Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

PLACE MAKING: On the poetics of the proximate environment – figures of public space in a strip mall.

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, July 13th, 2016

From strip mall to public space.

Using the notion of "place-making" in relationship to the strip mall may seem at first hand to be a contradiction. (1)

A strip mall, after all, is just a length of roadside used for a particular and *"geographically informal"* (2) purpose, which would lack a priori the ability to arrest our curiosity and to call us to find in it place-like qualities … unless turned into the backdrop of a film story.

A strip mall belongs to the *"open road"* (2) phenomena, with its own parking off the main road to sell to the traveller or suburbanite goods they may need **…** hardly a place offering anything to remember it by, but for its plastered up windows and product laden shelves and refrigerators.

In its more specialized version of "factory outlet" or "food court" ensembles, *it may begin to suggest public narratives around its business aims and clients interest;* ***it may also provide public space and time for sharing these narratives and discuss the experiences they are based on.***

In embryonic fashion, the truck stop that tends to the **social, economic and cultural interests and practices of the "open road" professionals,** may begin to possess place-like qualities.

When associated with the strip mall, through design and urban development, this type of tending to clientele's other-than-buying needs, may transform that *venue into a hub or center of community life in public.*

Example*: As reported in the Iranian Times International ca. 2014, the management of* ***a certain north Toronto strip mall that "****was little more than a jumble of sleepy storefronts and apathetic owners," was turned over to a sympathetic and enterprising immigrant who owned one of the businesses.*

"*The first thing he did was hire a guard to ticket cars whose drivers weren't patronizing the stores.* ***Then he posted an ad in the local paper renaming the strip mall the Toronto Iranian Plaza*** *(…)* ***Over the next decade, the strip mall evolved into a home away from home for the local Iranian community."***

To sum it up, the **strip**, or "raw" commercial use of the road side, can grow and change as its urban context grows and as changes its social context for community life in public.

Observers of these phenomena have come to wonder ***"at what point does a privately-owned business, like a shopping mall or supermarket, become a public space?"*** *(3)*

Defining spatial figures of public community life in private business venues.

The criteria of spatial "publicness" in a privately owned business environment, as a working hypothesis, seem to be of two orders:

- the allowed degree of **visual and physical access** and of **freedom of circulation and of**

engaging in activities unrelated directly to the business of buying,

- The **recognition of the other, either individually or in groups, as members of a socio-cultural group,** and the corollary consciousness of being the same object of recognition for the other.

These **freedoms** are almost non existent within the tightly managed merchandising space of businesses but may thrive in unassigned occupancy areas. Even in the new WiFi coffee shops, such behavior is allowed only with evidence of consumption next to the laptop ever present.
The social **recognition process,** on the other hand, goes on anywhere people aggregate, with high points with businesses and/or clientele of obvious socio-cultural group identity.

Observing spatial figures of public community life in private business venues.

Within the scope of this post I have decided to observe an open strip mall for evidence of spatial figures of public community life: the interface between assigned and unassigned occupancy areas, the threshold between inside and outside of stores and the one between sidewalk/covered arcade and parking,
These interfaces seem to possess a ***social draw and a seductive permission*** *for these* ***freedoms and recognition processes*** *to be acted out as community life in public.*

An open strip mall transformation: historical and environmental context

Developed by IVANHOE – Real Estate Development Arm of Steinberg supermarkets – as part of the very first chain of supermarkets in Montreal. (See feature image)
Opened in 1955 as Store #77, it was the major anchor of a strip mall, with a Woolworth anchoring the other end of the strip that included 20 stores in between, and had all the recognizable trappings of a fifties commercial steel and glass architectural design with the perennial logo bearing mast to be seen from far “down the road.” (See figure below and bibliographic reference.) (4)

fifties supermarket

“In 1992, IGA did take the store and still is the tenant today, with one particularity of this store being a ‘Kosher corner,’ which caters an important Jewish neighborhood around it” (4).
A change in building type ensued turning the **strip mall** into a **Commercial Centre named after the street it fronts**, with the logo bearing mast changed to a free standing one bearing the names of the main businesses, and with the Woolworth space eventually made larger to accommodate a chain drugstore with its own a second floor for medical related offices. (See feature image)
With the subway station already implanted in one corner of the site, the new identity and community orientation of the strip were founded and expressed in a renovated arcade with masonry support system and deep roof fascia bearing the names of the businesses below.
The arcade is particularly appreciated by the aging clientele residing in neighboring social housing blocs. Careful examination of the image below will show cane totting people walking and standing usually near the masonry pillars with their garbage pail and cigarette disposal cylinder.

arcade/sidewalk

The development was sympathetic and complementary to local businesses located around it, and the car parking hugging the arcade remained as a reminder of the original Strip mall it was.

Note the yellow signs on the stone pillars making it illegal to park if one is not doing business in the stores of the commercial center … no guard is present, however, as is the case of the Toronto Iranian Plaza mentioned earlier, but the general strategy still holds!

An open strip mall adaptation: spatial figures of community life in public.

Free visual access to store interiors for perusal prior to entrance, is not characteristic of large chain stores that depend on reputation and name recognition to make their pitch. In the case of the **IGA** supermarket, its long **blind façade** is relieved by the presence of the stacked caddies area and nearby picnic table for staff breaks and clients waiting for a ride. (See supermarket and drugstore façades below)



supermarket blind side



drugstore blind façade

Certain smaller shops, given a corner location, allow a two tiered social distancing strategy to obtain **visual access** through transparent shopfront window for the sake of **recognizing** product and clientele identity.

The **first such distancing** is the one of **"easy social disengagement"** from anyone that may be inside the store, as in the cases of the barber shop and variety store (see images below).

Note the traditional telephone booths occupying a neutral space, between the supermarket and the string of stores, and that speak of a clientele not familiar with, or unable to afford cell phones.



easy social disengagement distance from shopfront window



easy social disengagement distance from shopfront window

The **second such distancing** is the one where **caution and tact is called for to get closer** to see the images of haircut styles being promoted and the language of the newspapers being sold (see two images below).



social implication distance from shopfront window



social implication distance from shopfront window

In the case of the **coffee shop and the cleaners boutique**, at the other end of the arcade, the narrow arcade sidewalk does not allow for this two-tiered distancing strategy. However, upon closer examination of the two images below one can see how the presence of the garbage pail and the cigarette disposal cylinder next to the masonry pillar act as discrete invitation to gather or wait close to them, and to stay away from the shop window.

Note the presence of a security agent against the coffee shop window which has been recently revamped with counter seating along it … for watching the passersby as much as for being seen by them!



socially neutral distance from shopfront window at arcade pillar



corner shop social distancing situation

Evening visit to the strip mall allows better photographic conditions to document the visual access to the always busy bank ATM lobby (with members of the family waiting inside in winter and outside in summer, while a parent handles the banking operation), and the coffee shop above

mentioned shop window counter as shown in the images below.
Note: Grouping in front of these two venues can be considerable and maybe resulted in having a security agent hired to tone down excesses of such grouping. I use as criterion to assess what is an "excess" the fact that the groupings may come to bloc pedestrian traffic in the arcade/sidewalk.


bank shopfront window vs visual access


coffee shop counter at shopfront window and two ways visual access

It may be useful for pondering the social recognition dimension of community life in public, as shown in the following image, to review my post on the glazed shopfront and urban sociability.


social recognition and visual access through shopfront window

Note: Any commercial center will have its share of vacancy, with the usual information as to the thereabout of the gone business. In the following image, it is about a branch bank from another province that has moved probably due to a shrinking of its clientele and to the presence of the Royal Bank of Canada's behemoth next door.
It may also serve well in assessing the social status of a business to notice the choice of prime material in its front lobby such as aluminum, glass and polished granite of the departed business.


selection of material at entrance and image of shop

NOTE:
– What I have omitted to document photographically, for reasons of privacy, are the small groups of people socializing in front or at a rear door of a car parked at the edge of the sidewalk/arcade.
– For a similar reason, I have omitted to photograph the various "grapes" of kids hanging together near stores, or on the way in and out of them. Children abound around the commercial center given the summer day camps of the sport center across the street. See panoramic image below with water play area at left and large muscle play area at right and service building in the middle.


children and neighbouring park

– The gregariousness of Pilipino people is well known and they do constitute a major part of the clientele of the commercial center given the concentration of major hospitals in the district where they work.
– Religious Jewish people constitute another good part of that clientele and the rest is a mixture of immigrants and aged people of various cultural origins and backgrounds, if the multitude of language that can be heard can bear witness to.

Discussion

From the core situation of a speculative building, through its various modifications to becoming a community place, ***the strip mall seems to act as a touchstone of the evolution of the social, cultural and economic profile of the neighborhood…****answering the question asked by the Spacing Montreal Association:* ***" …at what point does a privately-owned business, like a shopping mall or a supermarket, become a public space?" (3)***
Using Grady Clays intuition about a strip belonging to the ***"open road" set of values,*** *we can say that the emergence of public life in the Strip mall happens at the point when,* ***becoming a stabilized***

shopping/commercial center, it leaves that set of values to sidle up to those of the "closed city" (2).

*We hope to have shown "**how"** it happens that **when** a strip mall comes to a certain economic maturity, it tends to develop an **"identity"** often in relation to the socio-cultural one of the neighborhood it is set in, thereby becoming a **public place for community life.***

***Note:** I think of the **Third Place** recycled shopping centers of the greater Seattle Area that feature a small stage for various events, a "half price" bookstore with very comfortable armchairs, eateries of the world, etc. in a very relaxed ambiance.*

But that is another story!

Bibliographical notes

(1) J. B. Jackson's environmentally oriented periodical **Landscape (**vol 16 #1, 1966, p 14), published in its "Evolving landscape" chronicle the following assessment:

*" If requirements for parking are modified, shopping centers could include offices and become true **community centers**"*

(2) Grady Clay in his "Close up – How to read the American City", 1973, p 108, writes about strips:

"*The **strip** is trying to tell us (…) that most Americans (…) are determined to simplify as much of the mechanical, service, and distribution side of life as possible; and are willing to patronize and subsidize any informal, geographic behavior setting that helps. **The value systems of the strip derive from the open road rather than from the closed city."***

(3) In a 2007 issue, the webzine **SPACING MONTREAL,** discussing the history of a now defunct supermarket chain, and one particular Strip Mall, observed:

"*Steinberg's stores, while they existed, **were a central part of Montreal's public life"** (…) **"at what point does a privately-owned business, like a shopping mall or supermarket, become a public space"***

(4) https://www.flickr.com/photos/grocerymaniaagain/3273730406

*Credit drawing of Steinberg supermarket: Vintage Canadian Supermarkets and Discount Stores **(4)***

Credit all other photos: Maurice Amiel

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