WHERE TO SHOP? THE GEOGRAPHY OF CONSUMPTION IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY ATLANTIC WORLD

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GHI FELLOW IN THE HISTORY OF CONSUMPTION

In 1966, the German travel agency Hapag Lloyd offered a guided tour of American cities geared toward German city-planners and retailing experts. An ad for the trip in the trade publication Der Aufbau explained:

It is an obvious development that our expanding cities are growing increasingly and visibly sick in their centers. The reasons for this are manifold. Because of too much traffic, noise, and bad air, the consumer no longer has any incentive to make the cumbersome trip into the city. Thus, the consumer is about to leave downtown behind. The United States took too long to recognize such trends which devastated their city centers, and they are now forced to pursue radical solutions. We would do well to learn from the American experiences.1

This short advertisement illuminates a central aspect of the development of twentieth-century mass consumer societies: their impact on changing metropolitan landscapes, the urban environment, and public spaces. My research deals with the changing spatial configuration of shopping and retailing in Germany and the United States from a comparative and transnational perspective by paying attention to both a vibrant transatlantic debate about the geography of consumption and the manifold local and national responses to it over the course of the past century. On a first level, this entails studying the visions and designs of retail spaces by urban planners, retail managers, and city officials. Consumer spaces, however, were not simply planned, but emerged from a complex process of negotiation that involved consumers as well. Shopping streets and similar places of consumption need to be understood as socially constructed spaces of everyday social and community interaction. My research will therefore also consider the appropriation of shopping spaces by consumers and the spatial practices, such as routine acts of everyday shopping, that (re)constructed and transformed retail space. As the geography of consumption changed, what significance did this have for the development of

retailing, the social meaning of consumption, and metropolitan life more broadly?

My project aims to contribute to what might be called a “spatial turn” in the recent historiography of consumption. Both representations of space, the visions of retail and urban planners, and the everyday spatial practices that construct consumer spaces and their social meaning have increasingly been studied – on the level of the store, the shopping street, and in the context of the city as a whole. The spatial layout and design of stores have long interested historians of consumption, who have examined the traditional service counter as a barrier between the customer and the goods as well as the enticement and desire evoked by sumptuous department store interiors or the efficiency and convenience of modern supermarket aisles. More recently, the planning of shopping streets and of larger configurations of stores has received increased attention especially in the American case. As public markets gave way to street fronts of discrete stores and later shopping centers and strip malls over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the relationship between retailers and consumers, as well as the public nature of consumption spaces, were continuously renegotiated.

Some historians have expressed concern that the increasing individualization of shopping, as well as the commercialization of urban space especially in the later part of the last century, have begun to undermine traditionally important public and community functions of consumption spaces. To address such concerns, we not only need more research on the community function that spaces such as stores and shopping streets actually played in everyday life (without taking too nostalgic a view of Main Street or a bygone age of the corner grocer), but we also need to ask about historical alternatives to the American spatial pattern of consumption, in particular, to the shopping centers and big-box stores at the center of present-day Jeremiads. Therefore, particular attention should be paid to the transnational dimension of retail development, which despite numerous cross-border transfers and exchanges is not simply a story of increasing homogenization and uniformity.

In this short essay drawn from my larger research project, I will focus on developments in West Germany and the United States from the 1950s to the early 1970s that the advertisement cited above refers to. Contrary to notions of convergence and “Americanization” in the realm of consumption, these two countries took
distinctly different paths in the postwar era when it came to integrating mass consumption within the spatial layout of their cities. After World War II, the United States became a predominantly suburban consumer society that was stereotypically centered on the two-car family, sprawling developments of ranch houses, and the suburban shopping centers and strip malls that supplied the multitude of goods with which to fill these houses. West Germany, by contrast, remained a much more urban consumer society. More densely settled, it was a nation of consumers who continued to live predominantly in apartments and who shopped by walking to neighborhood stores or by taking public transportation to downtown shops. To be sure, the reality of postwar shopping was more complex and varied on both sides of the Atlantic than this ideal-typical contrast between a suburban and an urban consumer society suggests. Still, despite important differences among regions and social and ethnic groups, a comparative look at aggregate national data on housing and retail development justifies the simplification for the present purposes. A number of factors, including public policy approaches (such as zoning regulation or tax incentives), differences in the structure of the retail industry as well as divergent consumer attitudes, contributed to this transatlantic divide in postwar consumption spaces. Differences in urban planning provide yet another important factor, and this essay will focus specifically on the planning of inner-city pedestrian streets or Fußgängerzonen. They emerged between 1950 and 1970 as a conscious West German effort to avoid some of the negative aspects of suburban mass consumption noted, for example, by Hapag Lloyd’s American tour for planners.

The transatlantic comparison is particularly useful because it reveals a wide array of similar problems and debates with at least partially different results. The rise of pedestrian malls in postwar West Germany can thus serve as an exemplary case to raise broader questions about the spatial development of consumer societies and its economic and social ramifications. What did the urban/suburban contrast mean economically for the development of retailing structures and local business communities on either side of the Atlantic? What consequences did it have for metropolitan communities, and how did changes in commercial space affect the everyday experience of shared public space? Did European countries like West Germany provide a historical alternative to American-style geographies of mass consumption?

7 On the notion of the “Americanization” of European consumer culture, see, above all, Victoria de Grazia, Irresistible Empire (Cambridge, 2005).
I. Alternatives to Suburban Retailing: The Example of Pedestrian Malls

In many ways, the inner-city pedestrian mall was a product of postwar mass consumption. In West Germany, the first pedestrian malls emerged during the 1950s in the context of postwar reconstruction. In 1953, the city of Kassel inaugurated the best-known early pedestrian street, the Treppenstrasse. Already five years earlier Kassel had devised a plan for its inner city, which had been devastated during the war. To accommodate anticipated modern traffic demands (usually done at the time with an eye to American developments), a new circular road pattern was set up to enclose the inner city. The Treppenstrasse was to provide pedestrian access from the train station to the main business street. The core of the city, planners envisioned, was to be the “realm of the pedestrian.” The city council unanimously voted to create a fully pedestrianized shopping street, because “the increase in automobile traffic makes it necessary to reserve the urban core solely for the pedestrian.” This experiment – and its further expansion a few years later – received nationwide attention in the press. Kassel’s city center was celebrated in the 1950s German press as an “oasis for pedestrians.”

The introduction of pedestrian areas during the 1950s, however, was not simply an attempt to “modernize” German cities and make them suited to the demands of the automobile. Planners and commentators in the media also stressed the “calming” effects of traffic-free zones. Such language betrayed underlying concerns about the modern and commercial “mass city” of the twentieth century, which were especially prevalent among conservative and educated elites. This can be seen in attempts to discursively connect the newly created pedestrian streets to Western (or, as they were called, abendländische [occidental] traditions. Images of Venice, the public places of early modern cities, or even the Greek agora were invoked repeatedly. From its inception, the development of pedestrian shopping streets at the core of West German postwar cities was thus also an attempt to embed modern mass consumption within a more traditional urban framework.

It was American city planners, however, who discovered the potential of pedestrian malls to revive struggling central business districts early on. During the 1950s, many American cities were already experiencing the negative side effects of an increasingly suburban consumer culture. As suburbs began to sprawl, retailers in central
business districts had to compete with outlying shopping centers that were mushrooming across the country. By the end of the decade, America’s downtowns and Main Streets saw a significant decline in retail traffic in central locations that had once been prime real estate and the heart of community life. American city planners soon found themselves looking at their European colleagues with envy. Traveling to Europe during the late 1950s, they not only marveled at modern public housing projects, but also at inner-city shopping districts bustling with life. Experiments with traffic-free areas in the centers of German and other European cities caught the eye of American observers: Pedestrian malls, they concluded, might hold the key to halting the decline of downtown centers.

One of the key figures in promoting pedestrian malls in the United States was architect Victor Gruen, an émigré from Vienna, who, ironically, had made a name for himself as a leading designer of suburban malls during the 1940s and early 1950s. Inner cities, Gruen argued, had to learn from the new suburban competition he had helped to shape. Their shopping districts had to be designed in such a fashion that consumers would like to stay and linger. In a 1957 talk before the American Planning and Civic Association, Gruen outlined his vision for the Main Street of the future: “The surface of the city center will belong exclusively to the pedestrian.... Thus a new measure of compactness and cohesion for the urban center can be reached, similar in character to the one found in older European cities.” Gruen wanted to design urban commercial spaces that would simultaneously provide a

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center to the urban community and ensure the economic survival of traditional downtown retailers.

Kalamazoo, Michigan, was one of the first American cities to implement such plans. Hit by rapidly declining retail sales due to suburban competition in 1956 and 1957, the business community of Kalamazoo commissioned Gruen’s firm to design a plan for converting its main business street into a pedestrian walking mall. The mall, built in 1959, was a tremendous success for the city and its retailers and mustered national attention. Kalamazoo – now “Mall City USA” – became a model for similar projects in Fresno and other cities across the United States. 18 However, pedestrian malls would not become the widespread national phenomenon during the 1960s that its proponents had hoped for. Indeed, for a variety of reasons, many American cities quickly ended experiments with traffic-free zones. Frequently, the business community mounted opposition fearing an even greater decline in sales should their customers be prevented from driving directly to the store. As surveys among consumers in American pedestrian malls showed, this concern was not unfounded. The vast majority of shoppers reached downtown in their own cars. Especially middle-class consumers (by now already underrepresented in the city) were unwilling to switch to public transportation – and mass transit itself was rapidly declining in postwar American cities. Respondents to the survey instead repeatedly complained about limited parking space and, furthermore, voiced concerns about their safety, crime, and “the element of people” in downtown areas. This also hints at the importance of “race” in postwar American urban development. 19 Above all, once race riots had taken place in the downtown and neighborhood shopping streets of numerous cities during the 1960s, few white middle-class consumers were inclined to envision American urban centers as any sort of “oasis.”20

As American pedestrian malls struggled, Victor Gruen and others took it upon themselves to warn European cities against repeating American mistakes. At a 1968 congress on commerce and urban planning in Brussels, Gruen emphasized the negative aspects of suburban shopping centers and touted his plans for pedestrian business districts as an alternative. 21 German observers were already attuned to the concerns Gruen presented; the “death of the American city” had become a common place in the German debate on urban planning. 22 German city planners as well as retailing experts traveled to the United States by the scores – the tour I

20 On the links between the 1960s race riots and downtown shopping, see Isenberg, Downtown America, Ch. 6, and Frederick Sturdivant, The Ghetto Marketplace (New York, 1969).
referred to at the outset of this essay being only one of many examples. Other study tours were organized by federal and local administrations as well as retailing and planning experts. By the mid-1960s, America had become the example of urban planning gone wrong.

Before the foil of the American problems, the survival of inner-city retailing emerged as a central concern in West Germany as well and became a driving force in the development of further Fußgängerzonen. As Germany’s first suburban shopping centers appeared “on the green meadow” (auf der grünen Wiese) outside of towns, many German towns stepped up their efforts to develop pedestrian areas.

The city of Munich set the most path-breaking example for developing pedestrian areas during the 1960s. Planning with the 1972 Olympic Games in mind, the city aimed to develop an entire network of pedestrian streets in its center. Championed by Mayor Hans-Jochen Vogel, a leading critic of American-style urban development, the Munich plan envisioned a system of pedestrian areas connected to public transportation. Its proponents hoped to recreate the urban center in its “old glory” for citizens and tourists alike. Centered on the Marienplatz, the largest contiguous pedestrian area in Europe was created between 1967 and 1972.

A survey conducted among Munich citizens in 1969 revealed vast differences in the role downtowns played for German and American consumers at the time. Over 80 percent of respondents in Munich indicated that they routinely shopped while visiting the city center. They not only visited department stores and specialty shops, but in surprising numbers still bought goods for everyday use as well. Many

23 See, for example, Erwin Thomas, Einzelhandel im Städtebau (Frankfurt a.M., 1964), a report of a trip organized by the Rationalisierungskuratorium der deutschen Wirtschaft in cooperation with the Bundeswirtschaftsministerium and the Hauptgemeinschaft des deutschen Einzelhandels.

24 First suburban shopping centers such as the Main-Taunus Center near Frankfurt were opened in the mid-1960s and garnered »

Fulton Street in Fresno after the creation of the pedestrian area, 1964. Photo by Tidyman Studios. Source: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.
complained about crowded sidewalks or too few benches and other such amenities on downtown streets. A lack of parking space, on the other hand, was not considered as high a priority as with consumers on the other side of the Atlantic. Indeed, the majority of respondents used public transportation to reach downtown – at least 20 percent even came occasionally on foot. Under such circumstances, the development of pedestrian zones, which met with widespread public enthusiasm, held tremendous potential in keeping urban consumers within city centers.

By 1970, 96 Fußgängerzonen existed in Western Germany; by 1973, their number had more than doubled to 214. They presented an urban alternative to the suburban shopping malls whose number had skyrocketed across the United States during the same time period. Taken together, shopping centers accounted for only 4 percent of total retail sales in Germany as compared to over 40 percent in the United States at the time. At least in part, the relative success of traditional urban stores in West Germany was due to conscious urban planning that brought together city officials and retailers. But the way consumers used existing shopping spaces as well as their shopping habits and attitudes towards urban centers also figure into the equation. Ultimately, a broader metropolitan context of regulation and development further helped pedestrian malls to flourish in postwar West Germany. By contrast, American middle-class consumers’ move to the suburbs was encouraged by a lack of zoning regulations and policies that subsidized mortgages and road-building, but allowed for only minimal public expenditures on urban apartment housing, mass transit, or other public services. Although West Germany, too, saw an increase in single-family homes and automobiles during the “miracle” years, substantial spending on social housing programs and public support for trolleys and other forms of public goods kept average German consumers more closely connected to the traditional downtown retailing core and to urban neighborhood shopping.

II. The Implications of Consumer Geography

The urban/suburban divide in retailing that is exemplified by the pedestrian malls had far-reaching ramifications. My research aims to raise questions about both the economic and social implications of transformations in the spatial configuration of shopping and consumption. Differences in the geography of consumption had signifi-
cant economic implications for the structure and development of the retail industry as a whole. The suburbanization of American consumer culture contributed to a process of retail concentration, symbolized by large supermarkets and regional shopping centers, that was unmatched in West Germany well into the 1970s and 1980s. Most new suburban developments in the United States severely restricted shops and other commercial outlets, so that, to 1970s suburbanites, the corner grocer was indeed an institution of bygone days. The automobile and weekly rather than daily shopping had helped to speed up the rise of large chain supermarkets. Above all in many smaller and mid-sized cities across the United States, once lively Main Streets began to give way to boarded-up store fronts as downtown real estate values plummeted. Independent specialty retailers and small traditional stores, in particular, struggled in the suburbanized retail landscape of postwar America. In West Germany, by contrast, even large-scale new housing projects on the urban fringes, such as Bremen’s Neue Vahr, often carefully integrated small retailers from butchers to florists within walking distance and usually provided mass transit connections to downtown shopping districts.

Such new neighborhood centers as well as inner-city shopping streets allowed more traditional specialty retailers to survive in West Germany. The quantitative differences between German and American retailing during the postwar decades can easily be illustrated. While the U.S. population in 1965 was roughly three times that of Western Germany, the number of retail businesses was only about twice as high (1,350,000 in the U.S compared to 600,000 in West Germany). Moreover, in West Germany, unlike in the United States, the number of retailers in variety goods and groceries actually increased after the war (from 246,041 in 1939 to 304,683 in 1961). Even though

29 For the numerical decline in different retail trades during the postwar decades, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, The Statistical History of the United States (New York, 1976), 843-45. See also “Status of Small Business in Retail Trade (1948-1958),” Staff Report to House Select Committee on Small Business, 16 December 1960 (CIS-NO: 86-2 HS033), 18-19.

retailing in postwar Germany did shift away from “full-service,” family-operated stores to independent self-service stores that were often organized in voluntary chains, the level of concentration did not compare to the suburban retailing landscape in the United States with its increasing shift to big-box retailers.

The pedestrian zones did their part in keeping German middle-class consumers in the city. Some urban historians have estimated that retail space in German inner cities doubled between 1960 and 1970. In the face of rising sales, Heinz Hermans, then manager of the Cologne chamber of commerce, proclaimed in 1972:

In Cologne one does not talk about pedestrian streets, one has them! ... Amazingly, furniture stores, which today often move out to “the green meadow” in Cologne, decide to settle in the pedestrian streets. ... Since automobile traffic was banned, retail sales there have grown by 30 to 40 percent. This revival of the inner city is not only to the benefit of owners of stores, restaurants and amusement facilities, but also to that of the urbanity and the prestige of the city as a whole.33

While retailing forms changed in postwar Germany as well and many pedestrian malls would eventually become home to the kind of chain retailers found in suburban American shopping malls, differences in the geography of consumption did contribute to a different West German path of retail modernization, which defies narratives of “Americanization.” One focus of my current research project is thus to investigate the interrelationship between changes in the geography of consumption and the development of retail structures across the twentieth-century Atlantic world.

Hermans’s somewhat exuberant observations on the “urbanity” of Cologne, cited above, point to a further implication of the spatial difference between American and West German mass consumer societies – their impact on community life and the urban public sphere. The debate regarding the “malling of America” frequently emphasizes the disappearance of public space. Private shopping malls contributed to a metropolitan environment, in which, as Liz Cohen has suggested, “people were no longer brought together in central market places and parks and public buildings that surrounded them but, rather, were separated by class, gender, and

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33 Attachment to “Fußgänger­bereiche in Köln” (1972), Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln, Acc 1714.
race in differentiated commercial sub-centers.”

Indeed, many suburban shopping centers attracted a fairly homogeneous, white middle-class customer clientele by the 1960s. Did Fußgängerzonen in Germany present an alternative to this trend by keeping consumers within the realm of urban public space?

That was exactly what many of its contemporary proponents hoped. Inner cities, they argued, should once again become a focal point of urban living. The notion that local retailers can and should be central to a vibrant city, small town, or neighborhood community life became commonplace among urban planners and sociologists by the late 1960s and early 1970s, as they abandoned the long-dominant paradigm of functionally separated urban development and began – following Jane Jacobs among others – to look for the social life of small, mixed-used urban spaces. Next to retailing, studies found, the ideal pedestrian mall should also include a residential population, restaurants and cafés, public meeting places, and cultural highlights. Pedestrian malls, many planners in Germany hoped, would ensure that inner cities remained part of the public sphere, a place for social interaction beyond mere commerce.

To be sure, Gruen and others had had the same hopes for early shopping centers. Commercially run suburban malls, however, hardly became another Piazza del Popolo as one Cologne city official described the pedestrian-only Schildergasse in a 1971 radio feature: “Here the stream of people can disperse. On the street, hippies display silver jewelry for sale. Jealously observed by shop owners, but democratically defended by letters to the editor in local dailies.” With similar enthusiasm the city of Munich described its Fußgängerzone in 1972:

The city as a community has regained its center. Everybody looking to see something, in search of excitement, life, and discussion congregates here. You can observe the most beautiful girls, those wearing traditional costumes, backpackers, all sorts of original characters, people who bring their concerns – political or religious – to the public, discussion groups, long-haired youths, and many old people.

While this reads like the urban boosterism one would expect to find in a tourist brochure, it does speak to a prominent strand in postwar West German urban development that tried to contain modern mass
consumption within an integrated metropolitan framework. Both statements interpret commercial pedestrian malls as democratic and diverse places of everyday social interaction. Critical voices, to be sure, were careful to point out the limitations of these public spaces – for example, when peddlers or street musicians interfered with the interests of local business owners. But while class distinctions remained prominent in West Germany, its cities by and large avoided the increasingly segregated and socially fragmented character of postwar American metropolitan development.

In assessing postwar geographies of retailing on both sides of the Atlantic from a historical perspective, however, one should be careful not to romanticize the “lost” traditional retail spaces in downtowns and neighborhoods. Here it will be particularly crucial to widen the timeframe beyond the postwar decades. As research into the cultural history of everyday life (Alltagsgeschichte) suggests, relationships between shop owners and customers were frequently marked by conflict, and stores and shopping streets also served as locations for social and political struggles and for practices of exclusion and persecution – most dramatically perhaps during the Nazi era in Germany or the era of Jim Crow segregation in the American South.

The development of shopping centers as well as pedestrian malls is part of a larger and more ambiguous narrative of twentieth-century retailing that defies simplistic interpretations of “decline” or “modernization.” Another central aspect of my current research, then, is an inquiry into the changing role that consumer spaces have played in everyday community life during the last century in both Germany and the United States.

III. Conclusion

A first point to emphasize in conclusion is that the postwar spread of mass consumption has produced not one “American-style” geography of consumption, but a variety of different spatial patterns. To be sure, one should not exaggerate these differences. Anyone familiar with German pedestrian malls, for example, knows that today they are often just as dominated by chain stores as their suburban counterparts. Nor are they always a haven for free speech and public exchanges. Still, the spatial difference between the American, suburban vision of a modern consumer society and its German, more urban alternative has had significant economic and


42 While I do not fully share his analysis, David Harvey’s critique that suburban malls and inner-city shopping streets in Europe and the United States are merely two expressions of a new form of postmodern leisure environments should be noted at this point. See David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity (Cambridge, 1989), 66-98. A similar critique can be found in Werner Durth, Die Inszenierung der Alltagswelt (Braunschweig, 1977).
social ramifications. Beyond its impact on the development of the retail industry and the urban public sphere sketched above, one could easily list political and especially ecological consequences of spatial consumption models that should at least receive brief acknowledgment. To begin with, the spatial organization of mass consumption has impacted political support for a variety of urban public services such as mass transportation. Only when and where such public goods and services remained a significant part of the everyday experience of middle-class consumers, as they did in West Germany, did consumers as taxpayers willingly support them. America’s suburban landscape of consumption lay not only at the heart of conservative taxpayers revolts; it also contributed significantly to an extraordinarily energy-intensive model of consumer society. The environmental impact of car-dependent suburban consumption and the sprawl it entailed has become increasingly evident since the 1970s. The early movement for inner-city pedestrian malls was, not coincidentally, motivated by environmental considerations as well.

The geography of consumption was a vital aspect of life in the twentieth century that helped shape the world we live in today. The pedestrian malls and shopping centers of the postwar decades are but a small part of a larger transatlantic story of shopping and consumption spaces. My research project thus sets out to explore broad questions of retail development and social change in urban communities through the lens of transatlantic debates over retail space and the cultural history of everyday retail spaces. In doing so, I seek to put the appreciation of local space by historians of everyday life into fruitful dialogue with recent historiography’s growing attention to transnational exchanges. It is important to understand the historical alternatives, the paths taken and not taken, and their consequences for the everyday life of consumers. The pedestrian malls discussed here provide one example of a European counterpoint to what once was the suburban “American Dream” – and is today in danger of becoming an American nightmare among mortgage foreclosures and skyrocketing gas prices. Ultimately, I hope to shed light on a complex process of transfers, convergences, and divergences with regard to both metropolitan development and the shape of mass consumer culture on both sides of the Atlantic.43

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