

Malls and the future of American retail

Bad customer experience is out of fashion, not bricks and mortar

[Alexandra Lange](#) Feb 15, 2018, 2:15pm EST

Rendering of City Center Bishop Ranch by Renzo Piano.

Sunset Development Company

This fall, a 300,000-square-foot shopping mall will open in suburban northern California, built around a landscaped outdoor courtyard inspired by an Italian piazza.

The first floor is all glass, the better to see the wares; above that, corrugated stainless steel. An Equinox gym anchors the mall at one end, a dine-in movie theater anchors the other. You can drink boba tea or a Berkeley microbrew, slurp ramen, or down a burger.

From the rooftop parking garage, visitors can look down on the piazza—“it is a sweet climate” [says its European architect](#)—or out to the surrounding hills. “I don’t want to be nasty to shopping malls,” he adds, in a promotional video for the shopping mall. “I just want to say, this is not a shopping mall, it is something completely different. Instead of something artificial, we need to make something very California.”

In March 1954, a 990,000-square-foot shopping mall opened in suburban Detroit, built around landscaped outdoor courtyards, inspired by Italian piazzas. The first floor was all glass, the better to see the wares; above that, brick panels framed in concrete. A Hudson’s department store anchored the center. You could get a bite at the snack bar or candy store, or shop for dinner at the supermarket while your kids worked up an appetite at the playground.

“A mall is a public space ... committed to intensive urban activity,” [said its European architect](#), where the shopper would have “new experience, new surprises, a change of pace, and a change of atmosphere,” denigrating the surroundings as “seventeen suburbs in search of a city.”

With splashing fountains, modernist animal sculpture, and 3,000 trees, “shoppers may just sit and enjoy Northland’s architecture, art, flowers and music, that play all the time,” *LIFE* wrote, as at St. Mark’s in Venice, Milan’s Galleria, or a Viennese sidewalk cafe.

The two shopping malls—for that is what they are—don’t sound very different, despite the snobbery both Renzo Piano (2018) and Victor Gruen (1954) display. Piano’s City Center Bishop Ranch, part of a sprawling 585-acre mixed-use development, is intended to provide a center both for the existing office park, and for San Ramon, California, a city of 75,000, as a whole.

Gruen’s Northland was intended to provide a second downtown for the fastest-growing city in the eastern part of the United States; a downtown that was suburban, yes, but free of the “ugly rash” of “smoke stacks, telephone poles, power poles, dangling wire, air-conditioning ducts, and myriads of ugly signs” he saw along America’s new highways. Gruen, like Piano, thought he could organize retail for beauty and community, making extra-urban sites just like the city—only better.

"Incorporating real public functions onto the quasi-public retail streetscape makes sense"

What Piano brings to City Center Bishop Ranch is a more sophisticated architecture than your average stucco-sided behemoth, with a ground floor

that's transparent both on the inside of the rectangular block and on the exterior. We've seen Piano use lightweight screen walls before—in the renderings they look quite similar to the New York Times Building's floating ceramic tubes—as well as the shaded exterior walkways. The ensemble reminded me of Renzo Piano Building Workshop's galleries at LACMA, without the art, but with the same indoor-outdoor flow, gourmet restaurants, and landscaping.

The resemblance becomes even more pronounced when you look at the parking: In Los Angeles, RPBW's subterranean garage and glass elevators are an unexpectedly delightful design experience. At Bishop Ranch, the parking has been absorbed into the perimeter of the mall, so that you'll shoot down to the central piazza rather than up. In either location, you'll have a lovely view of native plants.

Piano isn't the only capital-A architect working on the American mall. SHoP Architects has three mall (or mall-ish) projects underway in New York right now: Empire Outlets, on Staten Island, the Market Line, part of the Essex Crossing megadevelopment, and Pier 17, where ground-floor retail and food by David Chang and Jean-Georges mingle with public waterfront (a combination like the old mall, but less fishy). [There's Santiago Calatrava's Oculus, too](#), a shopping mall disguised as a transit hub. Design sites are filled with photographs of [extreme shopping in other countries](#). The U.S. is just catching up.

Museum-ing the mall only seems strange in the short term. When Gruen was working on Northland, the future of shopping, and the future of suburbia, were tasks that occupied the best architectural minds in America. While Northland, enclosed in the 1970s and [demolished last year](#), has gone to mall heaven, a few of its contemporaries remain successful 60 years after completion, thanks to their operators' ability to maintain what Gruen [described as](#) “new experience, new surprises, a change of pace, and a change of atmosphere.”

The Stanford Shopping Center, completed in 1957 in Palo Alto, California, was designed by Los Angeles architect Welton Becket, with a landscape by [modernist pioneer Lawrence Halprin](#). The mall, originally just a single open-air corridor with major department stores on both ends, remains similar to Northland in its emphasis on landscaping and discrete squares for sitting and dining. The materials, textures, and trees were intended to relate the retail to the Stanford campus, although the architecture was far more modern.

The Oculus transit hub, by Santiago Calatrava.

Patrick Gorski/NurPhoto via Getty Images

In 1961, [Candlestick Park](#) architect John Bolles converted an 1880s campus winery adjacent to the shopping center into an international food hall, known as the Stanford Barn, with Mexican, Chinese, and Italian restaurants, along with a donut shop and soda fountain. Like the university itself, they were to foster “understanding among peoples and their ways.” Alison Isenberg, author of the recent [Designing San Francisco](#), cites the Stanford Barn as an inspiration for San Francisco’s Ghirardelli Square; both are grandmothers to the food hall, without which no “city center” would be complete.

NorthPark Center, in Dallas, is another midcentury mall that has maintained its charms and a museum-like atmosphere. Designed by E.G. Hamilton, with landscapes by Halprin and Richard Myrick, the two-million-square-foot development was modeled after New York’s Museum of Modern Art, with white-brick walls and polished-concrete floors.

Dallas Morning News architecture critic Mark Lamster is a fan:

Instead of endless boring passages cluttered with kiosks, Northpark is a series of rooms of shifting scale that are visually consistent and controlled. It’s managed to stay relevant because it is a genuinely pleasant place to be, and because it is very carefully managed by the Nasher family [patrons of Dallas’s Nasher Sculpture Center—designed by Piano]. It’s a kind of consumerist utopia, beautifully maintained, and open to the entire public,

with stores at every price point, from low to high.

When *Bloomberg* released an 8-bit [Can-You-Save-the-American-Mall? game](#) earlier this month, as part of an end-of-shopping, [retail-is-dead](#) package, players' rescue options were severely limited: cutting rents, chasing rats, picking up trash, and making deals with local government to bring in the DMV and other city offices. Oh, and adding a giant slide which, [knowing my play proclivities](#), you can be sure I did—only to be promptly slapped with a lawsuit.

Only the last two of these hail Marys crop up in discussions with today's mall makers. Incorporating real public functions onto the quasi-public retail streetscape makes sense for all the reasons listed above. "At the end of the day, most humans still like human contact. Not all the time, perhaps," says Brad M. Hutensky, a real estate investor and governing trustee at the Urban Land Institute.

"Although born of the suburbs, the mall today is being reabsorbed by the city"

"Why do they ever go to the theater? Because it is a totally different experience, with a bigger screen, better seats, alcohol, food. It's not that bricks and mortar is out of fashion, but bad customer experience is out of fashion." He lists other experiences that can't be replicated online as the pillars of reborn shopping centers: pet grooming, spa services, walk-in medical care, shopping for fresh meat and produce. Bulk packs of paper towels: you can order those online. "Give people a reason to come beyond filling shopping bags," [as TIME put it last year](#).

My version of the mall game would offer more aggressive architectural interventions. Pop the top, and change the air-conditioned, enclosed food court into an open courtyard with a creek running through it. Cover the tan stucco with silvery panels to give it that au courant "industrial" look. Turn

one section of the parking lot into a food truck rodeo, local vendors only. Replace the Dillard's with a Spa Castle, or a Nitehawk Cinema. [The mall of the future](#) is architecturally ambitious, includes plants and water features, judiciously sprinkled with local retailers and food options, and surrounded not by a donut of surface parking lot but with housing, hotels, even educational facilities.

Don't get me wrong: Malls are still dying. [Credit Suisse estimated](#) that 220 to 275 shopping centers, 20 to 25 percent of the current stock, would close within the next five years. [We built too many](#), too cheaply. And it would cost too much to make many of them a worthy destination in 2018.

But even in the age of Amazon, people still leave the house, still shop, still eat. Malls have generated their own version of industrial ruin porn, including video. But when I talked to Erik Pierson, the man behind YouTube channel [Retail Archaeology](#), he freely shared that, while his video of Mesa's defunct Fiesta Mall may have gone viral, SanTan Village in Gilbert is doing just fine.

Hutensky points me to [a 2017 report from IHL Group](#) that states that while more than 10,000 stores closed in 2017, 14,000 opened—just not department or clothing stores. Shoppers may spend more on food, or on working off the food, than on clothes, but the underlying reasons for going to the mall haven't changed: it's sociable.

Should we be happy that the mall isn't dead? I admit I enjoy the convenience, the polish, and the landscaping of the best examples, even as I recognize the ersatz nature of their ambition—and the darker design elements that go unexpressed.

The City Creek Center in Salt Lake City, Utah.
George Frey/Getty Images

On a work trip to Salt Lake City a few years ago, City Creek Center, its downtown, open-air, multilevel shopping center arranged picturesquely

around an artificial rocky creek, was exactly what I needed. I shopped, I ate a solo meal, I saw people, who were scarce on other city streets. Just as Gruen predicted, it gave me a feeling of community. From a financial perspective, I spent more money because there were more, and different, things to do.

“In the new projects we are doing, it is hard to see where the city stops and the shopping center starts,” says Matt Billerbeck, senior vice president at CallisonRTKL, an international design and planning firm that has worked on the Ala Moana Shopping Center, Tysons Corner Center, the King of Prussia, and many more high-performing malls.

“There’s an inherent sense of community when you live there, work there, there’s an entertainment component. You can be a better neighbor to city in which you sit.” Billerbeck points to the East Harbour project in Toronto, where a new mixed-use neighborhood is being planned for the former Unilever factory site, with a million-and-a-half square feet of retail spread between buildings and around a brand-new transit hub. Although born of the suburbs, the mall today is being reabsorbed by the city, internalizing parking and orienting itself to transit, even future transit like autonomous vehicles.

However you remix the words “city” and “center”, however many public functions you invite in, however your sustainable landscape encourages walking (or hides the parking), it still isn’t the city. It’s a version of the city edited for the audience the owner and retailers want to attract.

All the mockery of the idea of Apple Stores as “town squares” multiplies tenfold—though malls, at least, must incorporate public bathrooms. No loitering policies, parental escort policies, and curfews explicitly exclude homeless people and teenagers from the mall. The economic mix of stores and the food options presents an implicit form of exclusion, as does the presence or absence of seating. The new urban malls must be responsible about the semi-public part of the equation.

Dekalb Market Hall located in the basement of the City Point building in Downtown Brooklyn, New York.

Richard B. Levine/Alamy Stock Photo

At City Point in downtown Brooklyn—the closest mall to my house—I’ve found a retail experience that promises improvement but offers less than the city surrounding it. It has the hallmarks of the mall renaissance: big discount stores, artisanal food hall, a central rather than peripheral location. But if this is the future of the mall I want out.

DeKalb Market is the food hall in the basement of City Point: boba and banh mi, pork buns and hamburger buns, ice cream, cake pops, deli meats, BBQ. The best time to visit DeKalb Market is at 2:30 on a Wednesday, when there is room to spread out at the food hall’s communal tables, and there even a few four-tops free. At that off-hour the combination of sounds bouncing off the concrete walls, floors and uncovered ceiling is not deafening, but merely loud.

I’ve been to DeKalb Market two times before, as a family, and it was a disaster. It was hard to keep track of the kids in the crowd, so they had to stay by our side. There was never anywhere to sit. We ended up perched on the end of one of the benches outside, a hybrid planter-seat that apportioned two-thirds of its length to bushes, thereby greenwashing their [defensive architecture](#). The benches on the old part of Fulton Mall, a semi-pedestrianized shopping street of an earlier vintage, are far more commodious.

What made the stingy seating even stranger was that there was plenty of room. At least half of the first-floor stores remain empty, and the passage down the center is large and climate-controlled, but includes not a single bench. Up the escalator, outside Target, no benches. Everything was new and clean, but the spatial politics were no different than those at the older and more worn Atlantic Center Mall nearby, which also has no benches, or at the Oculus in Manhattan, whose vast, white, photogenic hall has room for trade

fairs and [Old Master reproductions](#), but no benches. The social contract, the semi-publicness, implied by Gruen's courts or Piano's piazza is broken. I might run in to buy party favors at Target, but I'm not going to hang out.

Rendering of Empire Outlets by SHoP Architects.

Courtesy of SHoP Architects

This fall, New York will be getting its own architecturally ambitious mall, when Empire Outlets opens 350,000 square feet of retail including Nordstrom, Nike, and H&M, [right next to the Staten Island Ferry terminal](#). (In time, a five-story hotel may sit on top.) In recent years, outlet malls have outpaced their full-price competitors, though [their growth has slowed](#). Empire Outlets' competition is very specific: Woodbury Commons, and the busloads of international tourists who shop and bring wheelie suitcases full of clothing back home. It seems like a no-brainer—so much so that [it is hard to justify \\$67 million in state subsidies](#).

Could this be the shopping center that offers New Yorkers a version of that suburban shine at the end of a spectacular ferry ride? A construction site tour on a sunny February day was fairly convincing, and checked all the Mall of the Future boxes. The architecture, by SHoP, is light and metallic, more shipping container village than Ye Olde Commons, with orange-glass accents on the stairs, elevators and escalators. [Paula Scher](#)'s team at Pentagram is handling the graphics; retailers will be issued a standards manual, lest their sale signs overwhelm.

The site had been a public parking lot for ferry commuters; all that parking and more is now underground, part of a three-story podium that elevates the stores above the flood line. Exiting the ferry terminal, you can access either a promenade along the waterfront or one of the development's three internal streets, wide pedestrian ways with linear gardens designed by Lee Weintraub pointed directly at the superlative view of lower Manhattan. These streets are on private property, but will be open 24 hours a day, and there seemed to be plenty of seating around the planted beds and on a set of de rigueur sittable

steps.

From the water, escalators will whisk visitors directly up to the second-level food zone, called MRKTPL. (Why not go all the way to MXYPLYZK?) Rather than a vast hall, the food is organized as individual, glass-fronted restaurants, including chains like Shake Shack, GRK and Mighty Quinn's. There will be seating indoors, as well as chairs and tables outdoors on bridges between the long, wedge-shaped buildings. Cafe, not school cafeteria. I breathed a sigh of relief.