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# Shopping Centres and Sustainability

## The Localisation of Consumerism in Community Life

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*Abstract: This paper examines the conjunction of commodity consumption with social life in suburban Sydney, Australia through a focus on major shopping centre development. It briefly traces the history of consumer culture, before turning its attention to the emergence of the shopping centre as an historical form. Using case studies, it examines the way that these highly commercialised sites came to form central hubs of community activity in Sydney during the post-war period. By sketching the history of this process it offers some insight into the way that commodity consumption has become so central to our everyday lives, and why changing our consumer lifestyles requires more than just a change of sentiment, and must consider the infrastructure and environment in which we live, work and shop.*

Keywords: Sustainability, Shopping Centre, Retail, Consumerism, Local, History, Community

**T**HIS PAPER BEGINS with the premise, recognised by the United Nations Division for Sustainable Development, that the consumption practices of industrialised countries underlie many of the sustainability issues of the non-industrialised world, including environmental degradation and poverty.<sup>1</sup> It continues by briefly tracing a history of consumer culture, before focusing on a specific site of commodity distribution – the enclosed regional shopping centre. Using case studies, it examines the way that these highly commercialised sites came to form central hubs of community activity in Sydney, Australia during the post-war period. By sketching the history of this process it offers some insight into the way that commodity consumption has become so central to our everyday lives, and why changing our consumer lifestyles requires more than just a change of sentiment, and must consider the infrastructure and environment in which we live, work and shop.

### A Brief Background History of Consumer Culture

The birth date of consumer culture is an area of contestation within historical studies. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is suffice to

recognise that a number of historians situate it within the context of a series of technical, economic and cultural changes that occurred in Western Europe and America through the course of the latter nineteenth-century.<sup>2</sup> Industrialisation allowed mass produced goods to be made and sold more quickly and at a lower cost than their hand-made counterparts. A sceptical public's resistance to the new style of products was worn down by their proliferation and cheaper prices.<sup>3</sup> Department stores grew out of smaller more specialised shops and, together with the great European arcades came to symbolise the material aspirations of a growing and acquisitive middle-class.<sup>4</sup> As the century wore on, an increasing emphasis on display and promotion, most notable in the originating Bon Marche of Paris and American department stores, continued the transformation of shopping culture. A fledgling advertising industry sought to differentiate the homogeneity of mass-produced goods by imbuing them with meaning beyond their mere utility, and fashion emerged to introduce a cultural obsolescence to the production cycle.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Sustainable Development, Agenda 21: Chapter 4; Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, Chapter III, Changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, [http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD\\_POI\\_PD/English/POIChapter3.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD_POI_PD/English/POIChapter3.htm)  
<http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/english/agenda21chapter4.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Kim Humphery, *Shelf Life: Supermarkets and the changing cultures of consumption* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois culture and the department store, 1869-1920* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The global transformation of desire* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 45; and see, Miller, *The Bon Marché*.

<sup>5</sup> Richard H. Robbins, *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism* (Needham Heights MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), pp. 5-14.



## Australian Retail History

The retail model of the department store and arcade travelled across cultural and economic bridges to Australia in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. The department stores sourced their goods from around the empire, while the arcades took on names from British social culture such as The Strand, The Victoria and The Imperial.<sup>6</sup> The indigenous stores followed a similar pattern of growth to their overseas counterparts, expanding out of smaller stores to become great city emporiums in their own right. As in Europe, department stores sought to position themselves as providers of the 'social and economic aspirations' of the growing middle-income groups.<sup>7</sup>

North American commercialism in Australia was heralded by the arrival of the self-service 'chain' variety store – a new mark in retail innovation and the advance of mass-production. Where once a shop's proprietor or his assistant had selected and wrapped goods upon request, now customers made their own selections, before carrying them to a cashier to tally the cost. Savings were made on labour with the reduction of staff; shops became larger and the number of items available for purchase increased. Retailing skills shifted away from product knowledge towards marketing and managerial techniques.<sup>8</sup> By the mid-1930s Australia's two biggest Chain variety store operators, Coles and Woolworth's, were firmly established in the Eastern States, and Chains accounted for 27 percent of business in New South Wales. Clusters of local shops and Chains formed small shopping strips along the highways of major cities to cater for their growing suburban populations, and some department stores opened downsized branches in the larger suburbs.<sup>9</sup>

Further expansion of big retail was slowed by the deprivations of the Depression and wartime restrictions. But when the post-war economy began

to boom in the 1950s, retail services jumped with it. A consumer sentiment had been growing before and during the war, and was encouraged after it by the spread of television and increasingly 'Americanised' advertising that promulgated unified fashions in clothing, home furnishings and other forms of consumption.<sup>10</sup> Initial uncertainty about the strength of the new economy was challenged by the promise of lifestyles beyond previous expectations. Incomes stabilized, wages rose at unprecedented levels, and credit became more readily available for the purchase of consumer goods<sup>11</sup> - of which the automobile was the most highly prized. Between 1946 and 1961, motor vehicle registrations in Australia quadrupled.<sup>12</sup> And by 1962 one out of every three Australians owned a car.<sup>13</sup>

Just as it had done in America, the car fundamentally changed the social and physical infrastructure of Australian cities.<sup>14</sup> Suburbia was both filled in and sprawled outwards to accommodate a population that sought affordable housing and which could now transport itself.<sup>15</sup> City retailing declined under the strain of traffic congestion, parking problems, the cost of public transport and the time frames involved in shopping a distance from home.<sup>16</sup> Local suburban shops that were built around public transport routes and a 'walking clientele' fell by the wayside<sup>17</sup> as cars sped by them to what has been termed the greatest revolution in retailing since the department store - the enclosed regional shopping centre that catered for, and actively encouraged car usage.

## Shopping Centres in Australia

The internalised shopping centre in Australia was a copy of the originating American model that had been based on similar socio-economic conditions, as well as technical innovations in air-conditioning,

<sup>6</sup> Westfield Holdings Ltd., *The Westfield Story: the first 40 years* (Sydney: Westfield Holdings, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> B.A. Grace (Managing Director of Grace Bros. Ltd. and President of the Retail Traders Association of N.S.W.), quoted in *Australian Retailing*, vol. 3, no. 1, April 1969, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Humphery, *Shelf Life*, pp. 66-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-52. On the post-war extension of this policy, see, T.W. Beed, *The Growth of Suburban Retailing in Sydney: a preliminary study of some factors affecting the form and function of suburban shopping centres*, Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Art, The University of Sydney, for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Geography, March 1964, p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> On Americanised advertising and consumer culture in Australia, see Hsu-Ming Teo, 'The Americanisation of romantic love in Australia', in Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds.), *Connected Worlds: History in Trans-National Perspective*, (Canberra: ANU EPress, 2006), pp. 161-183. See also, Beverley Kingston, *Basket, Bag and Trolley: a history of shopping in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 92-3. One department store advertising manager describing radio and television said: 'Both have an excellent believability factor, with enormous potential for informing or amusing prospective customers.' See, Michael Davenport (advertising manager, David Jones), quoted in *Inside Retailing*, no. 116, March 11, 1974, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> 'In the mid-1950s... there was a rapid expansion in the availability of consumer credit.' See, Graeme Davison, *Car Wars: how the car won our hearts and conquered our cities* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ben Goldsmith, 'The Comfort Lies in All the Things You Can Do: The Australian drive-in – cinema of Distraction' in *Journal of Popular Culture*, 33(1), 1999, p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> Davison, *Car Wars*, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 76-81.

<sup>15</sup> Goldsmith, *The Comfort*, p. 156.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Bunning, 'Store Changes in the Suburbs' in *The Retail Trader*, vol. 40, no. 7, December 1959, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Kingston, *Basket, Bag and Trolley*, pp. 92-94.

'moving stairs' and construction techniques. The American expertise was openly and enthusiastically acknowledged within the industry literature. It was also cited as a source of credibility in advertising directed towards the general public,<sup>18</sup> although research on other cultural products suggests that Australian's enthusiasm for the new centres was more likely an attraction to consumptive modernity than to distinctly American inflections of it.<sup>19</sup> Advertising declared that the Australian shopper was standing at 'the dawn of a new way of life'. 'Space-age' retailing now offered a 'future' in which shopping would no longer be a 'boring chore' but a pleasure.<sup>20</sup> Promotions painted centres as 'high temples of modernity'<sup>21</sup> – clean, safe, glitzy and stylish: divorced from the chaos and uncertainty of the city, yet replete with all of its services and amenities.<sup>22</sup>

Advances in air-conditioning over the preceding century meant that vast internal spaces could now be filled with brightly lit, 'attractively displayed' merchandise at an empirically tested level of consuming comfort - wherever the centre was located across the globe. Shopping would take place within an 'eternal springtime' temperature of 72° F.<sup>23</sup> Nature had historically been seen as an unpredictable impediment to retail activity, and now with the ability to condition the interior, and the car to deliver customers to the shop front door, it could be largely excluded.<sup>24</sup> This environmentally expensive architectural model has recently been recognised as unsustainable, with research and some initial development into alternative designs. But from the business side these are still premised on the ever-

increasing consumption of commodities, and reliance on the car to individually transport customers to the shop door.<sup>25</sup>

From early on, the internalised air-conditioned centre surrounded by generous parking, laid out to maximise the exposure of shops to shoppers whose 'traffic flows' were regulated by the positioning of major tenants, became the standard shopping centre model.<sup>26</sup> Within a few years complaints, even amongst developers, began emerging about the homogeneity of designs.<sup>27</sup> Whilst the mix of shops would be varied to suit local conditions<sup>28</sup> or changing fashions, very little else in the design fundamentals was altered over geographic, social or temporal distance.<sup>29</sup> When the fashion designer Trent Nathan said of a centre on Sydney's North Shore that was upgraded in the late 1990s: 'Walk in here and you could be anywhere...'<sup>30</sup>, he was paying homage to the centre's internationality. But it was also an inadvertent reminder of the standardisation of its design, and the disconnection between its self-contained internal world and its locale.

Australian shopping centres were built by national companies along international guidelines. Although they included local businesses, they were in many ways external cultural products to the environments in which they were built. And their internalised nature ensured that a certain commercially advantageous separation continued. But they were also dependent upon local populations whose 'retail dollar' meant their survival and ultimately, their commercial success. Australian shopping centres worked hard to dissolve this contradiction seeking to 'localise', or embed themselves within the

<sup>18</sup> Peter Spearritt, 'Suburban Cathedrals: The rise of the drive-in shopping centre' in Graeme Davison, Tony Dingle and Seamus O'Hanlon (eds), *The Cream Brick Frontier: Histories of Australian suburbia*, (Clayton, VIC: Monash Publications in History, Dept. of History, Monash University, 1995), p. 99.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Waterhouse, 'Popular Culture' in Phillip Bell and Roger Bell (eds), *Americanization and Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1998), p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 9 September 1965 and *Daily Mirror*, 11 October 1965, quoted in Lindsay Barrett, 'Roselands or Everything Under One Roof' in *UTS Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, November 1998, pp. 124-5.

<sup>21</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Goldsmith who uses it to describe another great American consumer cultural import to Australia – the drive-in theatre. See, Goldsmith, *The Comfort*, p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> The image and function of centres was similar in America. See, Cohen, *From Town Centre to Shopping Centre*, p. 1056.

<sup>23</sup> Centres were kept at a universal temperature of 'spring'. See, Kingston, *Basket, Bag and Trolley*, p. 97; *Sydney Morning Herald* (advertisement), 20 September 1966, pp. 21,22; *Sydney Morning Herald* (Special Feature), 21 September 1966, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Sze Tsung Leong and Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss, 'Air Conditioning' in Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong (eds) *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (Köln: Taschen, 2001), p. 93.

<sup>25</sup> See Destiny USA, <http://www.destinyusa.com>, and commenting on it, Grist Magazine, Environmental News and Commentary, <http://www.grist.org/news/muck/2005/05/20/little-destiny/>

<sup>26</sup> *The Retail Trader*, vol. 39, no. 8, March 1958, pp. 44-5; vol. 40, no. 5, December 1958, p. 42; vol. 41, no. 11, July 1960, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Edwards, 'Reimagining the Shopping Mall: European Invention of the 'American' Consumer Space' in *U.S. Studies Online: British Association for American Studies Postgraduate Journal*, Issue 7, Spring 2005, p. 9. For the fact that 'no amount of sculpture or number of fountains in a plaza can offset the regimented look', see excerpts from an address by William T. Snaith (President of the Raymond Loewy Corp., U.S.A) to the second annual convention of the International Council of Shopping Centres, in *The Retail Trader*, vol. 40, no. 2, September 1958, p. 43.

<sup>28</sup> William Kowinski, *The Malling of America: travels in the United States of shopping* (United States: Xlibris Corp, 2002), p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> That there is a focus is on creating a 'global appeal...to a particular lifestyle.' See, Nicholas Jewell, 'The fall and rise of the British mall' in *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 6, Winter 2001, pp. 328, 335.

<sup>30</sup> *North Shore Times*, 24 November 1999, p. 4.

communities in which they were situated.<sup>31</sup> They were in a powerful position to do so, with a marked absence of formal, centralised community space available in the rapidly sprawling suburbs.

Housing Commissions, providing public residential development for the house-hungry population, had designed cohesive living environments but were limited by a dearth of funds in the immediate post-war climate of scarcity. Plans for integrated community centres combining recreational, social, and educational activities alongside child care and health services were shelved in many areas because of their expense. Instead more affordable, decentralised facilities such as sports fields, swimming pools, a scatter of libraries, and the widely supported Baby Health Clinics dotted the suburbs.<sup>32</sup> Private housing developers saw little profit in community centres and owner builders, by definition, were acting as individuals. Shopping centres stepped into the void, offering community space, parking facilities, and a tailored array of retailers and products, within a site that encapsulated and serviced the country's growing consumer sentiment.

### Shopping Centres as Community Hubs

The idea of large-scale shopping centres forming community hubs was an intrinsic element in the designs of their original architect in America, Victor Gruen. A critic of bland, amorphous suburban sprawl, he envisaged shopping centres as but one part of an overall, modernist, suburban civic plan in which people would live, shop, work, interact and create communities.<sup>33</sup> This ideal was undermined during the development of his, and the world's, very first fully internalised centre, Southdale. It opened in October 1956 in Minneapolis and was situated within 500 acres of proposed, integrated development. With the centre built, however, surrounding land

values jumped and Gruen's client, Dayton's department store, began selling off the surrounding land, exacerbating rather than relieving suburban sprawl.<sup>34</sup>

The internal designs of Gruen's original grand plans were also compromised. The commercial potential of community space enclosed within privatised development was hard to resist, and was quickly grasped both in America and Australia. In the latter, development applications abounded with public facilities that centres intended to provide – childcare, libraries, auditoriums and halls.<sup>35</sup> But these rarely materialised,<sup>36</sup> and where they did, an economic scalpel paring off non-profitable functions usually removed them from their host. Inside the industry, retailers were warned that community facilities could 'drastically affect profits' and that they should ask themselves: 'Will the feature we are considering draw enough extra people to pay?'<sup>37</sup> They were also reminded that once one community organisation had been given access to a centre's facilities, 'they all' would want to do so. In America, Gruen lamented the lost possibilities, bemoaning the fact that only 'those features which had proved profitable had been copied' from his early designs.<sup>38</sup>

In Australia, there were even examples of centres displacing existing services. In 1975, retail developers sought to purchase public land in Chatswood that at the time housed a Kindergarten, a Senior Citizens Centre and a Community Aid Centre. A resident's committee claimed, additionally, that the development would restrict the capacity of the library to expand and increase traffic flows around the Chatswood District Hospital, nearby schools and churches. Non-commercialised meeting places including the Old Town Hall, the School of Arts and the Dispensary Hall' were also to disappear in the wake of the proposed centre.<sup>39</sup> Despite strong local opposition, the land was sold (and soon afterwards on-sold at a considerable profit),<sup>40</sup>

<sup>31</sup> On the process of localization, see Terence Chong, 'Chinese Opera in Singapore: Negotiating Globalisation, Consumerism and National Culture' in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34(3), 2003, p. 453. For the process of American localisation in Australia, see Ben Goldsmith, 'The Comfort Lies in All the Things You Can Do: The Australian Drive-in – Cinema of Distraction' in *Journal of Popular Culture*, 33(1), 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Allport, *The Unrealised Promise*, pp. 55-8.

<sup>33</sup> Victor Gruen, and Larry Smith, *Shopping Towns USA: The Planning of Shopping Centres* (New York: Reinhold, 1960), p. 140, cited in Edwards, *Reimagining the Shopping Mall*, p. 5. On an Australian claim to provide such space, see Westfield, *The Westfield Story*, p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> M. Jeffrey Hardwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 53-6.

<sup>35</sup> On Roselands see, *The Retail Trader*, vol. 44, no. 3, October 1962, p 6; vol. 46, no. 11, June 1965, pp. 4-5.

<sup>36</sup> Kingston, *Basket, Bag and Trolley*, p. 98.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Benjamin (Manager A. J. Benjamins Shopping Center, Top Ryde), addressing the 1958 Residential Conference of Retail Executives at Leura, in *The Retail Trader*, vol. 40, no. 5, December 1958, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> Victor Gruen, 'The sad story of shopping centres' in *Town and Country Planning* 46.7-8 (July/ August, 1978), pp. 350-353, quoted in Edwards, *Reimagining the Shopping Mall*, p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> *North Shore Times*, 20 August 1975; P.B.R. Middleton (Convenor and Chairman of Citizens for Chatswood Community), letter to L.J. Woodward, Town Clerk, Willoughby Municipality, Chatswood, 8 September 1975, located in Willoughby Library Local Studies Section, Retail Trade – Chatswood Chase file.

<sup>40</sup> Netting a profit, according to David Jones chairman K.W. Russell, of \$3 million. See, *North Shore Times*, September 1981.

development proceeded and the services were scattered and shifted outside of the main commercial centre.<sup>41</sup> Today, Chatswood is effectively one giant shopping centre with some of Australia's highest retail rentals.<sup>42</sup>

Despite its absorption by commerce, community space remained in the marketing rhetoric as a powerful means to embed centres within communities. Centres were determined to establish themselves as *the* suburban community space. In 1959, *The Retail Trader* had reminded its Australian big business readership to: '...let the shadow of your institution fall over the length and breadth of your community for the base of that shadow will always be rooted in your store.'<sup>43</sup> This advice became somewhat of a doctrine for shopping centre operators, and was reflected in their advertising which frequently correlated their own icon of modernity with the 'medieval market square'. This imagined historical image had apparently represented 'the gayest time in trading', where 'a friendly meeting place' provided 'a happy family atmosphere'.<sup>44</sup> The Australian population embraced the concept. Centres drew large crowds, operating as 'a link between the two great icons of suburban living – the house and the car.'<sup>45</sup>

But rather than enhancing community life, some have seen the conjunction of these icons as an unsocial union – a private journey from within the house, within the car to the inward-facing shopping centre. The resident's committee protesting against further retail development in Chatswood in the mid 1970s, challenged the 'modern' equation of privatised commercial space with community space, pointing out that shoppers 'park as near as possible to the particular substantial retail complex they intend to visit, and on completion of their purchases there they... return immediately to their vehicles.'<sup>46</sup> Such shoppers did not engage with other local businesses, nor with the community locale more generally, instead confining their experience to their own private realm and the commodified space of the centres.

### Marketing 'Community'

As centres focused on the commercial side of their business, they increasingly turned to marketing as a means to create a community identity. It was a highly

successful strategy, increasing patronage, promoting consumerist behaviour and drawing support from local populations through the demographically targeted benefits that flowed back to at least some segments of the community. Over time, small-scale promotions grew in size and strength in line with the expansion of the centres they promoted. In some instances, localising campaigns became, a little ironically, nationwide promotional ventures. Three examples are given here to outline this marketing trend.

Local newspapers can draw significant revenue from shopping centre advertising. They have traditionally been supportive of the 'progress' centres bring to communities and are frequently used to run promotional devices disguised as news. In the 1970s, for example, shopping centre giant Westfield ran a weekly column in the Hornsby local newspaper entitled 'Westfield News', which provided information to the community about the community. It was largely, however, a promotional device for Westfield itself, and more generally, consumerist behaviour and the middle-class 'values' that shopping centres moulded themselves around. In one 1973 article, 'roving reporter' Ken Snell, declared that Hornsby had become, 'in the eyes of world travellers, the shopping Mecca of Australia. The great merchants of the Westfield Plaza', he declared, were 'the major contributing factor' to this transformation, although 'the dynamic leadership of the Hornsby Government and Council led by the distinguished Shire President, Don Evans, [and] the efficient crime-fighting police department' also got a mention.<sup>47</sup>

Shopping centres also sought to associate themselves with existing community activities, in order to establish themselves as local institutions rather than mere sites of commerce. In the early 1980s Chatswood Chase was built on the Kindergarten site described above. After a successful initial year of trading, it planned a massive first birthday promotional celebration, which it linked to the 13<sup>th</sup> annual occurrence of a local festival. As reported by the neighbourhood paper (in which 'the Chase' advertised heavily): 'Chatswood Chase's birthday and the 1984 Willoughby Festival have been interwoven to give the community one giant celebration'. The official openings of both were held during Thursday night shopping on the Chatswood

<sup>41</sup> *North Shore Times*, 13 August 1980.

<sup>42</sup> According to Westfield Director David Lowy in the mid 1980s: 'You will only find higher rents in the centre of Sydney or perhaps Melbourne'. See, *North Shore Times*, 9 July 1986.

<sup>43</sup> *The Retail Trader*, vol. 40, no. 7, February 1959, p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* (Special Feature), 21 September 1966, p. 1; *The Retail Trader*, vol. 47, no. 4, November 1965, p. 12; Westfield info-vertisement in *The Advocate*, 16 October 1968, p. 10.

<sup>45</sup> Spearritt, *Suburban Cathedrals*, p. 88.

<sup>46</sup> Middleton, letter to L.J. Woodward.

<sup>47</sup> *Advocate-Courier*, 9 January 1974, p. 5.

Chase ‘centre stage’. As the paper went on to say: ‘The linking of the two occasions indicates [how important] The Chase has become in the past 12 months to the day-to-day community life of the North Shore... naturally birthday bargains at The Chase will be a feature’.<sup>48</sup> The public facilities that had been displaced sat on the suburb’s outskirts looking on.

Donations and promotions involving schools have long been popular amongst centre operators. And it is hard to think of an institution more central to community life. Schools are the site of care and education of the children, the future (even if imagined), of the community. In the 1990s, Westfield began running what was probably the largest annual school-targeted campaign yet conceived by shopping centre marketers in Australia. Nation-wide, it encouraged schools and their supporters to earn points through purchases at Westfield centres. The school in each local area that ‘earned’ the most points, through spending the most money, won tens of thousands of dollars worth of computer equipment – a much needed boost in a time when public education is under funded. ‘Bonus days’ on which customers could earn extra points coincided with other promotional days such as Easter and Mother’s Day.<sup>49</sup> Updates on each school’s position in the competition were regularly displayed in local newspapers that enthused over the competition.<sup>50</sup>

Comments by the principal of a winning school in 2003 indicated the commercial success and ‘localising’ force of the promotion: ‘Our Parents and Friends Committee’, she said, ‘nominated a coordinator who was responsible for informing parents, and the wider community, about the school’s progress, to encourage them to get involved. It was very much a community building exercise... The coordinator used the school’s newsletters to keep parents up-to-date and to inform them of bonus weekends...’<sup>51</sup>

The computer equipment was clearly, and understandably, highly valued by the school, and by putting it on offer, Westfield was able to penetrate the school’s local network and represent itself as a member of its community. It might look like entrance to the community had been bought, except that the

ones paying were the parents and friends of the school who had made the purchases to earn the ‘reward’ points in the first place. In this light, Shop for Your School appears as little more than a successful marketing tool, but its very success tells us something about the communities who embraced it. Commerce is an intrinsic element of modern day-to-day life, and if it mediates community activity, that appears to be of no great concern for most of that community – especially if tangible benefits like school computer equipment can ice the social cake.

### The Perpetual Promotion of Consumption

At the same time as they were marketing themselves as ‘community centres’, shopping centres were also assiduously encouraging consumption more generally, and promoting to raise their profile and increase turnover. The overheads, commercial interests and sheer scale of shopping centres, required a volume of sales far beyond those achievable by small independent operators. In order to generate these sales and to maintain their relative market position they used the authority of their ‘coercive, centralized’ management<sup>52</sup> to engage in continuous, intensive advertising and promotion. Indeed this approach was a definitive characteristic of the ‘modern retailing’ that centres claimed to epitomise. Again, American ‘retailing experts’ in the late 1950s advised Australians in this regard:

The shopping centre developer of the past – a converted home builder usually, or even a lettuce farmer with well-located land – thought his work was over on opening day. He had a lesson to learn. His centre requires 365 days of intensive promotion each year to gain and hold its position in the area it serves.<sup>53</sup>

Promotions began during development.<sup>54</sup> Their size and cost, as well as the ‘countless feats of engineering skill’ required for their construction, were lauded in local newspapers.<sup>55</sup> A crescendo of advertising led to opening day, describing ‘armies’ of workers fighting against the odds to have centres completed on time.<sup>56</sup> Although fulfilling a clear marketing function, the praise in these papers was

<sup>48</sup> *North Shore Times Weekend Edition* (devoted to the ‘Birthday Celebrations’ including a full front page banner advertisement for Chatswood Chase), 11 March 1984, p. 18.

<sup>49</sup> *North Shore Times*, 4 April 2001, p. 19; 6 June 2001, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> *North Shore Times*, 9 May 2001, p. 21; 19 May 2004, p. 29.

<sup>51</sup> Ms Dianne Burgham, principal St Thomas Primary, Willoughby, quoted in *Sydney Weekly Courier*, 5 May 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Cohen, *From Town Centre to Shopping Centre*, p. 1064.

<sup>53</sup> James B. Douglas (President, Northgate, and Executive Vice-President, Bergen Mall Shopping Centers U.S.), ‘The Future of Regional Shopping Centres’ in *The Retail Trader*, vol. 39, no. 8, March 1958, p. 46.

<sup>54</sup> Beginning promotion at this stage was a recommended strategy. See, *Inside Retailing*, no. 109, 21 January 1974, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Barrett, *Roselands*, p. 125.

<sup>56</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 1966, p. 22.

genuine, reflecting the growing Australian attraction to Americanised modernity, and a confidence in its own ability to achieve it.<sup>57</sup>

Constant, intensive promotion became a fundamental ingredient as centres fought to secure and extend their 'dominance' of local retail.<sup>58</sup> Australian Prime Ministers and State politicians, celebrating 'private enterprise at its best',<sup>59</sup> gave official sanction to centres at grand opening days that saturated the media.<sup>60</sup> The coverage invariably reported large, enthusiastic and often hysterical crowds that became, in the words of Australian cultural studies writer Meaghan Morris, 'a decorative feature of the shopping centre's performance'.<sup>61</sup> In the following days, weeks and years, fashion parades and beauty pageants entertained the crowds with consumerist images, while mass specials occurred with enough regularity to provide a permanent aura of value. Cross promoting their own or an employer's commercial ventures, celebrities of all mainstream makes and models made regular appearances. Joining them were life-size cartoon characters, Olympians, international sports people and television chefs. Orchestras and royal memorabilia made tours, as did giant robotic reptiles and museum exhibits. Easter bunnies and Santa Clauses turned up annually<sup>62</sup> and children's entertainment was available during holidays. One promotion offered to help parents whose kids drove them 'up the wall every school holiday'. Supervised children's activities gave these parents 'three hours of undisturbed peace'... to shop.<sup>63</sup>

The centre as a site of entertainment, and a leisure destination, became a key concept within the industry. Echoing the rhetoric of the nineteenth century department stores, industry literature in the early 1960s used theatrical metaphors to describe

consumption practices within centres: 'A store interior is like a stage', retailers were told. 'Its actors are the goods on display; [while] the audience moves in and around the stage.'<sup>64</sup> But as marketing theory developed through the decade, there was a subtle shift in focus from the actors to the stage itself. Centres recognised the advantage of becoming 'less a storage place for goods and more and more a way of communicating a certain way of life.'<sup>65</sup> This life, above all, revolved around material consumption. And retailers eagerly, if with perhaps some biased optimism, observed changing attitudes in the shoppers who embraced it: 'youthful in mind and spirit, increasingly affluent, [and] increasingly aware of the [consumer] culture' in which they lived. To maintain their attraction to these shoppers, it was stated, retailers would 'be forced as never before to sell fashion... change, newly established fads and obsolescence.'<sup>66</sup>

### Shopping Centres as Emblems of Consumer Culture

As representatives of their commodified contents, centres themselves had to undergo continual cosmetic changes as they sought to physically embody the material ideals of their target demographic.<sup>67</sup> They were, in a sense, 'slaves to fashion': required to be forever fresh, vibrant and new. Modern and exciting when they burst upon the retailing scene in the late 1950s and 1960s, they had to remain this way to encourage and embody the consumerist lifestyle that supported their business. All surviving major Australian shopping centres have been periodically updated to reflect changing fashions, continually transforming to the 'now'.<sup>68</sup> The philosophy of the shopping centre and consumption is built around

<sup>57</sup> John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 104-5.

<sup>58</sup> 'With a large Super Prime regional like Bankstown you need to exploit its dominance as opposed to resting on its laurels' Peter Smith (Managing Director of General Property Trust) quoted in *Shopping Centre News* vol. 4, no. 7, August 1989, 18.

<sup>59</sup> New South Wales State Premier, Robert Askin, quoted in *Bankstown Observer*, 21 September 1966; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 1966, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Goldsmith uses the term 'officially sanctioned' in relation members of government opening drive-in theatres, and the term holds equal relevance here. See, Goldsmith, *The Comfort*, p. 158.

<sup>61</sup> Meaghan Morris, 'Things To Do With Shopping Centres' in Susan Sheridan (ed.) *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 217.

<sup>62</sup> *Sydney Weekly Courier*, 9-15 April 2003; 17 March 2004; and *North Shore Times*, 3 February 1988; 19 May 1993; 16 July 1997.

<sup>63</sup> *Westfield 1st Anniversary* advertising pamphlet, 19 September 2002, p. 12, located in Hornsby Library local studies file.

<sup>64</sup> Geoff Farries, 'Shopping Centres: An Important Retail Trend', *Rydge's*, 1 August 1960, p. 795, quoted in Spearritt, *Suburban Cathedrals*, p. 99.

<sup>65</sup> John S. Walton (Chairman of Executive Committee, Waltons Ltd.), 'Retailing's role in the future – and the customer of the 1970s' in *Australian Retailing* vol. 4 no. 3, July 1970, p. 6. For a wider analysis of this marketing trend, see Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo, 2001).

<sup>66</sup> Walton, *Retailing's role in the future*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>67</sup> On Bankstown Square, see Peter Walichnowski (Director Lend Lease Retail), quoted in *Shopping Centre News*, vol. 4, no. 7., August 1989, pp. 18-9, and on Westfield Chatswood, see *Sydney Weekly Courier*, 25 July 2000. On the same phenomenon in Britain, see Jewell, *The fall and rise of the British mall*, p. 333.

<sup>68</sup> A current Westfield television ad describes one of its centres as 'The New' Westfield Tuggerah, despite the fact that this centre has existed in its present location for some years. What Westfield means is that the centre has been re-vamped. It looks like 'new', or rather is the epitome of what Westfield is trying to define as 'the new'.



obsolescence. Centres must constantly change their physical appearance and image to stay one step ahead of it. And they rely upon the shifts of fashion to make today's product (both the centre itself, and the merchandise within it) more attractive than yesterday's.

This commercially and ideologically driven focus on 'the new' is highlighted by the notable absence of second-hand shops in major Australian shopping centres throughout the last fifty years. Not even up-market, expensive, profitable antique stores would find a place. When charities have been given space to raise money within centres, it has been a condition of their entry that they will not sell second hand items – traditionally a foundation of their fund-raising efforts.<sup>69</sup> Second-hand goods are a distraction from, and are even subversive to the ideology of 'the new'. They offer an alternative philosophy of consumption that undermines the mass-production obsolescence model on which the economics and very identity of the 'modern' shopping centre are based.

### The Control and Management of Tenants

The absence of second-hand shops in centres was part of an entire system of control over tenants that was designed to maximise turnover and promote consumption. In the early days, before their commercial power was firmly established, it was not always easy for Australian centres to attract tenants, particularly major fashion stores that had a more upmarket image than could be provided for.<sup>70</sup> But as they became more firmly entrenched in the cultural and economic infrastructure of the suburbs, centres were able to become increasingly selective and demanding. Industry commentators predicted this change, and its advantages.<sup>71</sup> They advised centre operators to examine a potential tenant's 'advertising budget, apparent aggressiveness, completeness of stock, reputation, merchandising ability, stability and

... ability to attract and hold trade.'<sup>72</sup> This attitude developed over time, with more refined marketing terminology calling for attention to 'concept, range, quality, fit-out, uniforms, packaging, [and] style'.<sup>73</sup> Today Westfield offers 'retailer education and consultancy services', including international 'study tours', to encourage high levels of 'performance' from its tenants.<sup>74</sup>

The requirements that centres, and their large institutional investors<sup>75</sup> called for tended to favour Chains rather than local or independent stores, because the former were considered to 'have the financial backing, expertise and marketing skill to ensure success'.<sup>76</sup> The support for Chains by the major shopping centres encouraged their already rapid growth that had begun early in the century. Some potential problems associated with this growth had been raised in the inter-war period by independent grocers in New South Wales who appealed for a government inquiry into the unfair advantage that their size bestowed upon the Chains, and the low wages and cheap imported goods that they favoured. The Chains, in response argued that they had 'shown the consumer what [could] be expected from really modern retailing' with the 'working classes' welcoming their cheap 'high quality' goods.<sup>77</sup> The Inquiry sided with the Chains although it reserved some criticism for their use of juvenile labour and price-cutting policies.<sup>78</sup> And as the supermarket and variety store Chains had spelt the end for many small grocers before the war, the rise of shopping centres saw the decline of many local shopping strips after it.<sup>79</sup> An 'aggressive' style of retailing, heavily backed by promotions and advertising, that sought to continually push sales over and above the planned purchases of shoppers<sup>80</sup> became the retail standard.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Bill Shirley (Promotions Manager, Westfield Hornsby) in a letter to charity groups, 3 January 1983, located in Hornsby Library local studies file.

<sup>70</sup> P.D. Yeomans, addressing the Golden Jubilee Convention of the Real Estate Institute of New South Wales, in *The Retail Trader*, vol. 42, no. 7, February 1961, p. 42.

<sup>71</sup> James B. Douglas, (President, Northgate, and Executive Vice-President, Bergen Mall Shopping Centres U.S. By Courtesy of "Stores"), 'The Future of Regional Shopping Centres' in *The Retail Trader*, vol. 39, no. 8, March 1958, pp. 45-6.

<sup>72</sup> P.D. Yeomans, addressing the Golden Jubilee Convention, p. 42.

<sup>73</sup> *Shopping Centre News*, vol. 4., no. 7., August 1989, p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> <http://westfield.com/corporate/retailer/index.html>

<sup>75</sup> Cohen, *From Town Centre to Shopping Centre*, p. 1056.

<sup>76</sup> G. Ritzer, *The Macdonaldisation of Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1996), p. 29 cited in Malcolm Voyce, 'The Privatisation of Public Property: The development of a shopping mall in Sydney and its implications for governance through spatial practices' in *Urban Policy and Research*, vol. 21, no. 3, September 2003, p. 255.

<sup>77</sup> *Retail Merchandiser and Chain Store Review*, May 1937, p. 6, quoted in Humphery, *Shelf Life*, p. 52.

<sup>78</sup> 'Chain Stores: Report of the Industrial Commission of New South Wales upon Matters Relating to the Management, Control and Operations of General Chain Stores in New South Wales' *New South Wales Parliamentary Papers*, 1939 cited in *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>79</sup> Kingston, *Basket, Bag and Trolley*, p. 110.

<sup>80</sup> 'Impulse Buying: new assault on the consumer' in *The Retail Trader*, vol. 40, no. 2, September 1958, p. 41.

## Shopping Centres and Social Life

Marketing, through the course of the twentieth century, managed to tie individual identity to consumption practices. Major shopping centres have sought to do the same with social identity.<sup>81</sup> The extent to which they have succeeded is obviously open to considerable debate, and the same issues of agency that occur in all cultural histories are equally applicable here. But centres have set themselves up as social hubs. They tend to force other local retailing into decline. They have the active public support of politicians and local media. And they provide the only real centralised conglomeration of services, shops, parking and recognised public space in the suburban landscape. This combination of attractiveness and power, along with the broader historical trend towards privatised consumer culture, has enabled regional shopping centres to become a dominant social institution in suburban Australia.

Any attempt to deal with industrialised consumption, so necessary for creating both global and local sustainability, must deal with the methods by which consumer goods are distributed and marketed. Regional shopping centres, as a significant

interface between production and consumption, are a major channel for both of these activities and therefore require attention. This paper has outlined some of the ways in which shopping centres in suburban Sydney, Australia embedded themselves within local communities. In doing so, they encouraged the attachment of consumption to social life. At the same time, they used constant and intensive promotion to push the boundaries of consumption ever higher.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro declared that: 'to achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, States should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption...'<sup>82</sup> The UN's Division for Sustainable Development has declared that we need to develop 'new concepts of wealth and prosperity'.<sup>83</sup> In order to achieve both of these goals we need to loosen the attachment of excessive consumption to community and social life in industrialised countries. And to do this, we need to reconfigure not only our imaginations, but also the nature of our built environment and social institutions.

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<sup>81</sup> There is even a Sydney suburb - Pagewood - that had its name changed to that of the local shopping centre - Eastgardens. See, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 April 1989, p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, Principal 8, <http://www.un.org/documents/conf151/aconf15126-lannex1.htm>

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