

THE ROLE OF SHOPPING CENTERS AS SIMULATED PUBLIC SPACE: THE SHOPPING CENTER CENTRO MAYOR, BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

EL PAPEL DE LOS CENTROS COMERCIALES COMO SIMULACROS DE ESPACIOS PÚBLICOS: EL CENTRO COMERCIAL CENTRO MAYOR, BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

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SUMMARY

Public space is in an integral part of the cultural richness of cities, and an essential element in the functioning of a democratic society. Made up of the networks of streets, sidewalks, parks and plazas, public space is what makes urban centers living entities. Though its importance is consistently recognized around the world, public space in Latin America has held a special role in society. In the context of Colombia, the role of public space has been shaped not only by its function as a gathering space for citizens, but it has been marked by decades of armed conflict. It was in this context in Colombia that the construction of major shopping malls emerged, becoming an increasingly important part of the commercial sector of Colombian cities, and, according to some authors, providing an alternative 'public' space in which citizens could gather. This study, through a review of the literature and a survey, summarizes some of the changes that have occurred in the urban public realm of Bogotá in the past decades, and hypothesizes the role that major commercial centers are playing in the daily lives of the city's residents.

Key words: Bogotá, public space, shopping malls, urban planning

RESUMEN

El espacio público es una parte integral de la riqueza cultural de las ciudades y un elemento esencial en el funcionamiento de una sociedad democrática. Compuesto de las redes de calles, andenes, parques y plazas, el espacio público es

lo que hace de los centros urbanos entidades vivas. Su importancia es reconocida alrededor del mundo y en América Latina, el espacio público ha tenido un papel especial en la sociedad. En el contexto de Colombia, el espacio público cumple su función como espacio para reuniones entre ciudadanos, pero además ha estado marcado por décadas de violencia e inseguridad. Es dentro de este contexto que la construcción de centros comerciales emergió, creciendo en importancia el sector comercial de las ciudades colombianas, y proveyendo espacios como alternativas al espacio público abierto. Este estudio, sintetiza la relación de los centros comerciales con otros espacios en las ciudades. Con los resultados de una encuesta realizada acompañada por una revisión de la literatura, este artículo resume algunos de los cambios importantes observados en las últimas décadas acerca del tema del ámbito público de Bogotá, y se pregunta por el papel que tienen los grandes centros comerciales en las vidas de los residentes urbanos.

Palabras clave: Bogotá, espacio público, centros comerciales, planificación urbana

INTRODUCTION

Public space is in an integral part of cities, and an essential element to the functioning of a democratic political system (Kingwell & Turmel, 2009). Made up of the networks of streets, sidewalks, parks and plazas, public space is what makes urban centers living entities (Saldarriaga, 2008). Though the definition of public space is debated, it can be understood as a physical space where strangers can have

face-to-face interactions, and where residents may engage in democratic activity, such as voicing dissent, and engaging in celebrations or protests (Saldarriaga, 2008). It is a space where cultural expression and art manifest themselves (Zambrano, 2003), where the actions of users are less restricted and where, most importantly, access to the space is not exclusive (Páramo, 2007). Public space is not only a passive space that is used by citizens, but it is also a site of "citizen construction" (Hunt, 2009).

In the 1970s, the sustained violence experienced in open and public spaces spurred a trend that had already begun; the rapid construction of shopping malls as alternatives to traditional street shopping (González, 2010). Shopping malls constitute a part of a relatively new neo-liberal form of urban development, which prioritizes privatization over public ownership. While the proliferation of shopping centers is often assumed to be based on changes in consumer preference, this shift from traditional marketplaces is the result of "co-ordinated state and market strategies" (Gonzalez & Waley, 2012). Globalization and 'hypercapitalism' have also played a role in the changing urban form of Latin-American cities, ensuring the growth of large retail centers amidst changing global relations and market forces (Finol, 2006). The success of malls is not only based on their function as centers of commerce and recreation, but is also affected by the branding of the space as culturally global with a distinctly anglo-saxon aesthetic (Finol, 2006).

The proliferation of private commercial space in the city has inevitably had an effect on urban form, and citizen participation in urban space, but what have these effects been? Are people patronizing malls more and open public space less? There have been a number of investigations attempting to establish the roles and relationships of urban shopping malls with, and within, the city. Drawing on precedents, this paper explores the role of Colombia's largest mall, the shopping center Centro Mayor, in the lives of clients, opening a debate on the evolution of space in one of Latin America's most populous urban centers and what this form of urban development will mean for the future of cities.

Public Space Globally and the Emergence of the Shopping Mall:

In their book on public space, Kingwell & Turmel (2009) term public space as a living entity, integral to any 'just society, that represents past victories or conflicts; Páramo (2007) agrees, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging how historical events have shaped, and continue to shape, the space, as they are re-interpreted through time.

Shopping Malls and Public Space: Authors often refer to malls and shops as public spaces in passing (Stillerman &

Salcedo, 2012; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2006), but this description requires more scrutiny. In a study conducted in Venezuela, the author takes the time to contextualize the study, and the roles of shopping malls as places designed 'directionally' to guide people towards consumption in a conscious and manipulative way (Finol, 2006). Goss concluded, in a study of the Mall of America, that the Mall performs essential functions in contemporary society but that its role is more complex than simply being a replacement for public space (Goss, 1999). This tentative criticism is countered when the privatization of public spaces or the production of 'quasi' public spaces is addressed. Here social control and the shaping of citizenry takes place under surveillance and according to rules imposed by owners who are profiting from 'proper' use of the space (Peterson, 2006).

In Syracuse, NY, the Carousel Center, a suburban shopping center, was analyzed to see if it was a space in which community was being created, and which essentially filled the role of the historic town center (Staeheli & Mitchell, 2006). The researchers in that study explicitly contend the acceptance of malls as new public space, citing control mechanisms and exclusion of individuals from the space. Staeheli & Mitchell (2006) also discuss the notable differentiation between the discourse offered by the mall, and the use of the space by shoppers.

The role of urban malls in the construction and reproduction of culture is highlighted by Mona Abaza in her assessment of the role of shopping malls in Egypt. Her observations of a central Cairo mall include the importance that the space plays in the development of gender relations among younger, less traditional generations (Abaza, 2001). The author concluded by saying that malls are used in a number of ways, and that ultimately they do gather crowds, as would open public spaces.

Stillerman & Salcedo (2012) conducted research in shopping centers in the Chilean capital of Santiago. They highlight the important ways in which clients interpret and recreate the spaces of consumption, which have often been criticized. They purport that, unlike Goss' reading of the artificiality of the mall, and Staeheli and Mitchell's criticisms of malls, consumers successfully appropriate the space for their own uses (Stillerman & Salcedo, 2012).

Although the research summarized above provides an important theoretical base for investigation, these studies lack empirical evidence on how clients are actually using the space. The empirical analysis presented here, based on a questionnaire conducted in Centro Mayor, provides additional information to this growing field of work on the evolution of the urban public space in the context of ongoing construction of urban shopping malls.

Centro Mayor: Centro Mayor began opened to the public in March of 2010 (González, 2010). The enormous mall represents a major intervention in urban space, taking up the equivalent of approximately eight city blocks it is currently the largest shopping center in Colombia, and the third largest in Latin America (Centro Mayor, n.d.).

Centro Mayor hosts a range of businesses, from a car dealership to specialty children's hairdressers. The types of stores that are most represented are fashion and footwear next are restaurants and dessert and ice cream shops (Centro Mayor, n.d.).

METHODOLOGY

In order to address the lack of empirical research on shopping centers and the roles they potentially play as substitutes for outdoor public spaces, a survey was designed. There were a range of questions asked, 12 in total, covering topics including clients' primary reasons for visiting the mall, their use of public parks and plazas in the city, as well as some basic characteristics of the household. Although the survey was a unique tool, the survey design of a study conducted at a mall in Prague (Newmark *et al.* 2005) was consulted to verify the questions included. The survey conducted in Prague also asked questions about the purpose of the clients' visit to the mall, but all results were presented in relation to transportation modes used and so details of that research is not included in this article.

The collaboration and participation of students of the Universidad de Ciencias Aplicadas y Ambientales was essential for the successful completion of this project 19 students in total assisted, 17 undergrads, from both the Geographical and Environmental Engineering program as well as the Environmental Sciences.

A number of the students were members of either of the working groups of INGEA (led by Nohora Carvajal and focused on themes of land-use and land-use planning) or ECOTERRA (led by Adriana Posada with a focus on social and environmental management). The remaining two students were both candidates in the Masters of Environmental Science Program. For the most part, clients were receptive and helpful when asked to participate in the survey.

Data: In total 329 surveys were collected for analysis, a better sample than had been expected. Though not statistically representative of the enormous population of clients of the mall, it does provide a sufficient idea of trends among clients.

Though there were some discrepancies in how survey questions were interpreted, all of the surveys were included in the analysis, for some, if not all of the questions. A number of

respondents chose not to answer some of the questions, in which case those surveys were discounted from the analysis of certain questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questions regarding clients' use of the mall, the purpose and frequency of their visits, and the frequency of their visits to other public spaces in the city (primarily parks and plazas) forms the principal part of this analysis, which consisted of adding up the responses and calculating percentages of the total number of surveys (for a copy of the survey conducted see Appendix A).

Of the 329 persons surveyed, 156 reported that shopping was either the primary reason, or among the most important reasons for visiting the mall. Nevertheless, a significant number of shoppers (200) indicated that among their most important reasons for visiting the center were leisure, socializing and eating out. These responses represent 61% of the total respondents. This aligns with Finol's findings, where youth in Maracaibo were found to be using the mall for leisure activities, associating the space not only with activities of consumption, but of cultural symbolism and social importance (Finol, 2006).

Surveys of clients who said that Centro Mayor was the primary place in which they did their shopping were separated out for a more in depth analysis. Slightly more of these frequent shoppers (43%) stated that their primary purpose for coming to Centro Mayor was shopping, while only (37%) of the total sample stated shopping as their primary reason for being there. Histograms showing purpose of trip are visible below for both the total sample and frequent clients (Figure 1).

Questions were asked about the frequency that clients visit urban public spaces. Although this question would need more supporting evidence, it at least provides insight into the prominence of the shopping mall, in terms of time spent there, in the daily lives of residents. The histogram (Figure 2) shows the proportions of respondents who said that they visited a shopping center or public space, and how many times per week.

It is immediately notable how many more respondents answered that they visit public spaces less than once per week. Inexplicably the 3-5 times per week category demonstrated a higher proportion of people visiting public parks than the shopping mall. To be sure, a portion of the people who reported that they frequented the mall multiple times per week were going for work purposes, but this is a surprisingly small amount, representing only 15% of those who said they visited the mall 1-3 times per week and 50% of those who visited the mall for than 5 times per week.

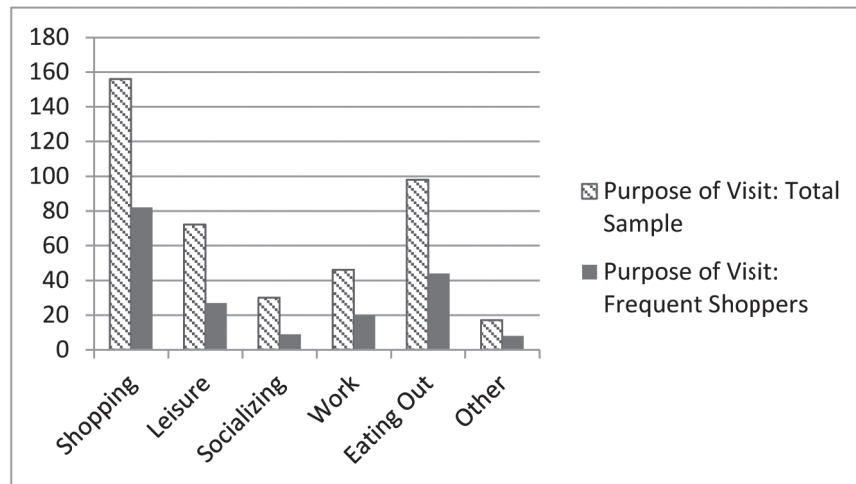


Figure 1. Primary purpose of trip, total sample and frequent shoppers.

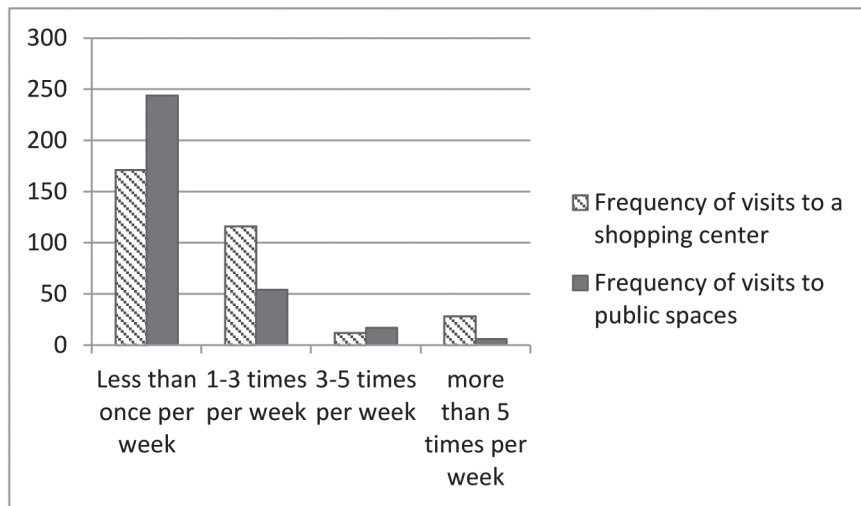


Figure 2. Frequency of visits to outdoor public space and to shopping malls.

This empirical evidence provides only a basis for further investigation and perhaps asks more questions than it answers. Additional information from interviews would have been beneficial, but time constraints restricted the research to the survey. Hopefully in the future this project will be expanded to include more urban spaces and to investigate more thoroughly people’s perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the spaces.

Further Research: It would be very useful to conduct the research over a longer period of time, using weekday afternoons and having a consistent number of people surveyed over the course of a month to ensure that variables such as weather, were not affecting people’s propensity to visit the mall or other public spaces.

Looking at the differences in purpose of visits and frequency of trips between neighborhoods of different strata would be essential to being able to generalize about the relationship between urban public space and the increasing popularity of shopping malls.

Though this study does contribute to the body of work on retail and consumer spaces and the interaction of these spaces with the urban public realm, there remains much work to be done. As stated by Crewe, focusing only on malls is to simplify retail spaces and to discount the importance of a range of other consumer spaces and their cultural and social roles (Crewe, 2000). Future research could contribute by expanding the research area and offering a more rigorous compari-

son of the use of public spaces and malls by residents across the city of Bogotá. Another important addition would be a more thorough survey of the malls and the services that are offered therein, as these most likely also have a significant impact on people's reasons for visiting. Supporting research in the future should provide more in-depth demographic data at the scale of the neighborhoods surrounding the mall, and attempt to collect information through a wider variety of sources including thorough review of periodical coverage, satellite imagery of neighborhoods and any other historical survey information available.

The increasing use of shopping malls for consumer purposes and for reasons such as socializing and leisure will surely have direct impacts on the public spaces that have historically been so important in Latin American, and Colombian, urban centers. Understanding these trends as they evolve is essential to planning healthy and well-used public spaces that contribute to the public realm and encourage citizen participation in what should be open democratic spaces. If people choose to spend their free time in private spaces where the participation of citizens is controlled and monitored, it will be to the detriment of a 'just society' that should be one of the benefits of thriving public urban life. Continuing research in this field should remain faithful to this idea, expanding upon the work that has been done, and drawing inspiration from the important roles that these spaces have played historically. Urban planning requires critical analysis of what has happened, and what sorts of evolutions are underway in a holistic manner that incorporates people's experience and use of the city, keeping in mind the ideals of accessibility that urban planning should aim to enhance. This strain of research serves to help further these goals and provide essential information to planning professionals and researchers on this topic.

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Appendix A: Survey questions

Estamos haciendo un proyecto de investigación sobre el Centro Comercial Centro Mayor y apreciamos mucho su participación. Por favor responda a las preguntas siguientes de la mejor manera posible. Puede parar el sondeo en el momento que usted lo desee. Su identidad será confidencial, y será conocida solamente por la investigadora si desea participar más en el proyecto.

1) ¿Cómo llegó al Centro Mayor hoy?

- Transmilenio
- Otro autobús
- Carro privado
- Motocicleta
- Bicicleta
- Caminando
- Otro _____

2) ¿Cuál es el tipo de transporte que más utiliza en la ciudad?

- Transmilenio
- Otro autobús
- Carro privado
- Motocicleta
- Bicicleta
- Caminando
- Otro _____

3) ¿Dónde hace la mayor parte de sus compras?

(Nombre del Centro Comercial o direcciones; carrera y calle)

4) Antes que el Centro Mayor se abriera en 2010, ¿dónde hacía la mayoría de sus compras? (Nombre del Centro Comercial o direcciones; carrera y calle)

5) Antes que el Centro Mayor se abriera en 2010 ¿qué medio de transporte utilizaba para ir al lugar donde hacía la mayoría de sus compras?

- Transmilenio
- Otro autobús
- Carro privado
- Motocicleta
- Bicicleta
- Caminando
- Otro _____

6) ¿, Cuántas veces viene al Centro Mayor, o a otro centro comercial (ej. Titan Plaza, Centro Comercial Santa Fé, Unicentro etc.)?

- Menos de una vez por semana
- 1-3 veces por semana
- 3-5 veces por semana
- Más de 5 veces por semana

7) ¿Cuáles son los propósitos más importantes de su visita al Centro Mayor hoy? (del más importante 1, al menos importante 4)

- Comprar _____
- Ocio _____
- Socializar _____
- Trabajar _____
- Otro _____

8) ¿Con qué frecuencia, va a los parques y plazas públicas de Bogotá?

- Menos de una vez por semana
- 1-3 veces por semana
- 3-5 veces por semana
- Más de 5 veces por semana

9) ¿Cuántos años tiene? _____

10) ¿En cuál barrio y localidad vive?

Barrio _____
Localidad _____

11) ¿Cuántas personas viven en su hogar? _____

12) ¿En su hogar, alguien tiene un carro? Si _____ o No
Si su respuesta es si, ¿cuántos carros hay en total en el hogar? _____

Opcional: si quiere más información o si estaría dispuesto a participar en una entrevista para complementar la investigación, por favor escriba su nombre, apellido y correo o número de teléfono.

Nombre: _____
Correo: _____ y/o
Teléfono: _____

Muchas gracias por su participación.

Annelise Grube-Cavers

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