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'Born to shop': malls, dream-worlds and capitalism

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Born to Shop!

— Logo of the Iulius Group, a conglomerate of malls in Romania

It has been 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and a new generation, untouched by the previous communist regimes, has come to adulthood throughout the post-communist world. The Iulius Group's logo — 'Born to shop!' — suggests that these are born shoppers: the capitalist babies of Central and Eastern Europe who are sustaining the largest growth in retail and shopping malls in Europe. With no living memory of shortages, queuing, or government restrictions, they know only the limit of their own — or their parents' — pocket/credit. Their world could not be more different from the one that their parents and grandparents experienced: both the abundance of goods and services, as well as the opulent settings under which they are now sold, offer striking visual contrasts to the not-so-distant past. In addition, the very experience of consumption is directly connected to the way in which the current social fabric — and new social divisions within it — is interwoven with the physical and architectural changes taking place in the urban setting.

It is this generation that has supported the growth of mall empires such as the Iulius Group in Romania, which now controls the largest chain of shopping



malls in the country and is an important player in the property market, helping to develop futuristic visions of shopping/living cities.¹ The Group owns four of the biggest malls in the country — in Iasi, Timisoara, Cluj, and Suceava — and is constantly expanding its terrain. The Timisoara Mall is doubling its current space to close to 180,000 square meters, now that it has won a licence to open the first Auchan supermarket in the country. This growth promises to potentially double its current figure of over 10 million visitors per year (Wall-Street Online 2007).² Two other large mall projects are being developed in Timisoara, one funded by Plaza Centers and the other by Romanian businessman Ion Tiriac — each worth over 100 million euros (Jinaru 2008). Surprisingly, this city of less than half a million people (320,000), can sustain three major malls and still promise profitable returns to all. This level of consumption would have been unheard of even four years ago, when the Iulius Mall in Timisoara was inaugurated. Yet consumption and marketing alone cannot explain the mall phenomenon in Timisoara and throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

Shopping Malls as Dream-worlds

Shopping malls represent the 'dream-world' of capitalism, to use Walter Benjamin's words (Benjamin 1982/1999) — the unbounded optimism on which capitalism is sustained, using striking architecture and futuristic visions of what cities will one day look like. Just like the original arcades, the shopping malls of today have generally maintained the iron/glass architecture, the suspended double or triple galleries, the long corridors framed by shops, and an openness of space that still offers protection from outer elements. They are idealised cities, where streets are always lit, clean, and air-conditioned, where everything is readily available, where everyone looks happy and no one is poor. The dirt, pollution, poverty, noise, traffic, and physical danger are kept outside this magic city's doors, creating a sealed bubble of joy and happiness. The mall is in every way the material expression of capitalism: from its architecture to the fashion and services that it sells, the mall is capitalism incarnate, the undeniable physical proof that capital works. It is thus not surprising that the Central and East European transition to capitalism would be most clearly marked through the emergence of the mall.

A more in-depth examination of Iulius Mall Timisoara reveals the nature of these 'dream-worlds'. Susan Buck-Morss describes Benjamin's notion of dream-worlds as 'expressions of a utopian desire for social arrangements that transcend existing forms' (Buck-Morss 2000: x), suggesting that they are as much a socio-political project as they are an economic one. In fact, most forms of social engineering require the creation and manipulation of a dream-world, generally through the implementation of specific physical,



architectural and visual structures to support it. In this sense, malls are not only the new town squares (Staeheli and Mitchell 2006) but also the new Houses of the People.³ They have very effectively replaced the communist dream-world of an equal community with the capitalist dream-world of a wealthy and individually glamorous community. Just like the former House of the People, the mall is first and foremost an assembly, a communal space. The mall provides a different kind of 'collective dream', one that connects the idea of happiness and community to that of material consumption: from storefronts, posters and enticing cafes, everything points to fashion, food and relaxation as the ultimate source of both individual and collective happiness.

Despite its appeal to modernity, progress and the optimistic future, the mall is ultimately a stagnant place: it signifies security through the creation of a sealed space, one that is not affected by unpredictable change. It is a controlled space, although playful (Maclaran and Brown 2005) and theatrical (Backes 2004). Within it, '[t]he dreaming collective knows no history. Events pass before it as always identical and always new. The sensation of the newest and most modern is, in fact, just as much a dream formation of events as 'the eternal return of the same'. (Hugo von Hofmannsthal cited in Benjamin 1982/1999: 546). The modernity of the space itself thus corresponds to a false idea of temporal progression/change: isolated from the world 'out there', the mall is a reflection of the future only to the extent that we desire our future to be as such. It is a 'wish-world' as much as it is a 'dream-world'. Outside the mall lie charity shops, failed industries and collapsing infrastructure.

The wish-world is sustained by visible and material proof that 'better' is possible: the mall as wish-world is physically accessible to everyone, whether they can afford to shop there or not. In fact, just like the Parisian Arcades of the 19th Century, the mall is a promenade space, a place of visual enjoyment and entertainment. Informal discussions with friends, family, and regular shoppers at Iulius Mall revealed that their presence in the space is not only about consumption but also about the ability to enjoy a 'Westernised' space: clean, cool, problem-free.⁴ Consumption is directly related to the need to preserve and actively participate in this wish-world: high prices that often exceed the cost for similar products in Western Europe are not a deterrent even for the more modest buyers. It is in fact quite common for consumers to spend more than half of their monthly salary on a luxury item. Clothes and accessories, just like the mall itself, become material and visual proof that one is a part of this particular wish-world.

The Impermanence of the Wish-world: Fashion, Architecture and Change

The illusion of wealth and well-being, even for the more modest consumer, is created through the easy access to goods: one can at least try them on if not



buy them. It is also created through the theatrical role of the mall's entertainment spaces — which include not only the bars, cafes, and restaurants, but also the lounge areas and the promenades themselves. To be seen at the mall, to be dressed well at the mall, to consume and entertain at the mall, is a sign of prosperity and wealth, whether real or theatrical. Out of the 210 shops at Iulius Mall in Timisoara (*before* its major expansion), 84 are for clothing, 29 for entertainment and food, and 51 for services. Each section of the mall, whether a clothes shop, a café or a bank, provides an opportunity to act a part, whether real or imaginary: everyone can fake belonging by posing as a businessman/woman, browsing through stores one could not normally afford, or sipping expensive coffee. Despite its large open spaces, this theatrical 'scene' is protected by the material and visual illusion of intimacy: furnishings and bars in the open spaces that suggest a kitchen or a living room, and music and sounds that create distinctively different atmospheres in different corners of the mall.

Fashion, as the ultimate decorum, also adds to the mall's theatrical aspect. Everyone dresses the part: along with architecture, fashion has become one of the most important pillars of 'Westernisation'. Quickly evolving from the 'jeans' and 'Adidas' obsession of the early 1990s, to the laid-back classics of the early 2000s — Gap, Calvin Klein, Zara — to the high-class labels of today — Prada, Louis Vuitton, Chanel — fashion spells out one's connections, travel itineraries and social status. As an immediate visual sign of 'development', fashion has been used throughout the Central and East European transition to capitalism to mark both a desire to follow the 'West' and a desire to prove success. Fashion and accessories are often as important to Romanian businessmen and women as their bank accounts. Visually marking success and material well-being, whether one has it or not, ensures a way to step up in the newly established hierarchies of wealth. Writers such as Manrai argue that there is a direct relationship between fashion and economic development/Westernisation. Comparing Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Romanian consumers, she argues that one can compose an accurate economic hierarchy based on the type and quality of fashion goods consumed. (Manrai *et al.* 2001).

While fashion is similarly used in 'developed' economies, the surprise element in 'transition' economies such as Romania is the extreme to which modest shoppers go in order to mark their belonging to a higher class and to act a part that they do not easily fit — that of a Westerner as opposed to a 'transitioner'. Young adults spend as much as 80 per cent of their salaries on clothes and accessories, often buying products that clearly exceed their buying capacity. Without easy access to credit cards, they resort to informal forms of borrowing from family and friends, buying knock-off brands, and shopping sprees to outlets abroad. As being poorly dressed



is becoming more and more of a social stigma, the notions of what it means to be 'well-dressed' are also changing. In Timisoara in particular, the strong presence of Italian immigrants is clearly reflected in the popularity of Italian fashion and design as well as the success of Italian restaurants and lounges. Style and class is thus often defined according to Italian standards. With an increasing international presence, this is likely to change in the future, shifting perhaps more towards the Western 'exotic': Japanese style and cuisine are now slowly rising to the top of what is considered to be 'high-class'.

The theatrical performability of fashion is, however, easily broken by those who cannot help but act their real part: the 'poor' of the transition. They are also present at the mall, and they do not always have the means to act differently. By positioning a number of important government services in the mall, such as the passport office, the driver's licence and car registration office, and the marriage licence office, the Timis local government has achieved its goal to move these offices to a more central location, in a more 'civilised' setting. Yet, through the 'universal' access to these services, it has also disrupted the underlying logic of the mall through the physical and visual presence of non-consumers. Forced to queue and wait sometimes hours at a time, these non-consumers attach a particular stigma to certain parts of the mall: the passport office is often surrounded by a large gypsy/Roma population, clearly marked by its colorful fashion and hats, whereas the driver's licence and car registration office is often surrounded by frustrated drivers. They provide a striking contrast to everyone else, making, at least a portion of the mall, in many ways not much different from other spaces often associated with transitions, such as 'outdoor markets'.

The proof of non-belonging is once again physically marked, either through fashion, attitude, or both. While much of the gypsy/Roma population willingly resists blending in by choosing more traditional forms of dressing — much of which resembles the traditional dress style of Romanian peasants, albeit often with more colorful accents — the *nouveau riche* amongst this population find alternative means of showcasing wealth: cars, jewelry, and houses. The lower class, which finds itself both attracted to and trapped in the mall — by the necessity of using some of the government offices located there — shies away from the most visible parts of the mall. Rather than frequenting the cafes, restaurants, and main stores, they find refuge in the few discount stores and larger supermarkets that allow them to lose themselves in the crowd.

The dream-world of capitalism is thus sustained as much by 'real' development as it is by an ardent desire to reach some kind of an 'end' goal. Fashion, goods, and the architectures that house them serve as visible marks of both the actual as well as the wishful progression towards 'the West'. The unexpected expansion of the malls' 'empires' throughout Central and Eastern Europe is thus more than just a sign of a successful strategy of foreign direct



investment — it is also a sign of the need to materialise at least part of the Westernisation dream. Because of its rushed nature, however, much of this process of materialising is focused on transitory architectures — basic structures that are effectively ‘adorned’ through signs and marketing to suggest a more radical change — and transitory goods, such as brands and fashions, that change radically from year to year.

Despite their seemingly ‘permanent’ structures, malls are often built on very simple skeletons of iron and glass. In fact, a closer look at Iulius Mall will reveal its simple structure. It is one large hall, divided by suspended promenades and glass walls that are as easy to disassemble as they were to assemble. Malls are often seen (and used) as a natural progression from the outdoor markets of the 1990s — which are still very popular, particularly with the larger part of the population who cannot afford to shop in malls. However, their permanence, as a sign of stability, is questionable. In discussing the perceived division between permanent and improvised spaces and architectures during transition economies, Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss, a Belgrade architect, argues that improvised structures, such as corner bars and kiosks or open markets, are often more honest in terms of their acceptance of their own temporary nature than are permanent structures (Jovanovic Weiss 2007). Without a pretence of permanence and stability, they still manage to offer an important comfort to the ‘transition’ consumer: prices that he/she can afford and spaces that are not afraid to accept the slow rate of ‘change’.

Seemingly permanent structures such as malls risk offering a visual and physical comfort that is less stable than it might appear, particularly in the current context of the latest economic crisis, which risks a shutting down of all sources of international credit and significantly slowing domestic ones as well. The shock of closed-down malls could equal that of closed-down factories, both for the consumers as well as for the employees, managers, and owners of these malls. With not only financial capital but also a large amount of human and hope capital invested in them, these malls now represent an important part of the Romanian self-image.

Conclusion

The mushrooming of Central and East European malls, of which Iulius Mall is just one example, is a sign of the unbounded enthusiasm with which the Central and East European consumer wants to embrace capitalism and its promise. The growth of malls is also a sign of the consumer’s ardent desire to see change materialise and to physically imagine and experience the end of the transition period. Malls offer the ultimate experience of being ‘Western’, of having access to everything that capitalism offers everywhere else in the world.



As the dream-world of capitalism and wish-worlds of their consumers, malls represent this view towards the future and the rejection of nostalgia, the leap towards a world where every space looks and feels like the mall: safe, clean, prosperous, and optimistic. Malls, however, offer a distorted image of the 'West' and 'capitalism', promising a kind of stability and permanence that they cannot sustain. As physical and visual symbols that attempt to provide proof of progress, malls risk deceiving and disappointing.

Using Iulius Mall in Timisoara as an example of the extent to which the transition cityscape has changed in the past 20 years, this piece has explored one of the most visible ways in which the transition to capitalism has left its mark on Central and Eastern Europe: in the form of shopping malls. Promoting an insatiable spirit of shopping, often taken to extremes that statistically fool us into believing the standard of living to be much higher than it really is, malls promote an entirely different lifestyle from one that was familiar only a few years back. Often built on empty lots, they rise out of nothing and strangely 'beautify' the otherwise rather mundane cityscape around them. Communist flats are now covered in advertisements and posters for products at sale at the mall, neighbouring parking lots double as promotion grounds for cars, temporary amusement parks and ice-skating rinks, and nearby empty lots are suddenly selling at record prices — promising to become new luxury apartment buildings with privileged access to the mall and its services.

Perhaps more so than in the Western world, the Eastern European Mall, as represented by Iulius Mall, has become a familiar playground for those who want to showcase their wealth. With many wanting to play up their actual worth, fashion and accessories become essential ways to do so. The transition in the very concepts of well-being and fashionability is also clearly marked in a rather striking transition in fashion styles. This shift marks both an increased access to established high-end labels (or knock-offs), and the direct impact of 'Western' exposure on fashion and taste — either through the presence of particular immigrant groups (such as the Italians in Timisoara) or through trips abroad. Fashion, along with the very architecture of malls, thus becomes an essential element in the construction of the particular wish-worlds that capitalism sustains. These wish-worlds are, however, not as inclusive as they might first appear. Although many can fake their belonging to these spaces, there are still many more who are left out, physically excluded by their inability to visually 'fit' into the otherwise clearly articulated decorum of wealth and well-being.

Notes

1 More information about the Palas Project, as well as the residential project next to the Iulius Mall in Timisoara is available at: <http://www.iuliusmall.com/en/cluj/about-us.php>.



- 2 Romania's population is 22 million people.
- 3 The House of the People was an essential structure of the communist party, providing an important social and cultural space where people could gather and share ideas. Currently transformed into museums or re-allocated for new uses, they have lost their initial popular appeal, at least in Romania. For an interesting examination of the role of space and the House of the People in communist ideology, see Kohn (2003).
- 4 Timisoara is my home town.

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