

Is shopping the new civic realm?



A character in a recent Hanif Kureishi novel declares, "Once... there was culture, now there is shopping." A complex intersection of globalisation, marketing, transnational transaction, world travel, and consumptive desires unleashed by late capitalism has taken the phenomenon of shopping to an unprecedented level in human history.

In the last few years flagship stores by two fashion giants, one by Prada and another by Calvin Klein, opened in New York City that poses more questions about the city and the civic realm than shopping. The Prada store in SoHo was designed by the Dutch architectural maverick Rem Koolhaas -- brilliant and insidious at the same time -- with a whooping construction cost of \$40 million (about \$1700 per square foot). The Calvin Klein store was designed by the English architect John Pawson with his characteristic minimalist expression. Despite the obscene price-tag, there is something spectacular about the Prada, it's overt architectural ingenuity drawing in people to gawk at the architecture rather than the products in a seeming atmosphere of civic bonhomie. The store is housed in an old brick building in the SoHo area where diverse materials, from zebrawood floors to aluminum mesh to gypsum walls, and from high-tech to the ordinary create a designed disharmony. The glass walls of the dressing rooms change from transparent to opaque with the flick of a switch. Mannequins in cages suspended from roof tracks create a dramatic environment. The main level flows down in a grand way to the lower level where an auditorium provides fashion, theatrical and musical shows.

The Calvin Klein store is different because of its minimalist atmosphere, subdued sensuality, moody silence, but most importantly, its lack of pretense to be what it is not: more than a store. But there is another story about John Pawson, who has generally designed high-end stores but has recently completed a Cistercian monastery in Czechoslovakia. As the story goes, the monks of the monastery discovered the minimalist architect, and before commissioning him went

congregation, a room for being alone, or an art gallery, a train station, a grocery store, all seem to coalesce into just one kind of amoebic super-space. Koolhaas would like to think that is the postmodern reality and that he can deliver that space.

I will admit that both Prada and the Calvin Klein stores are fusing the threshold of art, architecture and urban experience into a novel form of collective assembly, presenting a sort of new cathedral to the city

junction, glowing in the sun like a crystal, and a beacon at night, a mountainous silhouette above the chaos of the city. One can imagine a number of metaphors for the building but one comes persistently: the cathedral or the temple as a civic icon to the city. There is no hedging about it anymore: shopping is the spiritual ritual of the moment. The flag-stores at the various urban corners of cities of the world and designed by high-profile architects are the cathedrals of the different

modern life (*Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*). But what is Koolhaas really trying to do? Is Koolhaas lambasting consumerism (thus being a critic?), redeeming it as the only occasion of public/civic transaction (a theorist?), or succumbing to the seduction of opportunity (the commercialised architect?), or all of the above?

Compared to Herzog, Koolhaas is more of a formalist and compositionalist, and he is dazzling

sociological pretense.

Koolhaas is insidious because he acts as an agent provocateur, one who apparently mocks the system as he plays with it, but is really complicit in the great consumerist revolution the world has ever seen. Koolhaas is the Salman Rushdie of architecture, ever ready to shake up the system as a hyper-conscious artist, ever wary of the permanence of architecture. Pawson, on the other hand, not quite a star as Koolhaas, endures, which is also rather paradoxical to the vacillating cosmology of fashion. I would give Prada 8/10 for theatricality and ingenuity, and Calvin Klein 7/10 for aesthetics, but when it comes to a new form of civic space, I wouldn't qualify either as urban experiences in the public domain in the nature of the square or the piazza. The two landmarks -- or storemarks -- in Manhattan are far too exclusionary for that purpose. Walking by and walking in any one of the stores maybe an exhilarating experience, but the ultimate destination of shopping is reserved for a few.

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ABOUT CITIES

Both Prada and the Calvin Klein stores are fusing the threshold of art, architecture and urban experience into a novel form of collective assembly, presenting a sort of new cathedral to the city (made possible largely by major retailers turning to the most innovative architects of the time). The Prada store in Tokyo is designed by the hot-shot Swiss team of Herzog and De Meuron, whose work has received world acclaim for their astonishing material sensuality and formal innovations.

to see one of his works: a Calvin Klein store Pawson designed in Paris. A truly intriguing meeting point of aesthetics, asceticism, fashion, consumerism, and perhaps salvation. It is perhaps true that art is a constant tension between excess and less, and that art is only imitating life here.

The heart of the matter is not about Prada or Calvin Klein per se or some other high profile enterprise in the economic landscape, it's about the presence and nature of "shopping" in modern life. Shopping isn't what it used to be; it is now, what Koolhaas claims, everything. In the western context, but even as it is reproduced elsewhere in the global chain of consumerist capitalism, no matter where you go, the shopping centres, the airport terminal, the television, your favourite web page, its shop till you drop. Shopping is no longer just a commercial transaction, it's an existential condition.

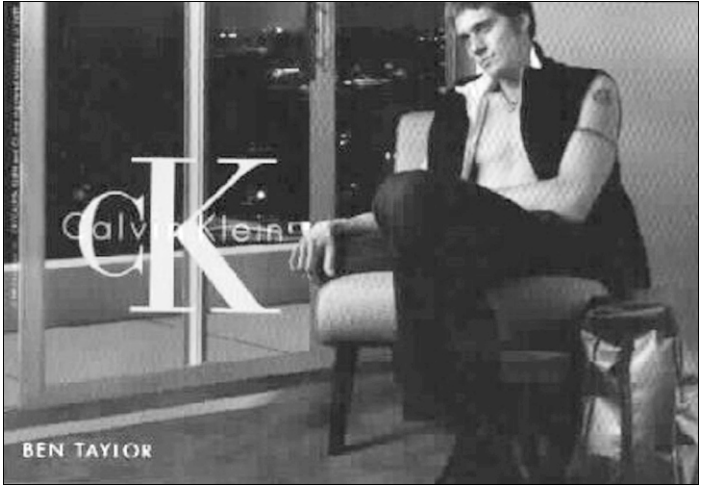
Is shopping -- shopping as articulated at Prada -- the death of civic space as we know it, or its extreme reformation, its final incorporation within the bowels of business? But perhaps, today, there are no clear spatial typologies anymore. A house of business, a house of praying, a place of entertainment, a space for

(made possible largely by major retailers turning to the most innovative architects of the time). The Prada store in Tokyo is designed by the hot-shot Swiss team of Herzog and De Meuron, whose work has received world acclaim for their astonishing material sensuality and formal innovations. The Tokyo Prada sits at a street corner in a fashionable district of the city, a massive glass pyramidal tower glorifying the urban

religiosities that are vying for our allegiance.

Koolhaas says it clearly: "Shopping is the arguably the last remaining form of public activity. Through a battery of increasingly predatory forms, shopping has infiltrated, colonised, and even replaced, almost every aspect of urban life." He has also published books on his study with Harvard architecture students on the glorified status of shopping in

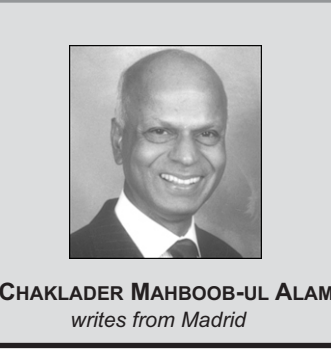
at that. His handling of radical, sculptresque forms with cutting edge technological aids as well as his manipulations of colour, material and texture is extraordinary. Great, but does that make shopping the new civic destiny of mankind? One needs to sort out Koolhaas' seductive aesthetics from his



Flagship stores of two fashion giants-- Calvin Klein and Prada



Is the American electoral system truly democratic?



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

THE US presidential election has always been a subject of great interest in Europe, Asia and elsewhere. But, it seems, this year it has aroused even greater interest than before. Why? Strictly speaking, although on Nov.2, 2004, the American electorate will be called upon to choose their next president, on that day they will in fact be depositing the immense military and economic powers of their country in the hands of a man whose policies and decisions will affect the lives of millions of non-US inhabitants of this earth. In the words of Julian Hewitt, who writes in the Boston Globe, "as the Ultimate global power, the United States creates ripples that cause big waves around the world". By his unilateral actions, Mr. Bush has made us painfully aware of this fact. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that not only the election itself but also the American electoral system have come under closer international scrutiny.

According to a poll conducted in a total of 35 countries by The Programme on International Attitudes of the University of Maryland and GlobeScan Incorporated during a period of four months, if the world could cast a vote in this election, John Kerry would win by a huge majority. Another recent survey called the Transatlantic Trends conducted by the George Marshall Foundation confirmed the findings of the GlobeScan poll.

The results of the scandal-filled presidential election of 2000 in which

vote is the most sacred right of a citizen, ever since its birth more than two hundred years ago, voter registration fraud has been rampant. Voter registration rules were manipulated in such a manner that the minorities (including the African-Americans, the Asian-Americans, the native Americans) were not allowed to vote until quite recently. The women obtained the right to vote only in 1920 (the Nineteenth Amendment). In late nineteenth and early twentieth century, politicians and party bosses manipulated the

that if a registered voter does not carry a photo identification at the time of casting his vote, he is turned away and not allowed to vote. What the election officials do not say is that according to law, in the absence of photo identification, the voter can sign an affidavit swearing to his identity, which would entitle him to vote. If in this key swing state, the authorities can suppress several thousand black votes as they did in the 2000 election, who is going to benefit from that? President George W. Bush, of course.

behind the Help America Vote Acts requirement for provisional ballots is that glitches in the election system should not keep eligible voters from voting."

Now let us look at the actual voting procedure itself. In the 2000 election, ballots of thousands of Florida voters were not counted allegedly because of hanging chads. So this year, many states are switching to electronic voting machines. Is this system going to be better than the last one? Well, there are considerable doubts about its accuracy, impartiality and even

states have different rules, but even different counties within the same state can have different rules, hence so much confusion over registration, voting and counting. In order to ensure free and fair elections under universal suffrage, what America urgently needs is a change of attitude. In a true democracy, voting is a right, not a privilege. There is a need for a uniform set of rules and procedures (with uniform standards) for the whole country. The country also needs an independent federal agency staffed by an adequate number of well-trained federal election officers to enforce these rules.

If America's voter registration system is that of a banana republic, its indirect method of electing the president is, to put it mildly, antiquated. An American president is not elected by direct popular vote. The first objective of the long and arduous campaign for the presidency is to win a majority in the electoral college, which finally elects the president. The members of the electoral college are called electors. Each state is entitled to designate electors equal in number to the total of its members to the House of Representatives (435) and Senate (100). Under the winner-take-all method, the party that wins the popular vote in a state also nominates all the state electors. In total there are 538 members in the electoral college because the Federal District of Columbia sends 3 electors. Although in theory, the electors can break their pledges and vote freely, in practice, they almost always follow party instructions. The candidate who wins the most votes in the electoral college becomes the president.

Two hundred years ago the founding fathers had good reasons to introduce this system. The absence of truly national parties (as opposed to state parties) and the desire to protect the interests of small states induced the writers of the constitution to adopt this system. But today the Democratic and Republican parties are truly national parties and the Senate, where the small states are already over-represented looks after the interests of small states. The democratic system is based on the principle that every vote is equal. Unfortunately the current system "thwarts the will of the majority (despite faulty counts, Al Gore won more than 500,000 votes than Bush in the last presidential elections), distorts presidential campaigning (because it is concentrated in swing states like Florida) and has potential to produce a truly constitutional crisis". There are many ideas on this subject like awarding one or two bonus electoral votes per state to the winner of the popular vote or split the state electoral votes according to congressional districts and then add two electoral votes to whoever carries the state. In my opinion, in order to uphold the democratic principle that every vote is equal, the US should scrap this cumbersome system completely and introduce direct election of the president.

LETTER FROM EUROPE

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tens of thousands of African-American votes were not allowed to be counted cast a shadow on the fairness of the electoral system in the United States. Now, there is widespread concern and fear in the world of similar frauds in this year's election as well.

The most vulnerable spot of the American electoral system has always been in the area of voter registration. Even though American democracy has always paid lip-service to the idea that the right to

votes of millions of newly arrived European immigrants with the help of corrupt police and local government officials.

The poor, irrespective of race or colour have always been discriminated against. Of course, if you are poor and belong to the African-American community, who usually vote for the Democrats, then the chances of your vote being suppressed are infinitely greater. If you are poor, African-American and elderly, then your situation is even worse. Take for example Florida, the state where President Bush's brother is the governor. There the elderly African-American voters are being intimidated by State police officers, both armed and in plain clothes. This unusual police activity has created so much fear among these voters that they are thinking of not exercising their right to vote. Another method is being used in Florida to disenfranchise the elderly black voters. Florida's voter-identification law is deliberately applied in such a manner

Actually police intimidation of the elderly black voters is not the only improper activity that is being conducted by the state authorities in Florida, where convicted felons are automatically barred from voting. The "felon purge" list was prepared in such a manner that it basically targeted the African-American community. When the list was challenged in the court, it was found out that the list also contained the names of thousands of African-American voters who had never committed any felony. Now it seems that the state authorities have been forced to abandon this list because of a court decision.

According to the International Herald Tribune, "US voting rolls are notoriously inaccurate. One study found that as many as six million votes were lost in the 2000 presidential election because of registration problems and that the use of provisional ballots nation-wide could have cut the loss significantly.....The guiding principle

reliability. How can one accept the count as accurate if there are no paper trails? (Apparently Nevada is the only state which generates a paper receipt for every electronic vote) If a recount were necessary, how will it be performed? What about the hackers? How can one safeguard the system against intruders? Without a proper backup system, how can one be sure that some data and or files will not be wiped out? I am afraid, without adequate audit trail, this year's election results will also become suspect.

While absentee voting has until now been considered as a safe method for future verification, this year election officials have discovered an incredible number of fraudulent vote-gathering tactics like forged signatures, altering ballots with white-outs and coercive measures that have been used by party officials to lock down votes in the critical swing states. This year, it is estimated that approximately twenty five percent of American voters will use this method to cast their votes, which will no doubt increase the possibility of fraud unless strict control is maintained over every step of this voting procedure..

To complicate matters further, Missouri and North Dakota have decided to allow military voters in combat zones to e-mail (which will not be secret votes) their ballots to Rumsfeld's Pentagon. This is so devoid of any democratic common sense that a prestigious American newspaper recently commented, "It invites cynicism about American democracy to operate a system in which employees who answer to the secretary of defence could control the margin of victory in a close presidential election."

It is difficult for us to understand how a country with the vast resources at its disposal can have such a flawed voter registration and voting system unless of course, the authorities want to keep it that way because it gives them (the privileged class) the opportunity to manipulate the results by disenfranchising a certain sector of the electorate. Not only different

Where Kerry went wrong

With his strategy in tatters, Kerry must now discredit Bush and simultaneously sell his own vision. This will be difficult for a candidate for whom straightforward English is often a second language. But it's hardly impossible, especially with Iraq melting down.

JONATHAN ALTER

AFTER Labour Day, the political calendar goes into a time warp.

Everything speeds up. With voters finally starting to pay attention, a week is about the equivalent of a normal month in political time. In late October the intensity can be so great that creative campaigns sometimes accomplish in a single day what it might once have taken three months to imprint on the minds of the voters. We don't know yet if we'll see such inventiveness this year, which means that for all of the weeping and moaning and rending of garments by despondent Democrats, we simply don't know if John Kerry is finished. We do know that his strategy so far, designed by Bob Shrum, lies in ruins, and for reasons that go far beyond the campaign's failure to respond quickly enough to the Swift Boat ads.

Shrum's grand plan wasn't complicated. He figured that with most voters believing the country is on the "wrong track," all that Kerry had to do was establish his credibility as a potential commander in chief and he would win -- hence the "bio" convention. No need to respond directly to Bush ads slinging him for wanting to cut the same weapons systems that Bush's father cut. No need to explain how the Iraq war had been botched. No need to discredit Bush at all, because he was already thoroughly discredited.

Oh, well. The Shrum strategy was the product of short-term thinking (the assumption that Bush's unpopularity in the period of the Abu Ghraib Prison scandal would last until fall) and was reinforced by the sealed and often smug world of Democratic politics, where it was taken for granted that Bush was bad, bad, bad, and any reasonable person already knew why. Shrum correctly realised that a Michael Moore-style sledgehammer would do little to sway undecided voters who don't loathe Bush. But Shrum wrongly extrapolated from that point that Kerry had no need to indict Bush in easy-to-remember phrases that would stick. He once told me as much, and that name-calling wouldn't work in post-9/11 presidential politics.

That was wishful thinking. Politics has always been a contact sport where the winning team is the one that pins the kick me sign on the other guy. This is especially true in a race involving an incumbent. Focus groups always tell consultants that they're turned off by negative campaigning. It sounds good and makes them feel virtuous, but it's not true. Except in multicandidate races like

the Democratic primaries, where voters can reject both the attacker and the attacked in favor of a third choice, the edge always goes to the predator over the victim. Americans like their candidates tough, especially during a war.

So Kerry and Shrum got the strategy exactly backward. If Kerry had used sticky language and cut-through-the-clutter ads to slice up Bush over the summer, he could have used the debates to seem positive and presidential. This is what Reagan did in 1980 against Jimmy Carter. He attacked him every day, then, with Carter discredited, left it to the debates for voters to say, "This other guy will do."

With his strategy in tatters, Kerry must now discredit Bush and simultaneously sell his own vision. This will be difficult for a candidate for whom straightforward English is often a second language. But it's hardly impossible, especially with Iraq melting down. The key is to focus less on the past -- 9/11 is Bush's ace in the hole -- and more on the present and the future, with a focus on the visceral and personal: Where's bin Laden? We've got him neither dead nor alive. Will your sons and daughters be sent off to fight in a second Bush term? You've got health insurance now, but will you lose it soon? Nailing Bush means painting a big "F" for failure on his forehead for what's going on right now, then pivoting to explain in the simple terms that have eluded Kerry what he would do differently in the months ahead: Give reconstruction contracts to allies in exchange for helping us stabilise Iraq. Set a date certain for getting out of Iraq. Promise we'll never have another Iraq. Fight terrorism where it threatens us most, which is not in Iraq.

Can all of Kerry's qualifiers, gaffes and flip-flops on Iraq be finessed with a KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) strategy? Yep. That's the magic of general elections, where 50 million likely voters are just tuning in. With a few choice one-liners, the onus of responsibility can be placed back where it belongs -- on Bush. Ripping off the GOP's 1994 "Contract With America" would also help. Voters need to know four or five simple things that Kerry and the Democrats would do immediately. As the clock winds down, the odds against a Kerry victory grow longer every day. But a day can be enough in politics, for those who can fight and KISS at the same time.

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