

Fun Shopping



Boris Brorman Jensen

At the beginning of the last century Walter Benjamin began to describe and examine the shopping arcades and galleries of the modern metropolis. Since then a strong tradition has developed, especially within cultural studies, of studying and analysing the relations between different lifestyles and the aesthetic realm framed and represented by the shop window, the market place and the architecture of the department store. In that sense an interesting cultural strand runs from the architecture of the early department store and the 'passages' of late 19th-century Berlin, through le Bon Marché in Paris, to OMA's latest Prada Epicentre in New York, outlining the contours of a rapidly expanding phenomenon with deep cultural roots.

Those grand architectural icons, and all the other great examples of extravagant department stores, for example KaDeWe in Berlin, Harrods in London, QVB in Sydney or Tiffany's on New York's Fifth Avenue, have managed to capture and condense a particular urban way of staging and directing consumption: champagne on ice, cigars in trim carved boxes, lady's lingerie arranged with amorous elegance, exclusive branded bags, ties and gilded ballpoint pens on devout display, and the whole range of bourgeois décor presented in luxurious abundance or – as in the case of Prada – a hip lifestyle reduced to a brand name and wrapped in an aura of sophisticated coolness. The elevated atmosphere created by the cathedrals of consumption, and the aura surrounding the commodities, whether simple convenience goods or extravagant luxury, demonstrate a highly degree of astuteness and a set of aesthetic preferences belonging to a particular, cultivated metropolitan lifestyle. And the glorious story of this exclusive section through the development of the modern market place is an exemplary

illustration of how urban cultures of consumption, product aesthetics and architecture can all develop and enrich one other.

For the cultural flows go both ways: from the product into art, architecture and urban spaces; but also from the urban scene and architectural practice into consumption. The aesthetics of consumption created by shopping centres directly influence the everyday life of the consumer, since the whole situation becomes a frame of reference for the various lifestyle groups, and a prototype for the individual field of articulation. Shopping architecture and the spatial organization of consumption are in that sense both an atelier for contemporary culture and a magnifying glass for reviewing and understanding different modern lifestyles.

But what exactly are the mechanisms that promote one kind of consumption as a cultural activity and categorize others as inane consumerism? Why does the broad and more popular variant of the consumer culture have such a difficult time finding its way into the architectural canon and achieving a more privileged status within planning, making it a more legitimate aspect of what is conceived as public space? How has the mall earned its reputation as anti-urban? Is there anything architects and planners can learn from the shopping phenomenon?

In this essay I will try to pin down these questions in an attempt to rehabilitate the notion of shopping by making an exodus from the dominant critical discourse, and devoting some thought to whatever encouraging impact shopping might have on architecture, the city and the various lifestyles of contemporary urbanity. If shopping is a matter of desire and seduction, expressions of lifestyle and the construction of identity, it is obvious that we need to investigate how architecture and urban design can deal with this hedonistic programme. I don't think it is betraying all the virtues of the profession to learn from this new *Funscape* of modern retail.

A call for productive criticism

One of the more predominant political/economic instruments during the last few decades of constant economic growth has been to stimulate consumption, and it is perhaps symptomatic that questions of self-expression and identity as well as social criticism have to some extent shifted their main focus from the conditions of production to the impact and significance of consumption. Within the last ten years or so studies of everyday consumer life have almost become a trend in

the humanities. It is without any doubt from this new academic front line that most of the analytical fieldwork on shopping and most of the cultural critiques of consumerism have been formulated. It is as if the majority of sociologists, anthropologists, art historians and researchers from cross-disciplinary cultural studies have decided to emulate the journalists who once exposed the Watergate scandal. They "follow the money", and for some time they have walked in the path of the consumers around the contemporary consumer environment, and carried on the ongoing story of Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*. For some reason architects have been reluctant to participate in this – and I am not referring to their obligatory criticism of the heedless waste of resources, the artificial urbanity of the mall and all the dubious commercial programmes threatening to invade almost every cultural practice; but to their reluctance to formulate a strategy that can grasp, decode and make use of the enormous driving forces of the consumer culture. It is as if there is a distinct nervousness within the architectural profession about becoming 'commercial'; or a pronounced scepticism towards contemporary consumerism and an animosity towards following its forces and investigating the potential of these new landscapes of consumption.

Another explanation is obviously that architecture has a long tradition

of operating by example. Architectural practice regards itself primarily as an independent form of production, and less as a critical capacity that can be developed and refined through the exacting use of existing production. Not many practising architects and planners believe that bad examples have any useful impact; so if you are critical of consumerism you tend simply to steer clear of it. You are confronted with a dilemma. You are either critical or productive. The conditions for producing critical examples depend on a kind of constructive dialogue with the hedonistic consumer culture – and in my view this process still faces some difficulties.

If Capitalism is a religion – then shopping is its Holy Communion

Karl Marx has described the aura around the commodity which the delicate parades of the department store so eagerly celebrate as capitalism's counterpart of Christian Communion. According to Marx, a *transubstantiation* or conversion of substance occurs the very moment a product – in principle worthless – is transformed into money again by a purchase. The effort to get the resources spent on making and distributing a given product to rematerialize as money constitutes the

Diesel. (Photo: Boris Broman Jensen)



actual mechanism behind product aesthetics and the architectonic display that capitalism's consumer economy has developed and refined.

The consumers – if we are to trust Marx – attend Communion and become reunited with the very creative power from which, as modern workers, they have become alienated. But viewed in a more contemporary, post-industrial context, this phenomenon appears more and more to have become a problem for the rich, if we define the notion of shopping as material overconsumption, not as a matter of access to basic needs. Poor people don't shop, they are kept outside and are restricted to viewing the consumer culture from a distance as a kind of peepshow which awakens both desire and indignation, because it creates even more taste for 'a western life' among those who are already hungry for it, and gives even greater moral offence to those already repelled by global marketing's massive eroticizing of consumption. It should however be pointed out that, even if shopping is regarded solely as a luxury problem, this does not make the underlying discussion of wealth distribution policies less essential, nor should the existence of any such shopping paradise be detached from its hidden links with migration and jihad. However, this will not be discussed here. But for the privileged part of the world I am focusing on here, the shopping ritual seems to have become a subject for amusing confessions of one's sins.

Those who have plenty and those who have no problems gaining access



(Photos: Borís Brorman Jensen)

to the commodities are facing the challenge of mobilizing inner resistance to the overwhelming flood of shopping opportunities. And this is perhaps one of the reasons why shopping is such an embarrassing and painful topic, especially from a Protestant perspective, which tends to regard production as a more uplifting activity than consumption. And it doesn't make things any better that shopping-centre architecture is often Baroque in its lingo – a point to which I shall return. Here in Scandinavia, where good taste is still rather whitewashed, buildings



that are all too colourful and all too flamboyant, as most shopping centres are, easily awake scepticism among architects and instantaneous resistance from the advocates of the ascetic design tradition.

Current post-Marxist discourses back up this tendency by speaking of the simulation of desires (the offer of excess or inverted indulgence!) and seduction, commoditization and sexism, privatization of public space and sophisticated processes of exclusion – but whatever it is called, for the majority of the critical approaches shopping involves segregation, false promises, genuflection to profit and the feeding of the victims of advertising with empty calories.

Eclectic typologies – Piranesi meets Borromini

Shopping centre atriums exudes commercial activity and it is interesting to observe how this environment of eternal turnover has turned back in time and found one of its favourite architectural themes in the

Baroque period. Generic shopping-centre architecture, with its oscillating balconies, vertical draws, spherical swarms, jumbles of crossing staircases, mirrors, screens and reflecting surfaces, is like a modern reconstruction of Francesco Borromini's work.



SuperBrandMall.
(Photo: Boris Brorman Jensen)

There is of course some deviation. Baroque architecture tended to dissolve its spaces in a dizzy multiple-shell-ness and always had a fixed centre inscribed in its intricate geometry. The dominant shopping typology has an abundance of lines of sight and flight, but tends to leave a more intriguing 'eye-of-the-hurricane' void in the midst of its constant flow. The typical shopping-centre style or cliché is more of a *propaganda fiscale* than a matter of faith. It has many phrasings but it is usually combined with an enthralling Piranesian devouring. Motifs from Giovanni Battista Piranesi's gloomy prison engravings emerge again and again. The various attempts to interpret the shopping culture with its quest for material redemption seem to awake a dormant neoclassicist fantasy of confined space among architects.

The classical symbolic references and artefacts, when it comes to shopping architecture, are often mixed together in an immense system of paths and passages. Endlessly moving escalators and a web of crossing flows and motive forces draw people inside. Most shopping-centre architecture defines its own enchanted world, inviting the consumers inside a cocoon of wonderful material superabundance. Modern shopping culture is inscribed in a carefully designed setting and takes place on a stage, and most shopping architecture is basically theatrical. The organization of a shopping centre may be extravagant,

rigid, confused, tangled, themed, stylish, exclusive, ordinary or claustrophobic – but despite the formal features it is always a carefully staged set-up designed to bring about a sale.

The difference between the notion of shopping and what one could call the more trivial act of purchasing is that shopping activities always imply a certain ambience. Shopping includes the display context as an inseparable element of its nature. So although most shopping centres are like fragments of the traditional urban scene turned inside out, they should not be regarded solely as introverted, hostile gestures towards their surroundings. Shopping centres are inhibited in their contacts with their own physical settings, because their nature requires screening to conceal the blissful vacuum. The mall, the shopping centre and other modern shopping structures need to bear up and vigilantly support their own context, since it is a valuable commodity. Shopping centres ought to be regarded as 'autistic' members of society. They don't like to have their routines disturbed.

They can be equipped with internal activities with quite unique characteristics, but they are not socially engaged. Their physical shells are armoured like a conch, but the inside is a soft glitzy space that never stops pouring from an illusory source. Modern shopping-centre architecture is just a thin framework around a buzzing dream-world, a gateway to an appealing fiction which, despite its frequent Baroque connotations, must never look old-fashioned, and is therefore under constant restoration.

A (new) public domain

The mall and most large shopping venues have at least one thing in common. They are usually gathered around two or more department stores, so-called anchors, and organized around a unifying atrium. The anchors are the gravitational points for the institutional turnover and the programmatic terminals for the inscribed consumer loop. The atrium is both a logistical machine and an event-generator that orchestrates the flow of people and creates the essential atmosphere of light distraction and titillating voyeurism that stimulates a willingness to buy – what has been called the "Gruen Drift".

It is generally around the atrium that the mall or shopping centre shows off its architectural ambitions and expresses its concealed magnitude. In many ways the atrium is to the shopping culture what the plaza is to urban life. The interior motifs of most shopping centres can be interpreted, without much effort of the imagination, as archetypal

variations on an urban plaza turned inside out. Atriums are almost always constructed as an exteriorized interior, reproducing an atmosphere that recalls a genuine outdoor urban scene wrapped in a carefully controlled space. The similarities are intriguing, and invite critical comparisons. However, the problem is that a comparative critique taking its normative model from a traditional understanding of the public life represented by the classical plaza will most likely reach the same conclusions over and over again: shopping centres are A) bad replicas; B) terrible imitations; and/or C) eclectic disasters!

Unlike the historic market place, the various contemporary shopping centres, malls, arcades and their variety of displays have not won full recognition as legitimate institutions in their own right. Shopping centres are in my opinion too often studied as if they were composed of elements they *do not represent*: authentic plazas, spaces free of any hegemony, the civic institutions of society, tableaux of an unprejudiced utopia, humanitarian services, campsites for free, non-commercial expression, and so on. In that respect we now know quite a lot about what shopping is not and what shopping *cannot* do – architecturally, urbanistically, socially and politically.

For even though the swarming crowds in shopping centres mimic the liveliness of urban life, they are of course not the real thing. Urban

spaces generate meetings among different kinds of people – the atrium must generate a profit. The lively space of the shopping-centre atrium, despite its apparent freedom of access, is privately owned and kept under firm control. The atmosphere can be jolly as long as it does not disturb business. Those who do not appear to submit to the unwritten laws of consumerism will be expelled by the friendly guards. Signs announce that "CCTV is operating on these premises for your safety" – but no one has the right to capture the scenery with his or her own camera. No signposts tell you directly who is threatening this peaceful closed-circle regime, and no explicit principles identify who the suspects are, and who is subject to exclusion. An absolute absolutism rules the atrium, no doubt about that. On the other hand, this does not imply that the meetings taking place inside are false, or that the nature of the atrium and shopping centre architecture *per se* is an apocryphal dystopia whose miseries we constantly have to decipher and reveal; or that the life inside and around the shopping centre is meaningless theatre.

The privatized and semi-public space of the shopping centre is an example of what Marteen Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp call a *public domain*. Viewed in the multicultural perspective, the parochial spaces of modern retail are probably a much better instrument of integra-

Horton, U.S.A. (Photo: Boris Brorman Jensen)



tion than the cultural institutions of the ruling middle class. I would claim that a trip to Fisketorvet (perhaps Copenhagen's most criticized shopping centre) is a far more *multicultural* experience than a visit to the foyer in Copenhagen's new privately-sponsored opera house at the other end of the harbour. The generic centre programme can actually be a cultural refuge for multi-ethnic meetings, because the various codes it emits do not belong to any particular culture. It is too ethnocentric and too self-righteous to regard shopping as a particularly 'western' or 'white' invention. It should rather be seen as a *de facto* global mainstream phenomenon with a symbolic language driven and enforced by a monetary logic.

What is the civic and where is it?

Those who have experienced Eastern Europe under a planned economy can probably testify to the difference made by the capitalist consumer culture to both the market place and the urban environment. The wave of discount aesthetics that is flooding through the retail outlets in Denmark at the moment might be more hideous than the now-collapsed planned economy's stacks and aesthetics of scarcity, and more strident than the jaundiced light that radiated from most of the former state-controlled shops, but this does not change the fact that urban atmospheres get much of their colour from the variety of consumer cultures. There are of course big differences among the ways that the old grocery shops, the specialty stores, the large department stores and the retail giants like Danish BILKA organize trade, and the effects the various businesses have on the urban environment. But whether we are talking about old or new shop structures, about fifty or a hundred thousand square metres in the city or out in the suburbs, the phenomenon of shopping still deserves to be acknowledged as an important architectural and urban instrument.

Now that the dogmatic and rigid aesthetics that were deliberately used to enforce and mark the symbolic front line of the Cold War have been dissolved, and the opposing sides have been 're-united' in global capitalism, it has become hard to imagine urban life without shopping. But just think about Washington, Canberra, Brasilia or Malaysia's new capital site at Patrajaya south of Kuala Lumpur. There you can find everything that modern planning has to offer: clear structures and well-defined geometry, symbolic places in systematic succession, obvious axes and fixed centres, separation of traffic and broad roads, historical monuments and cultural institutions, civic centres everywhere,

green areas and lots of trees – but still some of the same de-eroticized urbanity as one saw behind the old Iron Curtain. These stark examples of urban structures ruled by an autocratic (political) aesthetic illustrate how hermetic separation of the various institutions of society can help to externalize and accentuate certain significant constitutional boundaries between the state, the market and civil society. But the price of clear-cut boundaries and lucid aesthetic differentiation among the three domains is the loss of a fundamental urban synergy effect.

Although the respective institutions are explicitly defined by physical separation and unambiguous semantic codes, this clarity does not imply that an apartheid aesthetic in the relationships among state, market and civil society is any guarantee of an enhanced autonomy and democratic principles. Urbanity without the mutual catalytic effect of the market place, public spaces and the various state and cultural institutions has an awkward tendency to pinion street life in rigid patterns. The planned economy's political encircling of the market place and its aesthetics were not inspiring to look at; they did not even serve to assure the hegemony of the political regime. Attempts to counter capitalism's gay, inflated and highly erotic advertising space with a more rational set-up or a more politically regulated language risk creating a jovial dullness – or a 'G-rated' kind of urbanism like the one flourishing in Singapore.

My point is of course not that more shopping will automatically strengthen civil society, or that more supplies of consumer goods inevitably benefit more people. My argument is that the distinction between the state, the market and civil society is a constitutional principle which in real life can easily accommodate hybrid forms. The notion of civic should be broadened to include more shared spaces and more joint activities than implied in the original scheme. Shopping cultures, even though they function on the premises of the market, are not necessarily indicative of a kind of civil indifference. The blurred relations between the private and the public sphere, between commercial and non-commercial spaces, and the significance of the different 'publicnesses' of the historic centres and the more dispersed urban situations of the contemporary cities, are far from fully explored. But architecture, I believe, has an obvious potential to play a more emancipating role.

One good example

In 2003 the Danish architectural firm PLOT won First Prize in an open competition for ideas on "Better Urban Spaces" in Denmark by drawing attention to the latent architectural and cultural opportunities for swapping different urban domains. PLOT proposed a "High Plaza" on the roof of the large department store "Magasin" on the *Kongens Nytorv* circus in the heart Copenhagen. The proposal involved a transformation of the 3000 m² unutilized roof surface into a public plaza with an open-air stage, a sun deck, café arrangements, various recreational spaces and sports facilities. The High Plaza project is in principle a simple curved boardwalk covering the entire roof of the department store. But the folded superstructure deck creates intricate connections between the different landings of the complex and the hidden roofscape. It hooks the overlaid deck to the subjacent floors and a metro station underneath the main building – as well as connecting the proposed deck to a public street and Magasin's multi-storey car park by a system of elevators, ramps and stairways. The High Plaza project distances itself from the classical plaza in several ways: its location as a prominent backdrop, its encroachment on both public and private spheres, its soft material character and its three-dimensional topography.

It is neither a plaza nor a street in the traditional sense, but a mixture of both, which stimulates new aspects of the urban space with a hybrid recreational programme. The folded boardwalk of the High Plaza project stages a variety of social activities in a spatial field that transgresses the urban-design precedent of invoking clear boundaries, and represents a kind of infrastructural *effectualness* among different agencies.

It is a public place, because it is open after business hours thanks to the tactical link with the new Metro Station and the adjacent street Bremerholmen – but the three-dimensional plaza on top of the consumption environment is also a centre, with a blurred interface between the public and the private/commercial sphere. Big retail business has become very eager to exploit business opportunities in public space and to make a profit from spectacle, so that large parts of urban life have now been interiorized and placed under private ownership. Besides being a specific proposal to renegotiate the boundaries between the private and the public sphere, between commercial and cultural activities, the *urban field* that PLOT brings into play here is also an interesting example of how residual spaces and sealed-off areas can be included and activated as a new recreational space of

the city. What gives this example a critical dimension is the way the High Plaza project tries to re-open some of the territory that shopping threatens to colonize.

Made in China

Shopping understood as the essence of modern society's (over)consumption is, as earlier mentioned, not a question of basic needs. The major part of this (over)consumption is directed at "*all that you don't need*" as the Danish department store Magasin clarifies in its advertising material. For many reasons, it is easier for the privileged modern consumer to express an individual position within this cultural dynamic and to channel his or her symbolic capital through the pattern of consumption than through his or her participation in the production process. Surprisingly, an ordinary employee doing paperwork on a computer in an ordinary office space in some indifferent suburb may not find it difficult to identify entirely with this new kind of 'work'.

As a reaction to a lack of any clear position in the process of production, this post-industrial 'blue-collar-white-shirt' worker has now become more aware of his or her own lifestyle as an expression of identity. The formerly clear colour-codes of work have become more ambivalent, and as a result of this new diversity social ranking is now expressed as a more emblematic layer on the respective uniforms. The

PLOT (= BIG + JDS Architects) Magasin High Plaza, Copenhagen. (Photo: PLOT)



link between a specific commodity and its process of production and symbolic value has been fundamentally changed from that of industrial culture, since the place of production is no longer necessarily the source of its history, as Naomi Klein documents in "No Logo". The material objects to which we attribute cultural and symbolical significance are either "Made in China" or produced all over the world and assembled at some arbitrary site by an international company. In that sense, the place of production no longer always has a direct association with the commodity. The site or the space for encountering the cultural significance of a given product has therefore shifted to the place of display and utilization. Consumption takes place everywhere, and this homelessness of the articles of trade may be one reason why the contemporary shopping institutions are so obsessed with both the thematic fiction and its antithesis – the illusion of the authentic.

The struggle for influence over production about which Marx wrote has to some extent become a fight for control of distribution and trading territory, making the physical place of production a less interesting story than the virtual context of consumption controlled by modern advertising. That is why the marketing budgets for most exclusive brands often exceed the actual cost of production. And that is why Benetton can sell its clothing by showing a picture of a dying HIV patient, assuming that no one associates the depicted agony with the miseries of all the children working as slaves for big industry. The brand is interposed between the consumer and the commodity as an arbitrary sign, and is often established before the actual production process even starts. Shopping has become a question of lifestyle, consumption a dominant marker of identity.

A new cultural tribe is taking over the old class structure. We no longer orient ourselves primarily in a landscape of production, as in the guild districts of the historic city. The modern shopping centres have "Brand Guides" leading you around a distinctive environment of consumption. Nike is not so much a specific product, a shoe or a particular handbag, as a symbol or marker in this new sophisticated hierarchy of consumption. The brand is a kind of escutcheon offering protection from the accelerating placelessness of modern production processes, and all the tactically obsolete stories of its origin. In his encyclopaedic *Life Style* Bruce Mau, the graphic designer and leading specialist within this modern heraldry, has observed how these semantic parades influence the realm of physical space and squeeze its representations into a new kind of flatness. According to Mau we are witnessing the disappearance of the middle ground. The depth-

giving dimension between foreground and background is being transformed into a virtual extension, because the commodities are to a great extent formed by a independent context placed behind them, whether a plan, a space, an event or just a rumour.

And I think it has become an essential task for architecture and planning to withstand this barrage of semiotics and to challenge this copyrighting and commercial enveloping of the built environment and the shared cultural horizon.

A proactive strategy

The American architect Jon Jerde is one of the few practising contemporary international designers apart from Rem Koolhaas who has made a consistent contribution to the profession's discussion of the shopping phenomenon. Since the mid-80s Jon Jerde's Californian firm has had enormous success with building shopping centres, mega-malls and entire privatized consumption communities all over the world. Jerde terms his strategy *place making*, and his quite extensive production can to some extent be seen a reaction to the gloomy life and death of the American city. The basic concept behind Jerde's *place making* is very simple: give the city some safe shopping environments and give the shopping enclaves of the suburbs a more urban set-up. However, the sophisticated aspect of Jerde's concept is not the simple redistribution or swapping of density and programme, but the kind of treatment his architecture offers the suffering American city. Public space in America is to some degree afflicted by an omnipresent paranoia, and the American pioneering spirit instinctively regards collective spaces as a potential threat to the free individual. Jerde's architectural consultations deal with and combine the two exceptions that confirm this rule – the car and the private property – in one both eventful (*mobile*) and controlled (*private*) space, offering a safe framework for materialistic therapy. One could call *place making* an optimistic symptom-treatment aesthetic. The causality of urbanity is very complex, and it is hard to blame Jerde for the attempt to make short-cuts to good city life by adapting external characteristics of good looks. Jerde's architectural themes are not far from the Danish architect Jan Gehl's work with urban atmospheres and his endeavour to deal with the basic human perceptions of urban environments. However, Jerde's programmes are 100% commercial and privately owned. Jerde apprehends the city as a mall and focuses on an urbanity that is 100% embedded in a consumer context. Jerde's architecture is an absolutely *proactive* shopping approach and has therefore



been cited by critics as the very opposite of the oeuvre of the landmark-hero and star-architect Frank Gehry. The 'evil twin theory' is intriguing, but from an architectural point of view the two are not far from each other, as Daniel Herman documents in his article "Separated at Birth" in the *Harvard Guide to Shopping*.

Use the force of the dark side

Things are a bit different with Rem Koolhaas. He stands as both creator of the new Prada showroom and co-author of the Harvard Design School's *Guide to Shopping*, with one foot in both camps. He is on the one hand a guarantor of good taste, yet is armed with an ambivalent kind of irony that blurs the distinction between a critical standpoint and a productive effort. The successful example in New York demonstrates that he can create shopping architecture with style. The epicentre on Manhattan has shaken off any implicit connotations of 'junk space', eliminated all the opulent smugness of the standard shopping centre. The Prada shop expresses a conceptual kind of minimalism, in Koolhaas' own words invented to give the consumer a chance to shop with a clear conscience. Prada sets a new standard for a Protestant type of luxury that experiments intelligently with the shopping genre. The Prada project appeals to the more self-reflective consumer segments and satisfies every avant-garde demand for an authentic architectural style. The exclusive shop emanates an ambience of 'the creative class' and certainly has the impact of the good example.

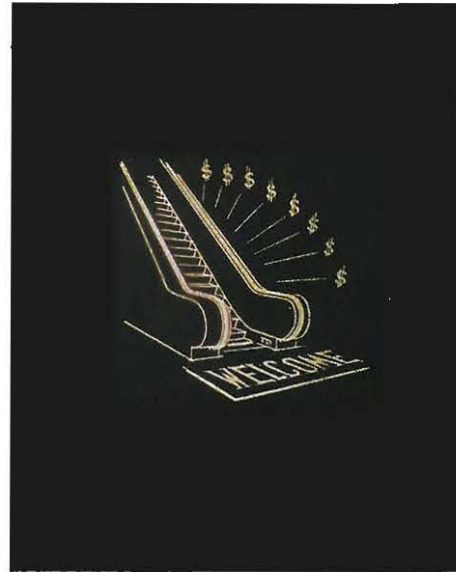
On the other hand we have the *Harvard Guide*, which introduces something that, for want of a better expression, I will call *the force of the dark side*. The shopping guide, like the other mammoth publication on the Pearl River Delta, offers no excoriating criticism, no explicit moralizing, no humanist counter-attack and no finger-wagging – just some lessons from reality. A *Learning from Global Capitalism* that tries without prejudice to gather knowledge about a booming phenomenon to subject the nourishing idealism to a reality check. The authors of the *Guide* do not say that architects should act as a fancy vanguard for jubilant trade delegations, or be reduced to purely calculating pragmatic activity without no compunction about anything. The *Guide* should be seen as an attempt to elevate the basis of praxis from a critical monologue on consumption to a more productive critical dia-

Voir and JC. Decaux (previous page)
(Photos: Boris Brorman Jensen)



logue. The Harvard Guide gathers together some of the tendencies of the market forces in order to use them as a kind of ready-made tool for creative-critical activity.

The strategy of using *the force of the dark side* tries to do the same as most conceptual art forms, which have to some extent abandoned the ideal of being pure, authentic production and turned to conducting experiments with what one could call the critical manipulation of the exuberance of commodities. Critical art has been much better than architecture at transforming its praxis from autonomous production to critical consumption of consumption. The strategy of using *the force of the dark side* does not mean imitating the tactics of the "ugly and ordinary", but trying to float some "disquieting ducklings" in the sea of commercial clichés that dominates the architectural style of most shopping centres. It is a question of formulating some strategies that can transform consumer culture from within instead of ignoring its reality. The Harvard Guide is in this respect almost a hacker's manual for those who want to retort to what should not be neglected but refuted and overruled – like the widespread Benetton type of 'idealism' that tries to give the impression that buying exclusive brands makes the world a better place to live in. There is a need for a critical architecture that dares to some extent to follow the market, but on the other hand keeps trying to reclaim the agenda, as PLOT did with its High Plaza project. To use *the force of the dark side* is to merge cultural and commercial programmes, grafting public event spaces on to the privatized sphere of consumption, and proposing new examples of how the experience economy and its expanding Funscape territory ought to be designed.



Harvard Guide to Shopping, 2001.
(Photos: Bogdan Szymczyk)