The cultural role of the malls

Abstract

The author attempts to examine the cultural and charitable events which increasingly take place in malls instead of old towns or squares and considerably widen the function of such places. In her opinion, we can observe a transfer of social life from customary space to shopping centers. Providing an examples from Toruń the author presents the main cultural functions of malls as a practice of satisfying all potential clients’ needs under one roof.

Keywords: malls, shopping, mass culture, consumerism, amusement parks, entertainment, free time, recreation, leisure

Shopping centres have an increasingly important position in our society nowadays. Our visits in malls do not limit to only buying things any more. Now we can leave our coats in the cloakroom and let the children play in the watched playground while we spent all day walking through elegant alleys equipped with benches, flowers and even palms. Today, most shopping malls have many restaurants, bars, cafes or even hairdressers, beauty salons, gyms, cinemas and entertainment parks which enables us to fulfil a lot of different needs in the area of a single building.

The cultural and charitable events increasingly take place in malls instead of old towns or town/city squares. It can be said that the social life is gradually transferring from the areas of old towns and main streets to shopping centres which are trying to fulfil all (material and cultural) needs under one roof.

In my work I would like to present the main (cultural?) functions of malls in the present day, except for/excluding selling. I am going to analyse four shopping centres located in Toruń as an example: Toruń Plaza, Atrium Copernicus, CH Kometa and Arkady Kupieckie.
The history of shopping malls and consumer society

The trade has accompanied humanity from the beginning of time. There were open markets in places where people came to exchange goods, previously without, than using money. Additionally, while trading people were also chatting, eating and praying. Many times they had to travel many kilometers to get to the market in order to obtain an opportunity to see new places and meet new people. The technical knowledge and culture also spread during the exchange of goods. According to Richard A. Feinberg and Jennifer Meoli, the history of shopping centers begins in the 1920s in the United States, in 1907 in Baltimore and in the 1920s in California. In Baltimore a group of small sellers decided to join their forces and occupy a car park to create one huge open market. In California the merchants who traded with Europe and other states were becoming more and more powerful and gradually eliminated smaller sellers and opened their huge shops offering a whole variety of products from different countries all over the world. In 1922 in Kansas City a group of shops accessed only by car were build. In 1931 in Dallas the first group of shops with its own car park were opened. The stores were facing away from the access road. In the year 1956 in the suburban area of Minneapolis the first enclosed shopping center was developed. We may say that it was the first mall corresponding to our contemporary concept. It was designed to make people happy, to entertain them by shopping like the malls do nowadays. It was not only a place for shopping, but a lot more. In the shop alleys and among the beautiful shop windows and cafes visitors could run away from bad weather and problems of everyday life. The inside was so colorful and magical for the people living in the 50’ in the same way as it is now (Feinberg, Meoli 1991: 426−427).

The 50s and 60s are considered to be the beginning of the “consumer society”, which considers constant buying and collecting goods as the new, most important goal and value. Its source is seen in the increase in the entertainment industry as a reaction to the loss of World War II and the overall rapid growth of the industry during this period. Not without significance is the emergence of mass society and mass culture, which is the starting point for creating the consumer society (Storey 2003: 107−108).

According to Dwight Macdonald, the beginning of mass culture and society has its place in the nineteenth century and the associated industrial revolution. Machines and the organized mass production of goods in factories significantly reduced prices, so that more and more people could afford to buy an increasing amount of things that were of lower quality but were available for almost everyone. Additionally, there has been a significant migration of people from rural to urban areas, where they formed new, eclectic communities. The people, single families separated from their villages and traditions, started to need something to bond, a common homogeneous (mixed and simplified) culture to create a new society. At this point mass culture was born as a simple way to satisfy many different tastes and fill free time, which has also been “invented” during this period. Macdonald points out that people living in the country did not know the concept