

## Modern Day Malls: Fantastic Third Places For Consumers

In mankind's history of thousands of years, only a hundred or so years ago, if someone said "I am going shopping," it would have meant only one thing: That person was going to the market to buy something. (By some accounts, John Wanamaker's Philadelphia store, opened in 1877, is considered to be the origin of the modern day department store.) In some developing countries, this has been the case as recently as 20 or so years ago. But in a substantial part of the world and for a majority of consumers today, this phrase has now come to mean a multi-faceted event. Spending money and buying is a part of it, sometimes, not always. But the event full-blooms as a diversion: it is to meet friends, to hang out with them; to do some people-watching. It is also to discover new objects of desire—dresses, stilettos, colognes, books, music CDs, gadgets, body-pampering potions, and more. And it is, in general, just to soak up the atmosphere—listen to the sounds, take in the aromas, the colors, textures, and shapes of the merchandise and of the surrounding spaces we call *malls*.

For a modern day consumer, it may be difficult to imagine what life would be without the modern day shopping spaces. Ostensibly, the *raison d'être* of department stores, and now malls, is to enable one-stop shopping; in practice, however, their real worth springs from their ability to serve a larger societal purpose: because of their large physical space, on one hand, they allow for a degree of anonymity infeasible in a mom-and-pop store. On the other hand, they serve as "public spaces"—for people to meet, chat, mingle, watch, walk, sit, hang out, and yes, not infrequently, buy something. In fact, many consumers today "live" so much of their lives just hanging out at these malls, stores, and cafes that some have called these public spaces "third places" (after homes and offices).

Now there is no turning back. These days and going forward, consumers will do much of their nonessential buying only in these "fantasy marketspaces." And marketers—retail stores—had better offer them. The experience they offer customers in these market-spaces will help them sell their wares. But even more important, they will serve a larger societal purpose at the same time, namely, making enjoyable spaces available to the public. The modern mall, then, performs a great public service—bringing citizens the small delights of diversions in the world of goods, without necessarily having to buy them.