

Shopping malls an american cultural phenomenon essay sample



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In his provocative book *One Nation Under Goods: Malls and the Seductions of American Shopping*, James Farrell made the assertion that malls are an American cultural phenomenon. He strengthened this argument by stating that by the year 2000 there were already more than 45,000 shopping malls all over the United States generating more than a trillion dollars in annual sales while serving close to 200 million Americans every month (Farrell, 267). The author expounded on this idea by saying that it is part of popular philosophy and therefore malls are places where Americans find answers to important questions such as the answer to those pertaining to the meaning of life. This is a bold statement considering that there is no mall in every country and every rural area in mainland USA. Farrell made a bold sweeping statement but it is not accurate to say that every single American could not function properly without malls. Shopping malls may be an important feature of American life but it is not so crucial that its absence will significantly affect the way of life in the United States.

At the heart of the argument is the correct understanding of culture. It seems that Farrell used the term rather loosely and perhaps, not critically evaluating what it means to use the term culture in describing the significance of shopping malls. Farrell's statement implies the idea that shopping malls are byproducts of American culture in the same way that the need to work hard, save and aspire to achieve the American Dream is part of American culture. This can be extended to mean that without shopping malls the American way of life will cease to exist.

On the other hand it can also be argued that even if Americans will be forced to eradicate every single shopping mall in existence today, Americans will

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continue to live as if nothing had happened. If a device can be created to specifically target malls and obliterate every shopping mall in the United States, life will still go on. Americans are not dependent on malls for meaning because American culture is so rich and diversified that the meaning of existence was already negotiated a long time ago - hundreds of years before concrete was first used in America.

Overview

Malls are everywhere. Malls are as common as the Mom and Pop stores of yesteryears. Aside from the sheer number of malls in the United States one also has to deal with another feature of malls which is size. A Mom and Pop store can be established overnight and it is possible that not all of the residents of the city will be aware that such a small enterprise was started just recently. But when a mall is not even completed - when it is still in the construction stage - it is hard not to notice. Malls can occupy large swats of land and their presence and impact can be felt by the common folks as well as the government officials and businessmen that live and work in the said area.

It is like observing churchgoers preparing to worship every Sunday morning. There is significant preparation, they look forward to the experience and most importantly the whole family can be expected to go. It is even possible that families are no longer worshipping together but they can be expected to be one family once they troop to the malls. It is like a ritual that allowed statisticians to make an accurate measurement, a statistic that Farrell used in the beginning of his book. There are more or less 190 million Americans

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who come to visit the malls on a monthly basis. The numbers are staggering once the idea that the figures were based on one month of consumer activity alone and not counting the number of Americans who come to shopping malls in one whole year.

In other words there is no escaping the effect of a mall. There are many reasons why malls are very popular in the United States. Shopping mall expert and pioneer by Victor Gruen who wrote the following prophetic words in 1948:

It is our belief that there is much need for actual shopping centers - market places that are also centers of community and cultural activity. We are convinced that the real shopping center will be the most profitable type of chain store location yet developed for the simple reason that it will include features to induce people to drive considerable distances to enjoy its advantages (Hardwick & Gruen, 1).

Based on Gruen's pronouncements, the businessmen and designers of shopping malls did not simply create malls for the sake of satisfying a need. Of course the need was identified early on that people are looking for shopping centers to have a convenient location where they can buy things that they need and do it without having to waste their time and effort because everything is located in one place. This is already a given, it does not take a rocket scientist to figure it out but what is interesting about Gruen's ideas is that a shopping mall is not a byproduct of chance but there was deliberate planning behind it. Shopping malls were created to draw

people, to draw families and make them want to spend their hard-earned money on the products and services available in the malls.

There is another reason why shopping malls are very popular in the United States. According to Francaviglia a lot of time, money and effort was spent to create a commercial environment that is convenient as well as safe and he added that malls are preplanned, enclosed, protected, and controlled (Nachbar & Lause, 202). Francaviglia also noted that aside from the assurance of safety, shopping malls were created bring out the inner-child in each person and he said that the concept was borrowed from Disneyland where parent and child can both enjoy their experience in the shopping mall.

Cultural Phenomenon

As mentioned earlier the key to effectively assessing Farrell's statements is to have a correct understanding of the sociological intricacies of the term culture. According to one social scientist culture is the life-blood of a people, the flow of moral energy that holds society intact (Scruton, 1). He added that " Nations may share a civilization; but they will always be distinct in their culture, since culture defines what they are" (Scruton, 1). This is a very important statement that can help understand what Farrell was trying to say. Farrell can assert that shopping malls is an American cultural phenomenon but he has to clarify what he meant when he use the term " culture" as defined by sociological experts.

It is necessary to focus back on what was said about culture - that it is the life-blood of a people and it is manifested by the way a particular moral

energy is holding a society intact. A culture produces a belief system. It is <https://assignbuster.com/shopping-malls-an-american-cultural-phenomenon-essay-sample/>

hard to accept that shopping malls can become a source of moral energy that can hold a nation together. Moreover, shopping malls are not byproducts of chance. It can also be said that the development of malls is not due to the interaction of cultural factors that led to the spontaneous development of a shopping mall concept. Based on the ideas of Gruen it was made clear that shopping malls were deliberately created and Francaviglia added that it is preplanned using Disneyland as the model.

If this is the case then shopping malls can be considered as a product created by enterprising people eager to make a handsome profit. The presentation and the packaging were so clever that Americans agreed to spend money by going to the malls. They cannot purchase the shopping malls and therefore there is another way to make them part with their hard-earned cash, an environment was created for them so that they will be enticed to stay and forced to eat their meals their and forced to buy things that they need because they had to justify the inordinate amount of time spent within the confines of a shopping mall.

Thus, shopping malls could not be the source of culture, it could not even be said to be the backbone of American culture. Shopping malls could not be the life-blood of the American people. It lacks the necessary ingredient to make it a force that can move people to alter their beliefs and to consider their ways. A child can be transformed by culture but a shopping mall could not transform a child. A shopping mall is therefore a tool that triggers what was already present in every American citizen.

Using the current events happening in this country one can have another illustration to understand American culture. It is well-known that America is in a recession and this economic crisis is linked to the propensity to buy things that are not needed and at the same time fueled by the desire to get rich quickly with the least amount of effort. Well, the same thing occurred in the early 20th century. In 1929 this country suffered its first major economic depression and interestingly the same factors applied to the Great Depression of 1929 and the financial crisis in 2008. Americans love to purchase things that they do not really need and they wanted to make money quickly.

In the 1920s American consumerism was very much evident. People were buying homes and cars as if the good times will never end. The same thing happened in the 21st century. People were buying homes with the idea of selling them at a later date to make more money while at the same time Americans continued to use their credit cards and spent their hard-earned money on trivial things. It must be pointed out that there were no shopping malls in the 1920s and yet consumerism was very much a problem.

Shopping malls triggered what was already there inside every person that visits shopping malls on a regular basis. It is not the shopping malls that created culture for them it was already inherent in every person.

Conclusion

The proponent of this study made tremendous effort to separate American culture from the idea of shopping malls. It was made explicit in the preceding discussion that it is preposterous to place American culture and shopping

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malls in the same sentence. Based on the arguments one can have a feel as to what Farrell meant when he said that many objected to his original thesis and that in one conference where he was invited to speak he almost created a riot. It is now easy to understand why his ideas created quite a stir. For one the assertion that shopping malls is intricately entwined to American culture can be viewed as an insult to many, especially those who hate the fast-paced life of cities and the not so eco-friendly attributes of shopping malls.

Those who love to live and work in conjunction with Mother Nature will understandably object to Farrell's conclusion. There are many Americans who work in farms. For those who live in rural areas, the rolling hills and verdant fields are preferred to the urban jungle. Therefore it is not correct to say that shopping malls is as American as baseball. It is simply a sweeping statement and one can even suspect that Farrell tried to exaggerate his claims in order to be initiate debate.

On the other hand it can also be argued that Farrell's statements are based on facts, based on an inescapable truth that malls are everywhere and that hundreds of millions of Americans are trooping to the malls on a regular basis. There is no other place in the American landscape where one can see a faithful gathering of adherents on a weekly basis other than the church. If the number of people going to the malls can rival the number of devotees that go to churches every Sunday then Farrell has indeed the right to say that it is a cultural phenomenon.

Yet upon closer examination one can find the basis for Farrell's assertion. It is possible that Farrell saw how shopping malls mimic religion. It mimics

religion in the way that it draws people; in the way religion can capture the interest of the people; and in the way that religion can make people do things. But there is a missing element. There is one thing that religion can achieve and shopping malls can never duplicate, no matter how big malls can become, and no matter how many people will come to visit. Religion created a way for the development of values that people share and nurture on a regular basis. Shopping malls does not have this life-giving blood as Scruton was able to put so eloquently.

Shopping malls are passive and they are made alive by the people who come visit them on a regular basis. It is the people who congregate there, that give shopping malls meaning. There is nothing that can be found in the dead concrete walls of shopping malls. Before they enter the malls the visitors brought with them their culture, their ideas and their beliefs. Their behavior inside the malls, the American-type of consumerism that can be described as buying things that are not needed is a behavior that they will continue to exhibit even without the presence of malls.

Shopping malls are tools that engage people and draw out from them the instinct to buy. Their desire to purchase the latest laptop and to acquire the latest electronic gizmo was already negotiated long before the first shopping mall was built in America. The presence of malls simply made it convenient for them to express their beliefs. It is not the shopping malls per se that dictated their behavior. Two babies born in America can have different outlook and perspective if these two children will be separated from childbirth. One will be sent to live in the middle of New York while the other

one will be sent to life in Iraq. Their behavior and their belief system will be influenced by what is happening around them.

These two children will grow up and the influence of their surroundings will affect their behavior. Whatever it is that changed them is called culture, it has the power to transform an innocent little child. The shopping malls do not have the same capability and therefore it is not accurate for Farrell to say that shopping malls can be compared to churches where people can find meaning to their lives. It is more accurate to say that shopping malls are tools that trigger what was already inherent in each person.

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