

A History of the Strip Mall

with a Look at Northfield, Ohio

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"Why did everything look like this?"

This portfolio excerpt preserves the original thesis pages and pagination. It includes the introduction (original pages 2-6) and conclusion (original pages 47-48). The complete 56-page thesis is available separately.

Introduction

Sometime at the end of April 2020, I found myself despairing deep in the woods behind my house. I was walking my dog for the second time that day already, thinking to myself, “so this is it.” The sky was a bleak gray and the grass was faded brown and the trees were barren and cold. I wandered past the skeletal steel structures that held up the power lines cutting across the wet and windy grasslands which dissected my suburban development. On the hill I had a view of cars going up and down Northfield road, the strip that is Northfield, Ohio. The pandemic was lonely and it destabilized my ability to plan for the future. So, I looked to the past. Why did everything look like this? I tried hard to escape my hometown in high school only to find myself forcibly back home for the lockdowns. I thought I had escaped the endless seas of cracked parking lots and gray roads. I was tired of having to drive through the Northfield strip yet again. A static and predictable landscape, I had to drive past it every day past Speedway on the corner, Pepper’s Market across from it, an empty storefront that Goodwill had moved out of in the 2010’s, Mixer’s Gentlemen’s club to the left, next to a Subway, Northfield Plaza to the right past the golden arches, followed by the MGM Northfield park casino and racetrack (“racino” as it is advertised), and succeeded by an isolated and gothic-looking abandoned Ford Stamping plant, responsible for producing parts for Ford automobiles. Why did everything look like this? Why was everyone ok with it? Why did my Russo-immigrant parents move here? The fast-food chains, the big-box stores, and the gas stations felt unattached from history, yet as if they’d be standing here forever. There is a way of life here that seems to almost be absent of one and this feeling is all-encompassing, as everything is taken for granted, while the area is deindustrialized, and everyone operates with very little knowledge or memory of the past.

The strip malls that surrounded me that Spring of 2020 serve as a microcosm for a central American experience for the majority of Americans. But in this study, I am using the case of Northfield Road of Northfield, Ohio to examine a longer history of the American strip mall. This paper will wave back and forth between the story of Northfield, Ohio and the larger story of suburbanization. In explaining the evolution of a strip mall, I will also incorporate the story of the Olde Northfield Township area, which is the original name of the area that now encompasses the communities of Macedonia, Northfield Village, Northfield Center Township, and Sagamore Hills. The goal is to reexamine the “common” in the American experience and what is more common than the drive-in strip mall?

Northfield is a village and relatively small area in northern Summit County, Ohio. Northfield road cuts directly through it as it is flanked by the archetypal anchorless strip mall and empty storefronts. Northfield Plaza sits next to the racino. The Commercial Real Estate Development Association defines the strip shopping center as, “an attached row of stores or service outlets that are managed as a coherent retail entity with onsite parking usually located in front of stores.”¹ The strip center does not have enclosed walkways linking the stores and it may be in a straight line or in an “L” or “U” shape. The ICSC (Innovating Commerce Serving Communities trade journal) defines the strip mall as an “attached row or service outlet managed as a coherent retail entity, with on-site parking usually located in front of the stores,” but also as specifically anchor-less. An anchor store is



Figure - Map of Northfield courtesy of Google Maps

¹ Sicola, Maria. “Commercial Real Estate Terms and Definitions.” *NAIOP Research Foundation*, 2017, 52.

a major outlet that is visited a lot and, in turn, brings customers to the smaller retail entities located on the strip.

Understanding the history of strip malls is integral to understanding American culture because it is a form that has come to dominate the American suburban landscape. This typology informs public space and conceptions of community. At first glance, the strip mall's purpose is only to sell. The seeming replicability of this form is obvious to anyone who has ever driven a car in supposedly disparate regions of the United States. In 2016, there were 68,730 strip malls in the US, according to one source,² double that of post offices, and equal to the amount of public elementary schools. This typology arises out of the intersection of the histories of suburbanization, development, and consumerism. As a cultural artifact, it is a testament to American consumerism and automobile dependence, one of the causes of sprawl. This does not just have to do with population density. Sprawl refers to a development occurrence that expands in an unlimited and "leapfrog" way outward from the core of a metropolitan area.³ In terms of land use types, it includes both residential and nonresidential development. The story of the strip mall will take place in the history of sprawl in suburbanization.

My driving research question approaches the advent of the strip mall through the perspective of community and place in America. The principal argument is that the strip mall examined through the lens of a public sphere acts as a microcosm for a history of a general kind of American lifestyle and culture. A community needs a place, and the strip mall provides such a peculiar place. What kind of cultural expression is there in an area with an absence of walkable public space where individuals and communities cannot linger nor commune? A public space, an

² O'Malley, Sharon. "Shopping Malls." *SAGE Business Researcher* (August 29, 2016). <http://businessresearcher.sagepub.com/sbr-1775-100682-2747282>. doi: 10.1177/237455680217.n1

³ Burchell, Robert W., United States, National Research Council (U.S.), Transit Development Corporation, and Transit Cooperative Research Program, eds. *The Costs of Sprawl--Revisited*. Report / Transit Cooperative Research Program 39. Washington, D.C: National Academy Press, 1998.

area of social life, is necessary for private individuals to meet and discuss a range of issues concerning themselves or their community. James Kunstler, with his *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993) notes that neighborhoods like Georgetown or Beacon hill are walking neighborhoods where, “you walk to a store – enjoying the felicities of the street as you go – and you are able to see other people along the way.”⁴ You might stop and chat with a stranger; “this is called *meeting people*, the quintessential urban pleasure.”⁵ Spaces where people can coexist and where a wide variety of functions can encourage unexpected activities and lead to natural conversation is what makes democracy possible.

Shopping is also a huge aspect of American social life and for many Americans, shopping at large shopping malls, shopping plazas, and strip malls will be the only time in their day they might encounter new ideas, sentiments, and the public at large outside of their private home, but the objective was only to look at strip malls.⁶ Many histories of the suburbs touch upon the rise of drive-in markets and the rise of the first shopping malls, as the two go hand in hand, for the shopping mall is entirely dependent on the consumers who live in the suburbs. In a sense, the shopping malls turn the citizenry into consumers, and in turn, the consumers inform the suburbs. Historians have examined the kind of public space that accompanies and creates the suburbs and about the type and quality that the mall represents. However, there has been a lack of attention to the strip mall alone.

It is a vitally important aspect of American life and culture to study because it equally represents so much about what Americans value and are deprived of. In order to understand American culture, one must study the typology where half of all Americans grow up around.

⁴ Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere : The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*. New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 1993, 127.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 2000, 211.

According to the latest census, approximately 175 million Americans live in the suburbs⁷ - just over half of the US population. To get anywhere, one has to own an automobile. In a country that claims to be the land of the free, the citizenry is oppressed by the conformist typology around them. This has sociological and cultural consequences, where place-making loses to drive-in culture.

As this introduction concludes, it is important to iterate that this project does not intend to make any value judgments like “good” or “bad” on the status of the strip mall, rather it aims to tell it how it is and was. The strip mall alienates individuals from each other and the larger community. People depart from their small domestic bubbles and travel in a world of one, the solitary journey within the car, driving to work, to the strip mall, and back home again. It might be the only chance at spontaneity in an otherwise predictable and regimented day. The strip represents America’s drive-in culture, but what kind of culture is this?

Beginnings

Planned shopping centers can make one feel a loss of connection to culture, place, or the past, but not at the Indian Mound Mall in Heath, Ohio. This shopping mall’s anchor stores include the AMC Theatre, FYE, the Big Sandy Superstore, Altitude Trampoline Park, Dick’s Sporting Goods, a JCPenney, and a currently vacant store that used to be a Sears. Built in 1986, named in homage to the earthwork mounds constructed by the Hopewell Indians in that area. Initially, the mounds were either effigies used for sophisticated Native American political or spiritual rituals. Ohio’s original settlers and inhabitants were American Indians. They arrived during the Paleoindian Period (13,000 BC to 7,000 BC). Mounds built by these native groups are still present today. South of Columbus, Ohio, the center of the state, there are a slew of these

⁷ Parker, Kim, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Anna Brown, Richard Fry, and D’Vera Cohn. “1. Demographic and Economic Trends in Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities,” n.d., 1.

shopping spaces in Macedonia by the big-box stores. Even Putnam found that “more and more of our shopping is done in a megamall in yet a third suburb.”¹³³ Moreover, this shopping experience does involve interactions with people embedded in a common social network as earlier architects thought. Putnam found that the suburbanization of the last thirty years increased our financial investment in the automobile but also our investment of time. Between 1969 and 1995, the average trip to work increased by 26% and the average shopping trip increased by 29% and each trip was much more likely to be made alone where “private cars account for 86 percent of all trips in America, and two-thirds of all car trips are made alone, a fraction that has been rising steadily.”¹³⁴ When I was home because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt the isolation and lack of community.

It is interesting to imagine what the land looked like before this industrial sprawl. The Seneca, Chippewa, and Ottawa villages traded and went on expeditions with Northfield’s early settlers, but by 1831 only 2000 Indians remained in Ohio¹³⁵ and today there are no formal recognized tribal communities or nations left in the state. The Cuyahoga Valley National Park and its trails are the best record we have of an area before industrialization, for that, I am thankful I got to grow up nearby both the sprawling woods and the industrial sprawl, seeing the complexities in both. My parents moved here for work and my house was built the same year I was born, in 1999. For them it was a brand-new world, at the exact same time it was just as new for myself, so it has been fascinating to experience these lands together with all of its gains and losses.

¹³³ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 2000, 211.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 212.

¹³⁵ “Historic American Indian Tribes of Ohio, 1654-1843.” Rocky Ricer City School District: Ohio Historical Society, n.d. <https://www.rccs.org/Downloads/Ohios%20historic%20Indians%2038%20pages.pdf>.

Sprawl and the history of the strip mall illustrate America's loss of community in the form of public space. Everything closes at 8:00 and restaurants close at 10:00. Most of life has been privatized and although the strip mall in its history has moments of rise and decline, it inadequately serves the community as a public space outside of the services and goods it houses. It exists outside of the United States; however, it is a profoundly American phenomenon in that it engenders a particularly solitary experience – a kind of excess of individualism. From the trends touched upon in this project, it does not seem that the physical community will be returning anytime soon to the strip mall or to any physical space for that matter. Life will be increasingly



Figure - Northfield Plaza today

privatized and virtual, unless we evaluate and make better efforts to revitalize our social networks and urban environments. For that reason, the strip mall serves as a peculiar artifact of a particular lifestyle devoid of any semblance of community.