminist affective geographies and geopolitics*

In their exploration of “building events” and “big things”, Rose et al. (2010), largely disagree with the affect theorists that work with the stated intention of avoiding entanglement with subjectivity entirely. While setting out to get closer to building events through the lens of Latour’s ANT and affect theory, Rose et al. (2010) craft an innovative ethnographic approach to two shopping centers in England that is capable of addressing these questions. While Rose et al. (2010) construct innovative mobile and visual methods to get closer to the actual unfolding of life at the shopping centers, the empirical findings push them back towards the enduring importance of subjectivity in shaping the qualities of bodies and space in motion. That is, while their “walk-along” method positions the researcher in direct contact with the raw unfolding of space, Rose et al. (2010) cannot help but to acknowledge the constitutive role of memory, practice and various modes of emotional engagement in the way respondents appear as intimately connected to the retail space. For instance, the imperatives of “looking after children” (Rose et al. 2010, 340) may override any kind of affective design embedded in the environment. In addressing Thrift’s “engineering of affect” thesis directly, Rose et al. (2010) suggest that there is much more going on in everyday life at the shopping centers that has the capacity of mitigating and/or mediating the affective imperatives of retail capital. They conclude by addressing the design of the centers directly:

“Its boundaries are breached, by phone calls and memories of other places; its affect is diminished and judged by thinking and emotive humans who are constituted with and through many things other than (this particular) affect. And if, in focusing here on just three kinds of feelings, we are also guilty of underestimating the human in human– material co-constitutions, we conclude by insisting that a more nuanced account remains a task for all geographers of big things” (p. 347).

As such, they present an alternative to an *only* affective and/or assemblage-oriented account of contemporary retail spaces. This turn toward emotion and affect is consonant with a broader feminist approach to geopolitics that we think is poised to make an impact on the way we conceptualize contemporary geographies of shopping malls. Feminist geopolitics, in short, also take seriously the affective and emotive dimensions of everyday life and connect them to broader distributions of bodies, territories, nations and modes of social reproduction and identity (Dixon 2016; Laketa 2016). There are now several outstanding contributions that emphasize these sensibilities in understanding the intimate spaces in and around shopping malls, from the politics of the veil and secularism in Istanbul (Gökarıksel 2012) to the everyday spaces of flirtation, love and romance in Egypt (Abaza 2001).

These and other works that emphasize the affective and emotional dimensions of shopping malls today also present important opportunities to continue thinking about the embodied dynamics of exclusion, difference and inequality in the urban landscape of consumption. Gökarıksel (2012) examines the Akmerkez mall in Istanbul to consider the entanglements between the secular, the religious and the everyday through practices of veiling. Through the analytical lens of feminist geopolitics, she deconstructs the headscarf as simply an ideological object. Rather, she highlights the intimate politics of the mall by investigating the materiality of bodies and spaces in the construction of difference and belonging through seemingly mundane practices of women-wearing headscarves. The focus on the complexities of exclusion and inclusion is also the subject of Staeheli and Mitchell’s (2006) work on the emotional discourse of “community” that the mall uses to promote itself. They interrogate how the “comforting and affirming aura of community” (982) is produced on the ground through spatial disconnection, thereby making the mall protected by a socio-affective “moat” (988). The mall as “moat”, in short, makes it possible to avoid the confrontations of public life that are supposed to suffuse democratic society. The richness of the mall’s affects, it seems, can be contingent on positionality within these broader political landscapes. Thus, while Allen’s (2006) “invitation” to the mall is appropriate for some cases, it is highly conditional and even inappropriate in others.

In future work, there is scope to extend the emphasis on the affects and emotions of embodied difference in the mall. We suggest that the literature reviewed here begins to provide an analytical approach to underpin this extension. In this and the previous section, we have argued for the continued significance of mall spaces in constituting and reenacting different political subjectivities. To fully develop our argument on what is promising and productive about the new literature on shopping malls, the following section offers insights from our empirical work. We use this example in order to synthesize some of our points developed at the intersection of consumer landscapes, politics of difference and geographies of emotion and affect. The following section illustrates the advantages of using these theoretical resources that revisit the political dimensions of the mall through the lens of affect and emotion, in particular for post-conflict urban geographies of consumption and retail. We offer brief glimpses into mall spaces of the post-conflict city of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina that exemplify the complex mall dynamics in societies undergoing significant political transformations.

**A IV Affect, emotion and geopolitics in the mall: theorizing from a post-conflict city**

*“It is as if Allahu Ekber is written on your forehead.”*

Lucy, 18, on Mepas Mall in Mostar.

To fully grasp the question of *what the mall does* in an urban environment (cf. Miller 2013), we argue for the importance of considering the intersection of three analytical elements that work simultaneously and in relation to one another: the built environments of retail capital; the spatial politics of difference; and the role of emotion and affect. This section gives empirical weight to our overall theoretical argument as it employs the proposed analytical framework in a specific case. The analysis draws from a larger ethnographic-style project on the embodied geopolitics of Mostar, conducted in the period between 2011 and 2014 by Author (for further information, see Author 2016, 2018). Below, we begin with the first element of the proposed framework – the built environment – through a condensed analysis of the design of the building. We also consider how the mall fits within broader geographies of difference that shape the city, and finally we enter the mall itself to glimpse the ways that emotion and affect flow through this complex urban architecture, especially for young Mostarians. In this way, we put our analytical framework into action to illustrate the multiplicity of meaning and materiality that is often at play in these spaces.

At 100 000 square meters, the Mepas Mall (opened in 2012) in central Mostar claims to be the largest shopping center in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is advertised as an exclusive and distinguishably modern development in this historic, post-socialist and post-conflict city. The question we pose here is: what does the Mepas Mall perform in the context of the war-torn and economically impoverished Mostar?

Figure 1: Mepas Mall in Mostar (photo taken by author)

We begin with its architectural design. As an 8-story tall building, Mepas Mall is a striking and highly visible element of the Mostar’s built environment (see Figure 1).

[Figure here].The glass design of the building is in stark contrast to the surrounding environment, yet the archetypal architecture and design of the mall mark it as an indistinguishable replica of the markedly “Western” consumer ideal (see Figure 1). The building mirrors this ideal in ways that appear de-historicized and out of place in the local context (Sančanin, 2012). However, it is precisely though this dis-attachment from the historic and cultural milieu that the building becomes a grotesque materialization of the fantasies and desires for the imaginary consumer ideal. Seen in this way, and concordant with Goss’s (1993) meta-theorizing about the mall, Mepas Mall in Mostar serves as a symbol of capitalist modernity that assuages the traumas of post-socialist transition.

The spatial politics of difference of this mall, is played out via its location. Located just west of the main Boulevard, the building is complexly interwoven into geographies of ethnic polarization that have plagued the city for over twenty years. The main Boulevard is one of the major transit routes in the city, but more importantly the street served as a frontline in the fighting between Croatian and Bosniak armed forces for the duration of the war. The road continues to feature prominently as an invisible spatial border between two ethnically designated territories, or “sides” of the city – Croatian/Catholic and Bosniak/Muslim (Laketa 2018). Moreover, the site of the Mepas Mall builds on the urban memory of another shopping center called “*Hit*” that once stood just five hundred meters to the south. *Hit* was Mostarians beloved shopping destination in socialist times and the open area outside *Hit* was one of the most popular meeting places as a space of conviviality in the city. *Hit* was destroyed during the war, and as spaces around the building and along the Boulevard became a “no-man’s land”, the cultural memories of conviviality continue to haunt that place (ABART, 2012; Kuftinec, 1998).

However, to understand how the mall is positioned with respect to the geopolitics as an “ethno-territorial order of space” (Toal & Dahlman, 2011), one needs go further than the symbolic and discursive register of “the mall as text” to attend to its situated perceptions and affective atmospheres (Anderson 2018). Feminist approaches to geopolitics direct attention to the lived everyday materialities that constitute geopolitical contestations (Dixon 2016). The following vignette draws out the role of emotions and affect involved in constructing difference and reveals how the Mall hails different notions of citizenship and belonging in this starkly polarized city.

*Jasa and Lucy[[4]](#endnote-4) are friends and class mates in their senior-year of high school, yet they have a rather different approach to the new mall. Jasa says she hardly ever went there, while Lucy shops there only occasionally since she finds that there aren't any good shops on the “east side” of the city where they both live. Lucy seems to suggest that if there were a comparable shopping destination on “her” side, she would prefer going there instead. When I further ask Jasa to explain why she went to Mepas only on a handful of occasions, both young women turned to struggling to explain the intensities of corporeal sensations of the mall space[[5]](#endnote-5):*

*Jasa: “A lot of our people go there… And myself, when I go there… even though there is no division line ['linija razgraničenja'] or something… when you go there, you have a feeling that there are all these people around you of different faith, of a different nationality ['nacija']. You have a feeling as if everybody is watching you”.*

*Lucy (nodding her head): “As if it is written on your forehead who you are, it is as if Allahu Ekber ['God is great'] is written on your forehead. And everybody knows it... and you cannot go anywhere.”*

*Jasa (laughs in agreement): “That is exactly it!”*

The push and pull of the mall becomes evident through the intimate spatial experience Jasa and Lucy describe. For both young women, Mepas Mall is a place that belongs to the “other side”, an “ethnicized” territory where they don’t feel welcomed, even though “a lot of *our* people go there”, as Jasa states. The complex negotiation between distance and connection to the mall is performed here rhetorically using us and them pronouns. The emotional geography of the mall thus overlaps with the territorialized mappings of the city in the binary form of “our” and “their” side (Laketa 2018). These practices of emotional distancing are complicated by the young women’s account of the mall as a place without physical division lines giving a sense that one ought to fit in. The failure to experience a sense of belonging there despite the supposedly more inclusive perception of the mall is a contradictory position that gives rise to their struggle to “objectively” explain their unease.

This emotional geography is also affective in two ways. First, it re-orients perception towards the body, as both Lucy and Jasa attend to their sensations and their corporeality in that space. Both young women feel visually exposed as intruders in that space, as well as subjected to other’s gaze (for similar conclusion see Gökarıksel 2012). Even though young Mostarians from the east and west side are mostly not visibly different, the affective encounter with the mall space foregrounds the spatial regime of difference as an intensely corporeal experience that surpasses but also re-instates the visual regime “as if it is written on your forehead”. This spatial-affective regime of difference repositions and reorients their bodies and through such intensities of feeling the mall itself becomes “ethnicised”.

Second, the corporeal experience is that of confinement and the inability to escape the spatial-affective regime. “*You cannot go anywhere”,* as Lucy says. Unlike the “enchanted” possibilities of Pyyry’s (2016) San Francisco mall, the Mepas Mall fails to offer a space for playful reinterpretation of youth identities. Rather, it forcefully re-instates the confines of ethnic identity that mark the geopolitical life in the city. Through the intensities of feeling at the mall both Lucy and Jasa orient their bodies towards or away from the mall as an urban element simultaneously situating themselves in the complex process of subjectivation in the city. The “magic” of the push and pull of the Mepas Mall is materialized as an effect of repetitive urban socio-spatial practices of attending or avoiding that space; a lure that is fragile – it exists so long as it is constantly reenacted. The spatial form of the mall thus works as an ordering force of social relations in the city where consumerist ideals overlap with geopolitical narratives.

The worked example of Mepas Mall illustrates the benefits for considering the proposed framework in a variety of geographies and analytic settings. Primarily, it reaffirms the importance of malls as places where political, social and economic subjectivities are produced and consumed in intricate ways. Moreover, it exemplifies that considering the simultaneous entanglements of the built environment, spatial politics and the complexity of affective life eludes simple interpretative gestures of reading cause and effect in an analytic setting. Rather it allows discerning the way these three analytical elements come together to create particular geographies of difference. The architecture, the location and the situated embodied experiences of the consumerist landscape point to entanglements that reproduce existing ethnic fault lines. However, it is important to note, as stated earlier, that there is nothing unidirectional about the mall as a power structure[[6]](#endnote-6). The affective life in the mall is not easily captured or pre-determined, nevertheless it is crucial for the process of constituting and reenacting different political subjectivities in societies undergoing significant, and often violent, political transformations.

The analytical framework we employ here illustrates the possibilities of drawing on theories of affect and emotional geographies for understanding the built retail environment today. It synthesizes the complex interactions between consumer landscape, politics of difference, and feminist approaches to affective and emotional life. It allows us to discern multiple forces at play in the formation and dissolution of (geo)political communities and identities. Specifically, through deploying the analysis of affect and emotion the framework sheds light on the co-constitution of spaces of consumption and geopolitics in the intimacy of the everyday. Surely, the new urban landscape remains a spatial technology reminiscent of the spectacle or “magic” of the mall. However, the magic here is more than an ideological illusion or fantasy; rather it attests to the affective and emotional resonance of mall space that is material and productive of a multiplicity of social relations. The assumed magic of the Mepas Mall is sharply attenuated and mediated by the persistence of ethnicity in the post-conflict urban landscape. In other words, concordant with the aforementioned literature on the spatial politics of the mall, difference is itself spatialized - both produced by and productive of space[[7]](#endnote-7). In thinking back to the early criticism of Goss’s “magic of the mall”, the framework enables the incorporation of a series of alternative insights into how affective retail space relates to broader geographies of subjectivity, identity and geopolitics in the landscape.

**A V Conclusion**

Surveying the complexity of the mall continues to be of relevance in the field of geography and beyond, yet there has been little attention paid to this urban architecture and its evolution in different parts of the world and in different socio-cultural contexts. In this article, we have focused on malls specifically, with hopes of staging a critical reflection on the mall as a meta-object that cuts across key areas of geographical thought, including urban development, globalization, socio-cultural power and the politics of embodiment.

Taking Goss’s (1993) seminal work on the “magic of the mall” as a starting point, we traced how recent works attuned to emotional and affective dimensions have updated and reinvigorated our conceptualization of this “magic”. While in Goss (1993) the magic is positioned as an ideological illusion supporting the “false consciousness” as a symptom of capitalist alienation, the recent works reviewed here approach the magic as a rather productive and materialist interplay of forces in the mall. Those forces are variously theorized in terms of emotions, affect, ambiances, atmospheres and enchantments, attesting to the magic of the mall that is not merely a mental fantasy, or an ideological veil that covers the “truth” of the capitalist modernity. Rather, the magic of the mall is productive of social and political relationships, it marks our emotional investment in the built environment as an excess to the internal push-and-pull dynamics of retail design. Moreover, the magic is a lived corporeal experience, materialized immanently in the encounter between bodies and spaces in ways that go beyond the instrumental logic that is so central in Goss (1993; although see Goss 1999 for a conceptual shift as he reflects on the “Mall of America” in Minnesota).

The attention to the lived materialities of the mall brings forth another important element of the recent geographic writing on the mall: the politics of difference. Situated mostly within Lefebvre’s “right to the city”, scholars have investigated the multiple ways mall spaces are enacted in everyday urban geographies. Malls become spaces where different communities are created and political subjectivities emerge in ways that cross-cuts questions of difference in the city, such as racial, gendered, ethnic and class difference. This literature highlights the co-constituted nature of mall spaces as both a product of difference and actively producing difference. Rather that analyzing “the mall” as a singular and fixed entity, these approaches consider how differences produce mall spaces and generate manifold geographies of consumption. Moreover, the spatial enactments of political communities and notions of citizenship are intimate and embodied practices that build upon histories of colonial and capitalist force relations embedded in that space. The tensions between the notion of public and private in the spaces of the mall and the intimate struggles therein seem to epitomize the contradictions inherent in liberal democracies that seem to vacillate between coercion and openness (Allen 2006; Staeheli and Mitchell 2006; cf. Wolin 2009. However, the mall, as a spatio-affective technology, is not simply a place where fixed notions of belonging and difference are simply imprinted onto bodies and spaces, but is rather a place of complex negotiation and interplay of multiple forces.

Our final section brought two bodies of literature together on (i) notions of affect as an excess of the symbolic register of the mall and (ii) subjectivities that capture and re-territorialize affective intensities. Our worked example of the Mepas Mall illustrates an approach that addresses the mall as a geopolitical entity in order to synthesize and ground these emerging debates. Our empirical vignette attests to the importance of malls as spaces of intimate struggles situated within the broader landscapes of capitalist and post-conflict societies. In order to understand the grasp of state-power in such a complex setting, attention to the affective and emotional dimensions of the mall allows us to go beyond its predetermined and fixed structuring effects. Attention to the lived materilities of the mall suspends an overarching interpretative ideological framework in ways that allows considering the mall as a site of production that feeds into, modifies and contradicts the preconceived ethno-territorial spatialities and politico-capitalist subjectivities in the post-conflict city. The embodied spatial experience of the mall becomes a field of potentiality that reveals the workings of geopolitics in ways that speak beyond our worked example of the Mepas Mall. These situated perceptions work in powerful ways to orient bodies in spaces, making it a crucial entry point into the creation of different political communities. It is through attention to the intimacies that emerge in those spaces that we are able to understand the sites where geopolitics are made meaningful, places where geopolitical struggles gain traction and where they are transformed.

To conclude, the recent approaches to the mall reviewed here become productive entry points for considering different forms of power that transect these spaces. As both mundane and spectacular elements of the urban aesthetic, they are places that pulsate with life and its excesses, where subtle affective intensities are constitutive of and constituted by the multiple encounters in that space. We hope that this attention to the complexity of affective and emotional life in the mall sparks further research that, rather that offering a final resolution, aims to acknowledge and attend to the multiple notions of community, belonging and geopolitics that reverberate through them.

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1. This article, then, is somewhat restricted to the literature published in English and Spanish. Notwithstanding these limitations, we are able to cover a fairly large number of publications in international journals. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Work on surveillance in the shopping mall space has also an important part of this discussion and has continued to inform contemporary research (Doan 2010; Manzo 2005; O'Dougherty 2006; Voyce 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Robbins and Marks (2010) also outline the geographies of assemblage that draw on other related theoretical approaches that seek to de-center the focus on subjectivity and identity as *the* primary drivers of space and geography. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Names are pseudonyms chosen by participants themselves. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The conversations were held in local language and all translations are done by Author. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Indeed, Brand and Fregonese’s (2013) research on political and urban polarization in Beirut, Lebanon describes how the spatial and design form of the newly opened Beirut Mall worked to carefully overcome the political and religious dividing lines and engineer a space of neutrality (for similar conclusion on the mall as a space of ethno-national encounter in West Jerusalem see Shtern 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the ways differences produce particular kinds of mall geographies. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)