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From Textual Freedom to Social/Economic Contingencies: Space, power and the shopping centres in Singapore

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Introduction: Postmodernism, text, contingency

There is a common saying here that shopping is the favourite past time for Singaporeans. Shopping in Singapore is indeed hugely impressive even by world standards, both for the sheer range of goods and the luxurious shopping malls providing a total experience that fulfills the lifestyles and hedonistic yearnings of locals and tourists alike. Postmodern cultural analysis perceives mass consumption as a crucial means of making individual identities and subjectivities (Lee 1992), and it is through the commodification of private needs

1. A draft was first presented at the SISEA (Social Issues in Southeast Asia) Seminar, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Much thanks to Surin Maisrikrod, Diana Wong, John Girling, Patricia Lim, Nirmal Kishnani, Simryn Gill, and Michael van Langenberg for their critical engagement with this paper.
and desires that the regulatory forces of capitalism are reproduced (Harvey 1991). If this is the case, then it is no longer possible to think of the shopping centre as a mere site of amusement and even that of purely economic transaction, but a place in which the trajectory of power is figured.

The heritage of all this is undoubtedly the "ideological criticism" of the Frankfurt School. From the perspective of the Critical Theory, consumption is seen as means of doing ideological work, of imposing the logic of mass production on individual consciousness and thought. In Adorno's (1973) discussion of popular music, for example, the "colonization of consciousness" by the infantilized consumption of the standardized mass produced popular music, makes the alienation of the consumer no less devastating than that of the worker. The conception of consumption and power is both instrumentalist and deterministic; it is also notably "bourgeois" in the invalidation of the aesthetic and political value of popular music.

Postmodernism would typically reject this unproblematic reading of consumption as a particular result of some essentialized superstructural practices, a mere reflection of the forces of production. The rejection of the neo-Marxist cultural analysis not only implicates a theoretical and ideological shift; it also opens the way to discover new behavioral possibilities and significance in mass culture and sites of consumption. Postmodern, or more accurately, poststructuralist theorizing sees consumption - and the shopping centre - as a particular signifying form in which individuals can script their own meanings, and give shape to their subjectivities in the world. In this way shopping and shopping centres come to be endowed with the literariness of text which invites the reading and writing by diverse "authors". Out of the profound skepticism of Marxist totalization and determinism, and in the anxiety to dispense with the "safety rail.. of materialism" (Frow 1983:229), postmodern analysis of shopping centres inevitably dramatizes the freedom of users in the celebration of consumption\(^2\). Such freedom is expressed in the textual operation in the appropriation and

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subjugation of signs by the self. At the same time, territorization of spaces in the mall by diverse users and wanderers suggests a kind of spatial democracy that the new sites of consumption offer.

For many of us trying to rework the problem of culture and mass consumption, the affirming of behavioral and textual freedom in the shopping centres is highly attractive. It is tempting to inject an ideological agenda into, for instance, the Barthian offering of textualization as a possibility of "changing the object" from its "anonymous and irrecoverable" quality (Barthes 1977:165, 77). From such a perspective, shopping centre becomes a construct that comes into being by diverse authors - architects, mall management, retailers and shoppers - who (re-)make the space into products of their imaginings, desires and concerns. The move takes on the political when it refuses to privilege the effectiveness of any single agency, so that the textual commitments by shoppers/mall users (neo-Marxism's hapless victim of commercial fetishism), retailers, and mall management are equally upheld.

The celebration of textual freedom in postmodern analysis of consumption is to promote a view of unrestrained personal fulfillment through the egalitarian acceptance and enjoyment of mass marketed merchandise and pleasures without "moral censure" (Featherstone 1987). The liberating of the subject from the iron cage of determinism produces a textual jouissance can be as dazzling as the pleasure of viewing the crowded New York street from the height of the World Trade Centre that so enchants Michel De Certesau:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Centre is to be carried away by the city's hold. One's body is no longer criss-crossed by the streets that bind user or used - by the sound of all its many contrasts or by the frantic New York traffic. The person who ascends to that height leaves behind the mass that takes and incorporates into itself any sense of being either an author or spectator. Above those waters Icarus can ignore the tricks of Daedalus in his shifting and endless labyrinths. His altitude transforms him into a voyeur. It places him at a distance. It changes an enchanted world into a text (1985:122).
Textual pleasure, however, should not blind us to the 'tricks' or wisdom of Daedalus who consults, we might say, grounded contingencies in any analytical flight. What concerns me here is not the deconstruction this pleasure, but the question about the 'significance' of textual instability in the reading of space like the shopping centre. The question is an evaluative one: at what point of deference does textual openness come to be foreclosed by the distribution of power, or some notion of contingency? Obviously the shopping centre is no hospital, school or military field; its spatial logic has no symmetry with the 'orderly grid' of technologies of discipline and power (Foucault 1973, 1979). But the behavioural possibilities at the mall are nonetheless, like Icarus’ enterprise, bounded and contingent. They are said to be contingent in the sense that their ‘conditions’ of emergence, insertion and functioning’ are bracketed within and marked out by certain cartography of 'regularities' (Foucault 1972:163). By attending to the trajectory of these 'regularities', we can talk about the way behaviours in the shopping mall are circumscribed without inferring their ‘determined’ qualities. In this sense, and like Foucault, power is not looked at as an effectivity that determines individual actions but as something that prescribes the map of probabilities. Moreover while such bounded probabilities can be restrictive, they can also be positive and which people use for their own advantage, as I shall demonstrate. In relation to the shopping centre, the contingencies that prescribe the distribution of these probabilities are undoubtedly: mall management, spatial organization itself, and the principle of retail economics. In the Singapore context, we have to consider in addition the geographical location of the malls, a issue that centrally involves government urban planning policy and state politics in general.

Thus the power of exclusion by mall management appears in some context to be absolute in deciding who should be included and who should not be included in the mall. But the temptation to “naturalize” such a power gives away when we consider that its presence and exercise are themselves “contingent” upon other operations. The unhinging of mall management may come from the contestation by the mall users. But the understating of the power of management is also traceable, in a more subtle sense, to the principle of retail economics that underpins the new shopping malls these days. It is a principle
which opens up the differences between shopping and non-shopping activities almost to the point of "privileging" wandering and aimless meandering - all for the important purpose of enlarging the catchment of potential customers. Retail economics, mall management and spatial behaviour therefore overspill into a subtle looping of influences and mutual implications. The freedom to wander, to indulge in the endless array of choices of goods and services, turns out to be bracketed by the commercial logic in the management of retail space. These wider "contingencies" not only illustrate the "incomplete" and "relational" character of the connection between power and behaviour; they also offer a means of tempering the all too easy celebration of freedom and choice we come to associate with the dazzling site of consumption in Southeast Asian cities.

**Shopping centres in Singapore : “A visible move towards wants, rather than needs”**

Shopping centres represent S$16 billion real estate in Singapore. Along Orchard Road - the “golden mile” of Singapore - is some of the world’s most expensive retail space after Tokyo. Currently the retail industry is going through a major change in search of a new direction to meet the changing tastes and rising income of Singaporeans. The planning, location and the physical design of the new shopping malls³ is fascinating to observers of globalized consumption and spatial behaviour in urban Southeast Asia. In many ways the new developments constitute a departure from the conventional approach which emphasized single-retail use and restriction of non-shopping activities. The moving from the old to the new type of shopping centre thematizes in fact a different principle in regards to physical design, spatial management, behavioral opportunities and the perception of user activities. The new design principle breaks down the orthodox division and hierarchy of uses, and creates relatively diverse spatial opportunities for both shoppers and non-shoppers alike. Before turning to examine the new shopping mall, it is useful to take brief look at the history of the retail trade.

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³. I describe this in Yao (1993).
In Singapore Japanese-owned Yaohan and Isetan are regarded as pioneers that have revolutionized the concept of shopping. In contrast to the neighbourhood shops, they provide more than simply shopping: they offer, as it has become a retailing cliche, "shopping as an experience". Yaohan opened as an anchor store in Singapura Plaza on Orchard Road in the seventies. The concept was to link shopping with other activities under one roof in air-conditioned comfort. To achieve this, a whole floor at the basement was devoted to housing a supermarket, as well as a large food section featuring a Japanese restaurant and snack bars selling a wide assortment of Chinese and Japanese meals and cocktail tit bits. Isetan, in contrast, attempted to achieve the "totality of shopping experience" not through food or a supermarket, but by the well-stocked designer brand clothes and fashion accessories, especially those from Japan. Isetan opened in Havelock Road in 1972, and it introduced Singaporeans to such brand names as Issey Miyake, Daniel Hechter, Kenzo and Calvin Klein. Through its parent company in Japan, Isetan was able to source fashion houses in Tokyo, Paris, New York, Milan and New York and, brought products to Singapore shoppers. Isetan was the first department store in Singapore which brought Singapore consumers to the world of fashion overseas. In the local retail industry, Isetan was, and still is, renowned for its glossy fashion advertisements, and the monthly sales offering "genuine price reductions" of selected quality goods.

The fundamental concept of Yaohan and Isetan was about moving away from shopping for necessities to shopping for "lifestyle" embodied in the internationally marketed designer goods. Lifestyle shopping or putting in Baudrillard's (1976) terms, the consumption of "signs", turns shopping centre into more than a place for selling things and has come to script the character of shopping malls in Singapore. Along Orchard Road shopping centres adopt a tenancy mix policy where food and drinks are never far away from cosmetics, designer clothes and electronic goods. The food outlets are Western fast food chains like Mc Donalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut and Delifrance - as well as local hawker food. The last has become very popular as the whole basement of a shopping complex is turned into a "food court" right below boutiques and stores selling Espirit or Benetton clothes and sports shoes. The
Food Court below Scotts Shopping Centre in the Orchard Road-Scotts Road corner is only a stone’s throw away from the Mandarin Hotel, Metro Department Store and the Far East Shopping Centre which has their own outside cafes and fast food outlets.

Providing food in retail centres breaks the traditional raison d’ètre of shopping. Shopping has come to mean other things - meeting of friends, taking the family out for a meal, and generally giving in to the seductive allurement of window displays. Nonetheless the appeal of food alone is limited; with the rising standard of living and global consumer culture, something more spectacular has to be provided to lure the customers and to stage the buying of “subjectivities” which high fashion and Western fast foods promise.

In the first place, it may be simply that the novelty of these older shopping centres is fading. As Singaporeans become more affluent and as they travel more, they find what is available at home pale by comparison with those offered in London, Hong Kong and New York. Surrounded by poor neighbours in the region, it is perhaps reasonable that keeping up with the Joneses should also be on an international scale. Partly in response to changing consumer taste and the need to capture greater retail dollars, the shopping centres are planning a new phase of development both in terms of physical design and merchandising. The answer (lies), according to the managing director of Metro, one of the largest department store chains in Singapore:

in turning retailing into something far more than a mere matter of marketing merchandise. They have to make shopping an all-encompassing experience, with malls that are one-stop centres for shoppers to buy their merchandise, pay utilities bill and engage in leisure and entertainment activities. ... (The) wave of the future consists of “mega, multi-anchor malls” designed to shock the senses of even the most blase shopper (Tan 1993:6).

Compared with the present shopping centres, malls of the future will be immensely larger each with two, three or more anchor tenants instead of one. These mega malls will be under one million square feet in floor space with a wide
variety of stores offering shopping, entertainment and variety of services. People can look forward to not only shopping, but also restaurants and cinema, health gyms as well as banking and government services.

Over the past few years, new shopping centres have been built which may provide a prototype of these mega malls of the future. These includes Raffles City with its anchor tenant Sogo drawing shoppers from the twin hotels in the complex; Marina Square with three major anchors Tokyo, Habitat and Metro; Northpoint serving the northern HDB estates of Yishun and Woodlands; and the recently opened Ngee Ann City on Orchard Road with its major departmental store Takashimaya. Raffles City (216,000 sq feet) and Marina Square (650,000 sq feet) are designed by the “architect superstars” the United States-based I.M. Pei and John Portman respectively; they are impressive for their sheer size and complex of buildings interrupted by open atriums. Northpoint on the other hand, is interesting because it is the first Orchard Road style luxurious shopping centre opened in a public housing estate4.

Other than the development of these mega malls, the existing shopping centres are trying to find ways around the problem of size. One solution that has been mooted is to merge several shopping centres to provide the feel of a mega mall. For example, as informants have suggested, adjacent centres could be structurally joined into one mall by a series of contiguous corridors or underground passage ways. In design and marketing terms, the shopping malls so formed could develop a single coherent retailing concept and marketing image within a common locality. Each locality would consist of a string of structurally and thematically linked stores or small shopping centres. In the retail scene, the

4. The concepts for these shopping centres no doubt come from North America where huge mega malls (often more than a million sq. feet) are the norm, such as the 3 million sq. feet Mall of America in Minnesota including a miniature golf course and six nightclubs, and the 5.2 million sq feet West Edmonton Mall in Canada with its 11 departmental stores, 828 specialty shops, hotels, amusement park and even a skating rink (cf. Shield 1989).
mega centres would present competition with other centres on a locational basis, rather than between individual centres as such (cf. Tan op.cit).

**Economics, diversity and fragmentation of use**

The new mega malls emphasizing multi-use and diverse services extend and build upon the retail concept introduced by Yaohan and Isetan. Size is a crucial factor because of the need to accommodate a minimum number of shops which will provide a range of services deemed necessary for a “state of the art” shopping mall. At the same time, for the developer, the subdivision of large floor space into numerous shopping lots ensures better returns for capital. In addition, size also provides the economy of scale when recuperating from the development and later management costs of a shopping mall. Size, fragmentation of use, and economics are crucial issues when examining the spatial principle of the new shopping malls. Analytically the breaking of single purpose merchandising into a flowering of fashion, restaurants, health studios, cinemas and supermarkets recognizes the complex “textuality” of consumer needs and desires, refocusing shopping into a myriad of social experiences. What immediately comes to mind is that we cannot understand these multiple use shopping malls through the simplistic, polarized differences between retail interests and shoppers” needs, advertising-inspired consumer demands and private aspirations. By inducing and meeting the most whimsical of consumer fantasies, the malls appear to be as much about catering for - almost selflessly - the need of malls users as about merchandising for profit: thus the free concerts, cultural performances, public utilities counters, government services enquiries, and information booths for career development for young students. It is as if the single minded transaction of goods for money has come to be diffused into this

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5. Another reason for the trend in mega malls is the nature of corporate finance. In Singapore as in other major cities, corporate financing is being increasingly internationalize and ending would involve huge loan packages: 10 to 20 million dollar loans are often of little interest to these large financial institutions. I am grateful to Caroline Gates for this insight.
fulfillment of desire and pragmatic needs. Perhaps that is why these malls have to be of immense size, not only for economic reasons but also for providing the monumental certainty of gratification, and from another point of view, the contrasting nuances of "poetics of space" (Bachelard 1964) in these sites of consumption.

What is important is that mega malls like Raffles City and Northpoint in fact implicate a new organization of space. Spatial organization has important effect on behaviour: it defines the boundaries, who can and cannot enter, and the degree to which people can negotiate their usage and territorialization. In this case, putting it simply, the principle of the new type of shopping mall is one which allows aimless wandering and window shopping, as people go from one store to another, one fast food restaurant to another, with or without a definite commitment to purchase. It is an environment which, with all the dazzling allurement of designer goods, encourages loitering or non-purposive shopping, to use a retail jargon.

However this physical and "textual" freedom of the mall users is not absolute. The contour and significance of such freedom is always subject to the prescription by certain contingencies. If textual transformation, as Michel de Certu so elegantly proclaims, is necessary for our perception and use of space, this bridging of text and practice is contested between mall users, shoppers, retail tenants and mall managements - not to mention the state bureaucracy that arbitrates in the complex rulings of city life. The centrality of spatial principle and behaviour can be illustrated by looking firstly, at the relatively regimented older shopping centres.

In retail industry, data on the traffic catchment are crucial information for any shopping centre. These data are usually expressed in the form of the number of people passing through the site. Some of them would either have actually made a purchase or declared intention to purchase on the particular date the survey is carried out; they are just as likely to be non-shoppers. From the shopping centre's point of view, volume of foot traffic indicates the size of
potential customers and thus provides a fair estimate of the rental value of the shop spaces. Still the fact remains that not all the people present in or passing through the shopping centre would actually buy something. If the retail space is organized in such a way which mainly caters for actual shoppers and has little tolerance for window shoppers and wanderers, then difficulties will arise. This contradiction is most evidently played out in a site like Lucky Plaza on Orchard Road. Built in the 1970’s, Lucky Plaza has an unique position as a down-market shopping centre situated among most expensive retail shops in Singapore. Unlike the neighbouring stores, shops in Lucky Plaza mainly sell cheap common branded goods with mass sales turnover. This feature plus the many money changers opening at the weekends and offering attractive rates compared with the banks, have turned Lucky Plaza into a favourite place for locals and foreign tourists looking for bargains and convenience. With the bargain hunters also come Filipino maids working in Singapore who gather by their hundreds at the Plaza on Sundays. There they gossip, exchange news from home, and compare the bargains they have just purchased. Or they go to the specialist “Filipino shops’ at the top level where they can have their hair done, buy magazines and herbal medicine from the Philippines, send remittance home, make travelling arrangements, or have gift parcels made for sending home. To the plaza management, the gathering of the Filipino maids is regarded as an annoyance and the fact that they actually do much of their shopping there does not seem to change its perception. Instead the women are seen as an unruly lot with their excessive gaiety and exuberant chattering, who take up up space and drive away real customers. Singaporean shoppers too complain that the maids add to the long taxi queue outside the Plaza. The “problem” of the Filipino maids occasionally comes to the forefront, and security guards are instructed to disperse the women by asking them to move on - something the Plaza management is allowed to do under the law. Over time a certain accommodation has been worked out by the centre management and the Filipino users, and the crowd of the domestic maids continue to gather by the plaza under the watchful eyes of the security guards.
Commercialism and the new spatial logic

This episode, and others such as the so-called Centrepoint Kids - teenagers gathering in the upmarket Centrepoint Shopping Centre on Orchard Road - highlight the tension in the way conventional shopping centres are organized. The problem has a risen because of the management’s need to maintain some clear definition of shopping and non-shopping behaviour, and in the wider sense, retailing interests and public thoroughfare. In a shopping centre like Lucky Plaza there is relatively limited possibility for users like the Filipino maids to negotiate the use of space for their own ends. Their freedom is circumscribed by the power and the perceptions of the management in regards to what are considered delinquent behaviour detrimental to commercial interests and orderliness of the centre. To be fair, it is also a matter of space. At Lucky Plaza, like the older shopping centres, the public space inside - in the form of an internal atrium - is small providing only a few seats, and the walk path outside the tenant shops narrow and really does not allow the leisurely pacing of window shoppers. Any large gathering of people beyond a certain number will lead to a traffic congestion. In spatial terms then, it is simply that the original design concept did not foresee the type of user behaviour the Plaza finds today: the large volume of people some of whom wish to wander, to pause and chat with each other, rather than rushing from store to store looking for something to buy. Space therefore dictates to a large degree the limit of behavioural options and thus the exercise of power by the management. Indeed the power of exclusion and crowd control in the context takes a certain transparency and perhaps easy legitimacy. The space in Lucky Plaza is such that the gathering of the Filipino maids is quickly perceived as a problem, and the decision of the management viewed by the public as understandable and necessary. To an extent, the spatial principle tends to “determine” the problem, but also strategically underlines the solution and the nature of management control.

Such a “strategic determinacy” is denied to new shopping mall like Raffles City. Here space as a signifier has a much wider and more subtle textual meaning. The cartography of power which prescribes behavioural choices within the mall is dispersed and gives the appearance of not related to the space
at all. We see this most strikingly, when compared with Lucky Plaza, in the loosening up of the formal definition legitimate behaviour and the neat boundaries of shopping and non-shopping activities. In order to offer a "total experience" which is more than the buying of merchandise, yet an unmistakable enterprise of commercial seduction, a shopping centre like Raffles City pursues an approach in which the commercial intent seems to be at the backstage. Instead the dominant emphasis of the management is on creating an carnivalesque amusement for shoppers and non-shoppers alike with all the resources - and imagination - at its disposal. It is a shopping mall like Raffles City that more appropriately symbolizes the "citadel of desire" promoted by mass consumption and advertising.

A visit to Raffles City is always an impressive experience for the monumental confidence it exudes. Designed by the Chinese-Americanarchitect I.M. Pei, it is sited right across from the Raffles Hotel - icon of Singapore's colonial past. By taking on its namesake, Raffles City perhaps hopes to rub on the aura of imperial nostalgia admixed with contemporary architecture of high modernism. Raffles City is in fact a part of a complex of buildings. The shopping mall sits in the mid section flanked by two five star hotels the Westin Stamford (1,253 rooms and 16 restaurants) and the Westin Plaza (796 rooms and 16 restaurants); in the front, a broad atrium links it directly with the MRT (Mass Rapid Transit, the Singapore underground light-rail system). After alighting from the City Hall Station people move towards the mall. Entry to the malls is however interrupted by an open space where people gather their thoughts, meet friends and decide what to do next. It is as if the outside atrium has been designed to offer a pause to the otherwise direct flow of traffic from the MRT Station to the mall opposite.

The shopping mall itself is, in contrast with the older Lucky Plaza or Far East Plaza on Scotts Road, sparse with a distinct sense austerity. The feeling is created by the broad internal atrium at the centre: a huge glass structure which, as one looks up, takes ones vision towards the skyline. "Cathedral of commercial fantasy" is perhaps no extreme metaphor when the "poetics of space" is undeniably one designed to awe and inspire. As the dominant space of the mall,
the internal atrium pushes the shops “against the wall” to the four sides and breaks the visual connection of shop to shop from one side to another. As one leaves the first level, one sees immediately not the shops opposite - the sight of which is in any case interrupted by the brass railings and the staircase - but the well-like space underneath where sales exhibitions, cultural shows and musical concerts are held.

The atrium, with its hollowing out of the centre of the mall, seems to work against economic logic by giving up valuable retail space to public use. The outside corridor too, as I have said, seems to undermine the commercial ethos by gently breaking the direct traffic of people from the MRT station to the mall. Certainly mall users enjoy a kind of freedom and leisurely pace not possible at the older shopping centres like Lucky Plaza. Indeed the spatial organization of Raffles City depends on actively seeking out “mall loafers” - the wanderers and window gazers who, like Benjamin’s Baudelairian flaneur, walk on the thin line between uncommitted individualism at one moment, and surrender to the commodified desire the next (Benjamin 1993; Eagleton 1981:25-27). I venture that the success of a new mega mall like Raffles City is realized by a certain gesture of disavowal. The overall spatial order and siting of shops versus public space are such that seem to understate the eager commercialism that so typifies the older shopping centres. More particularly, the spatial principle draws on and expresses a profound architectural and psychological insight that commercial viability can be achieved by a kind of denial, so that much of its efforts can be devoted to crowding-pleasing and the provision of public space (the beloved agenda of liberal urban planners). Yet it is a denial that has an impeccable commercial logic. This has to do with ensuring the catchment of the people - the all important volume of foot traffic on which both the value of retail space and the viability of shops depend, as pointed out. Seen in this light, it makes sense for Raffles City not to target the relatively small number of “decided” shoppers. Rather the approach focuses on advertising events and amusements in order to “work on” the larger population of mall users and uncommitted shoppers some of whom will be seduced by the stratagem of commercial promises to become “real” shoppers.
In Raffles City then, space, architectural design, and retail economics slip back on each other in a way that allows a significant congruence between mall management interests and user choices. Yet for precisely the same reason, the behavioural freedom must be seen as bounded and circumscribed. It is so because the textual transformations of space by users and mall management both figure, and draw reference from, a spatial organization that is itself underlined by the principle of retail economics. Of course, compared with Lucky Plaza, the sense of "determinacy" here is relatively incomplete. The effectivity of spatial principle is nonetheless evident, and this is testified by the commercial success of Raffles City as one of the most popular shopping centres in Singapore, rather more specifically by resolving any real or imaginary problem of delinquent behaviour.

Consumption and the politics of desire

If wider contingencies like retail economics tend to script the spatial principle and the locus of power and behaviour possibilities in a shopping centre, there is another important sense in which the process is acted out. I refer to the building of luxurious upmarket shopping centres in the suburbs near public housing estates. Other than the emergence of multi-use mega malls, the spatial location of shopping centres away from the Orchard Road area is another significant development of the retail industry today. Like much of urban life in Singapore, this is charted by government policy. The relevant guideline is the revised Concept Plan of 1992 which a specific emphasis on establishing major regional centres to encourage decentralization from the congested Central Region in the southern part of the island (Sim 1991). Under the policy, the government takes the lead by relocating from the Central Region those government and semi-government bodies which do not benefit from the high-rent CBD (Central Business District) locations. One radical feature of the plan is allowing private housing development in selected HDB areas, thus bringing middle class residents of private condominium to public housing estates. Furthermore the HDB shops will receive face lift and upgrading in accordance with the Government’s Retail Sector Development Plan. All these are signals
enough for private retail developers that government has the intention of turning public housing estate areas into thriving retail hubs.

The best example of the trend of “bring Orchard Road shopping to the housing estates” is the $100 million Northpoint shopping centre in the largely working class area of Yishun north of the island. Opened in Christmas 1992, Northpoint was jointly developed by Centrepoint Properties and Cold Storage Holdings which also jointly owns the highly successful Centrepoint, a landmark of expensive shopping on Orchard Road. Northpoint is thus centrepoint’s northern counterpart, but targeted at the predominantly working class and lower middle class population in the areas of Yishun, Thomsons, Sembawang and Ang Mo Kio north of the island. Here shoppers are served by 75 shops including anchor tenants like Cold Storage, Toys ‘R’ Us, McDonald, Giordano, Body Shop and Swensens as well as Yishun 10, the ten screen cinema multiplex, all of which spread over seven floors and 73,088 square feet of floor space.

At Cold Storage Northpoint shoppers can buy French mineral water, German beer, Australian cheeses and Dutch cauliflower; you choose your purchases from a refrigerator with gentle cascading water that keeps the produce fresh. Northpoint is about “quality shopping close to home”. Conceptually it represents the flowering the principle of the mega shopping centre by featuring diverse services like food and entertainment in order to ensure the catchment of potential shoppers among the users. Yishun 10 Cineplex whose cinema houses show first run Hong Kong and Hollywood films has proved to be highly successful in this regard by helping to draw in the crowds for the retail shops. Over the next few years, similar luxurious shopping malls are to be built in other suburbs. In Serangoon - not far from the Little India beloved by Western tourists - Koven Centre is being planned. It will feature shopping and entertainment facilities, serving more than 250,000 residents in the neighbouring HDB and private housing estates in Yio Chu Kang and Upper Serangoon Road. Other suburban shopping centres near completion include the Ginza Plaza in Clementi and Sin Ming Plaza in Thomson, as well as an Orchard Road-type commercial centre in Woodlands across from the Malaysia border, to be completed in 1997.
Government regional planning, of course, is not the only factor that plots this movement to the suburbs. The relatively cheaper land prices, rising affluence of the residents in the HDB housing estates, and the retail industry’s relentless pursuit of new markets, all contribute to the spatial location of new shopping centres. In retail terms, the move to HDB housing estates makes sense as each housing estate has a critical mass of up to 60,000 consumers whose disposable income and standards of living are rising.

However in the complex hegemonic conditions of Singapore, official ideology and government attitude towards mass consumption can be nonetheless singled out to understand something of the politics of desire with which shopping and shopping centres are invariably enmeshed. There is nothing more evident of the textual overlaying of mass consumption than the dramatic proliferation of western - and Japanese and Hongkong - consumer goods in a city renowned for official regulations of many spheres of social life. For example, while in the west consumer education and official attitude - and the very organization of civil society in consumer protection and environmentalism - have tempered to an extent the wide social acceptance of fast foods on nutritional and environmental grounds if only among certain social class; a similar movement is lacking in Singapore. Mass consumption be it fast food or designer clothes and accessories is tacitly approved by the state as the law of the market place. This is in dramatic contrast to the stringent control of film and video (though sex and nudity rather than violence is the main target), and ‘politically sensitive’ publications from abroad. These materials are prohibited on the grounds that they are detrimental to Asian cultural values - moral purity, discipline and group rather than individual consciousness - and political stability. Given the instant gratification and hedonistic desire so famously celebrated by global marketing of Western fast food and consumer goods, the lack of official censure of mass consumption comes across a phenomenon overlaid with complex textuality. The complex argument can be simply put as follows.

Historically the legitimacy of the ruling PAP (Peopl’s Action Party) has always been built on the social provision for the masses. The early struggle for power in the 50s and 60s with the radical labour unions, and need to resolve the
urgent economic problems brought about by the withdrawal of British armed forces and later in 1965 the separation from Malaysia, meant that political viability of the government came to depend on a commitment to some form of democratic socialism (Chang 1971). Such a commitment, in other words, has been "a pragmatic response to the special compulsions of the Singapore reality faced by the PAP social democrats" (Vasil 1984:77, cited in the United Nations University 1985:55). In short the social delivery of the government - public housing, free education and subsidized health services and superannuation scheme - is a historical burden that cannot be easily unloaded. Currently the government is attempting to restructure the overall system of state provisions, no doubt to avoid what it sees as the social and financial ills of "welfarism" that plagues the Western economies and societies. Nonetheless government handouts of quite a different kind are given out which invites interesting reading. For example, there was in 1993 the government scheme of a $250 grant for each citizen on top of a $500 lump sum contribution to his/her CPF (Central Provident Fund) superannuation account. Even more massive exercise was the offering of preferential shares by Telecom, the highly successful government-owned telecommunication firm, to the Singapore public as an incentive "to own a part of Singapore Incorporated".

Consequently it is not straining the point to view the unrestrained mass consumption and the flowering of shopping centres as a part of the wider tapestry of the politics of desire. The official agenda6 is inserted first and foremost by the urban development plan which is - in Singapore and elsewhere - conceptualized to meet the economic, infrastructural, social and political needs of the country. The entering of luxurious shopping malls in public housing estates thus takes on a significance which signals the continuous granting of government provision to

6. It is a well-known fact Singapore planning authority tends to favour development applications which involve internationally renowned architects. This has in part led to the building of some of the most impressive modernist monuments in Singapore, such as as the OUB (Overseas Union Bank) Building by Kenzo Tange, and OCBC (Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation) Centre by I M Pei.
the masses, of a form more befitting of the present time. If economic success is the justification of PAP rule, then shopping centres stocked with the best of Western consumer goods are proud testimonials of the successful economic management by the government. Like the current effort to make average Singaporeans own shares, the easy access to luxurious shopping facilities previously available on Orchard Road realizes the benefits of belonging to Singapore Inc., "Bringing shopping close to home" is not merely a retail jargon, but demonstrates the true democracy of consumer desire the gratification of which is now granted, as in much of other social and economic needs, to the lower classes under the benevolent official rule.

Conclusion

"The house", writes Bachelard, "is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space" (op. cit:3). A shopping centre too has a "phenomenological essence" that is underpinned by its spatial organization and the way it scripts user behaviour. Philosophically speaking, there is no such thing as pure physical space as individual attempts to territorialize it, transforming it into one of personal use and significance. The poststructuralist jargon, "there is nothing outside the text", appropriately points to the power of human agency in the writing of text on the typifications of urban life. Postmodern analysis of culture and space has given much importance to the process of "writing", by focusing on the way human agencies negotiate space and other texts by bracketing them with their own reading and empowerment.

However people's ability to negotiate the use of space cannot be a matter of political faith\(^7\). The process, I have suggested, has to be seen within a specific locus of power; only then are we able to delineate the limits of such negotiation, and settle the question regarding the significance of any textual operation in the first place. The two issues are in a way distinct. The later is raised in order to avoid the reductionism in which any use of space is regarded as ipso facto negotiation from the user's point of view. We have to ask: what are the

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7. For a forceful argument of this point, see MacCannell (1992).
specific contingencies which script and realize such a negotiation? Thus in a new shopping mall like the Raffles City the relative freedom and opportunities are not “objective things” simply there for the taking : they are made possible by the spatial principle which encourages a substantial degree of territorialization by users. Equally important, the spatial opportunities available are from the users’ point of view highly meaningful as they represent genuine freedom to wander, to socialize, both inside and outsides the mall, beside to shop.

All this also leads to the next analytical point. This is that the freedom or spatial opportunities available in a site like the shopping centre cannot be conceived simply in terms of the absence of power or control. On the contrary, the behaviour possibilities we observed in mega shopping mall like Raffles City are something that is charted by the intricate looping of crucial contingencies of architectural design, mall management, and retail economics. There is thus a special irony in such freedom. Personal choices in the shopping malls are granted as much by the postmodern cliche of the sovereignty of consumer desire, as by the considerations of economic viability and spatial design. The relative “license” available to users of Raffles City is not totally innocent. Compared with the more regimented space like Lucky Plaza, the success of Raffles City in fact has much to do with its ability to conceptualize and work out the new retail economics which depends on the affirmation of the notion of “freedom” and “consumer choice”. Whether such freedom and choice can be analyzed apart from the neo-Marxist framework of commodity fetishism cannot be settled here. My primary concern has been to examine critically the celebration of “freedom” vis a vis operations underlined much of postmodern literature on urban mass consumption. The freedom of mall users, I suggest, cannot be essentialized out of one’s theoretical skepticism of determinism. It is a freedom that is always “in context”, located in the complex intersections of different textual practices. The insertion of these practices and principles, as I have shown, operates through relative laxity of control and - more positively - the privileging of “user choices”. Under this light, the conclusion is at best a “decentred one” : the behavioral possibilities in the new shopping centres are scripted by a textuality that is as much as about empirically real spatial opportunities as the subtle canvass of commodification of desire in late capitalism.
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