

## READING OF THE RETAIL BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND ITS SYMBOLIC MEANINGS: THE CASE OF SELECTED CZECH MALLS

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**Abstract:** The study of the retail built environment, or architectural geography, stands apart from the current Czech and Slovak human geography agenda. However, in Anglo-American literature there is a substantial body of research around this topic and the analysis of the symbolical meanings of the architectural environment. The paper aims to set out a theoretical framework based on the works of Jon Goss and to identify some of the elements he described for the U. S. retail built environment within the dynamically evolving Czech context. This paper presents the results of a qualitative study in three selected shopping malls in Prague. The fieldwork focused mainly on the identification of cues acknowledging the existence of civic, liminal or transformational spaces, various spatial or temporal archetypes, the function of the retail environment as an instrumental space or socio-spatial system. The presented project should also serve to introduce qualitative research tools (participant observation, ethnography, phenomenology, semiotic reading etc.) into academic work in current Czech and Slovak retail geography. While there are not many symbolic meanings or archetypes to be found in the selected malls, there are clear signs of the mall operating as a spatial system and instrumental space. Thus, Czech malls are currently in a transitional state of the retail built environment functioning between the effective transactional space that aims to foster consumption and expenditure and a symbolic context of consumption offering the experience of “elsewhere” known from U. S. shopping malls.

**Key words:** shopping malls, retail built environment, archetype, symbolic meaning, spatial system

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The study of the retail built environment, or architectural geography (Goss, 1988), stands apart from the current human geography agenda. Thus, the shopping mall as a spatial phenomenon does not seem to attract the curiosity of many social scientists nor geographers. However, in Anglo-American literature there is a substantial body of research around this topic and the analysis of the symbolical meanings of the architectural environment. Goss (1993) defines the built environment of

a shopping mall as a private space designed to facilitate effective commodity circulation, but also as a commodity itself, created to bring profit. It is therefore a money-making tool, a space institutionally controlled to keep the customer inside as long as possible to make him/her spend as much as possible. From the abstract point of view, the shopping mall represents a liminal space (Turner, 1982 in Goss, 1993) between the mundane and the exotic, between the reality and the dream, between local and global etc. It constructs the spatiotemporal context of consumption which encompasses various archetypes and aims to give impression of something “else” (whether it is from the temporal perspective – an impression of a different era, retro design, hi-tech design, or spatial perspective – in the style of other places, countries, semantic metonyms reminding us of elsewhere etc.). The research thus turns to the intersection of the instrumental design of a mall and its reception and active use by its visitors, and the critical reading of the retail built environment (also called the psychoanalysis of space, Lefebvre, 1981) becomes the method.

This paper thus presents the results of a preliminary study in three selected shopping malls in Prague. The paper aims to set out a theoretical framework based on the works of Jon Goss (1993, 1999) and to identify some of the elements he described for the U. S. retail built environment within the dynamically evolving Czech context. The fieldwork focused mainly on the identification of cues acknowledging the existence of civic, liminal or transformational spaces, various spatial or temporal archetypes, the function of the retail environment as an instrumental space or socio-spatial system. Last, but not least, the project should also serve to introduce qualitative research tools (participant observation, ethnography, phenomenology, semiotic reading etc.) into academic work in current Czech and Slovak retail geography.

The first section of the serves as a theoretical framework to guide the empirical analysis and presents a basic introduction to relevant studies of the retail built environment and the symbolic meanings, archetypes and abstract themes found in it. In the second section a study of the Czech retail built environment is described. After a basic description of the selected shopping malls and a short note on the method, the search for the spatial and temporal archetypes and abstract elements and themes recognized in U. S. literature on retail built environment of shopping malls is sketched out. While there are not many symbolic meanings or archetypes to be found in the selected malls, there are obvious signs of the mall operating as a spatial system and instrumental space. These claims are documented by photographic material. The paper concludes with remarks on the current transitional state of the Czech retail built environment functioning between an effective transactional space and a symbolic context of consumption, and on the perception of the new retail environment by its users and its producers.

## 2 THE MEANING OF SPACE IN THE SHOPPING MALL

Czech shopping malls are still searching for their face, but they already share many common characteristics with typical U. S. malls (Kowinski, 1985; Underhill, 2004). They employ the same elements in the environment (design, water, art, nature, semantic metonyms etc.). In general, the heart of a shopping mall is usually formed by an ample light area, in the form of a passage or gallery several floors high, with a glass roof, small plazas and adjacent corners and crossings. The common area is surrounded by a number of specialized shops offering a rich variety and many services. This is enriched by small restaurants, cafés etc. In the current highly competitive background, however, the need to make a difference and attract exclusive customer groups is evident. It is also necessary to prolong the time spent in the mall so as to increase spending. The notion of lifestyle concept (Kim et al., 2003) is emerging and this means conceiving shopping malls according to their visitors and their life style. The importance of the consumer's life style thus creates a basis for the differentiation of new shopping malls. In this respect, developers have to concentrate primarily on the entertainment (Baker and Haytko, 2000), community involvement (ULI, 1999) and experience aspects of shopping. The main role in the tenant mix is then played by unconventional retailers and functions such as personal services, sport and wellness centers, multiplex cinemas, entertainment and educational parks, etc. (Balasz and Zinkhan, 2003).

A similar trend is represented by the transformation of shopping malls into tourist destinations. In addition to their retail, entertainment and recreational functions and activities, shopping malls offer hotel accommodation, catering, airport transport, car rentals etc. The attractiveness of new malls is fostered by their stylization (e.g. in a historical style – art deco, rock and roll fifties etc.). The emergence of festival centers, which are smaller and directly offer leisure shopping, is also related to a certain stylization. The developer aims to create an impression of a carnival or circus by combining shops, restaurants, boutiques, live music, magicians and acrobatic performances, etc. (Timothy, 2005).

It is evident that nowadays a shopping mall fulfills functions which have little to do with shopping as such and that it takes on many new meanings for a postmodern consumer. Shopping malls may substitute the feeling of community and solidarity in suburban neighborhoods and may also act against the traditional dialectics of centre versus periphery by the fact that they are placed on the periphery, but they prove that they can function as a core, a centre. In a postmodern city the role of controlled and private space of consumption grows and the crowds of shoppers shift from the streets into the indoor spaces with proper spatial norms (Shields, 1989). These spatial norms of a shopping mall command the visitants to entertain themselves, window-shop, linger and consume. A shopping mall as a place of collective dreaming and its spatial configuration allows for different understandings and readings of the retail built environment for different visitants. The diversity of discourses and practices in a shopping mall then becomes a subject for study in postmodern geography. As stated by Shields (1989: 154) these practices activate the artificial en-

vironment of a shopping mall and without them it would represent only a dead space, a designer masterpiece imitating a real place.

In addition, a shopping mall has the power to transform material relations into symbolic expressions and vice versa. Goss (1999) in his “unofficial guide” to Mall of America shows how spatial and temporal archetypes create an idealized context of consumption and how developers manipulate these archetypes to create an atmosphere for shopping. He claims that an aura circulates in the space of a shopping mall in the form of art and personified products and there is also a magic of objects, advertising, spatial arrangements etc. These forms dissolve into an enchantment exercised by the mall where consumers, on the contrary, offer their aura for buying of certain products.

Similarly, Backes (2007) states that a promenade in the mall is truly a promenade through the postmodern mentality and how the consumer learns and understands the meanings of this space is only a matter of practice. A shopping mall resembles the antique agora, a public democratic space (from which, however, women used to be excluded, unlike from malls today). Often, a shopping mall is compared to a cathedral, with people seeking in the products bought a spiritual meaning they miss in their everyday life. Accordingly, Goss (1999: 71) acknowledges that a shopping mall fulfills a religious and psychological function in today’s society and gathers collective myths with individual experience and fantasy, although its function is also secular in the other way. The collective dreaming and desires that are satisfied in the mall are both economic and spiritual. Any boundaries of space, time or meanings are erased. Backes (2007: 13) claims that a shopping mall is a space full of opportunities, where a customer may experiment and try a variety of performances and participation. Essentially, in the mall we can find regular people in their true setting which depicts both the best and the worst of their culture.

Goss (1993: 25) argues that current society lacks public space organized on a pedestrian scale and that such places are lost within the current dynamics of urban society and space. Nevertheless, such spaces can be reproduced in the retail built environment in their idealized civic, liminal and transaction forms. These three types of space form the base of the theoretical framework in this paper. The civic function of the retail built environment may be seen in the metaphor of the urban street in the mall – benches, flowers, trees, signs, lamps etc. Malls also host some community services such as post offices, libraries, municipal halls and their space is often used for public meetings or similar activities. However, it is clear that these services must be consistent with the context of consumption and services that do not support consumption and spending are usually omitted (restrooms – see the example in the Palladium mall, drinking fountains etc.). Similarly, to “outdoor” public space, as stated above, the civic space in the mall excludes some minorities (Sibley, 1995). It is a common practice in U. S. shopping malls for the security service to ensure there are no homeless people lingering in the mall. Even teenagers hanging out in the mall are controlled. If an individual is not carrying shopping bags or looks suspicious (a teenager, a young man, someone who looks neglected, etc.), he or she will be escorted from the mall under threat of prosecution. One thus cannot escape the pres-

sure from the environment to shop, to consume. A person cannot just promenade in a mall (if this is not the developer's intention as in the case of older people in malls). In this context, the social stratification of the retail environment becomes an issue.

The mall as a liminal space is reflected in many dualities and contradictions reproduced in the retail built environment. This offers experiences of festivals, market-places, circuses, streets, Italian piazzas, Greek agoras, exotic tourist destinations etc., altogether combined with the simple experience of shopping and consuming. Only the malls offering various entertainment facilities are able to keep shoppers longer at the center and let them feel the nostalgia of the place while shopping. According to Goss (1993: 28), "the contrived retail carnival denies the potentiality for disorder and collective social transgression of the liminal zone at the same time that it celebrates its form".

The mall as a transactional space represents its basic designation. Several companies train their personnel in techniques to personalize the service and take advantage of the transaction with customers; tourism offices produce regional shopping guides for specific centers etc. The current retailers help the consumer to navigate through the volume of product information, advertisements, shows, magazines etc. in many ways. Everything in the retail built environment is skillfully aimed at increasing consumption and spending. Even the construction of malls as instrumental spaces is realized to manipulate the consumers through the mall (see the example in the selected centers).

In the following study a group of spatial and temporal archetypes was chosen for study as defined by Goss (1999). The theme of spatial mobility and travel and the effort to create a feeling of "elsewhere" are often used to sell particular goods (clothing, shoes, accessories) connected to different places or time epochs. This usually applies to shops with outdoor facilities, fashion stores or design (vintage, retro) outlets. As regards temporal mobility, Goss states (1999: 55) that "the mall recalls times before the repression of spirit under the reality principles of modernity and adulthood, in the form of originally Nature, Primitivism, Childhood and Heritage". These archetypal forms thus evoke an imaginary return to innocence and "better" times. According to Goss (1999: 56) primitiveness is related with collective memory through the human origins in nature, cultural memory is reminiscent of themes of important periods in national history, and personal memory connects an individual with his or her childhood. Nature serves to evoke a vision of an exuberant wood, park or subtropical paradise in contrast with the dilapidated urban environment that hosts the mall. What is more, Goss (1999: 61) claims that "in the nature stores customers purchase not only commodified nature, but an educational and spiritual experience, and a natural way of being". It is extremely important to study this within the Czech retail built environment mainly in the current era of growing interest in protection, sustainability, organic products and food, fair trade evolution, a healthy life style etc. Primitiveness in U. S. malls relates largely to Native Americans, but it is expressed also in other ways such as exotic names of dishes on menus, ethnic food in food courts, foreign names of the outlets etc. Childhood archetypes draw on the persistent cliché of seeing consumerism as the intellectual immaturity of the mass

consumption society and it is true that most of the mall activities are organized around the experience of children. Heritage forms in the retail built environment are constructed to reproduce nostalgic reactions and ideals of traditional labor by selling old-fashioned design products, hand crafted goods, food, delicatessen, cosmetics etc.

### 3 METHOD

This study of the retail built environment in the shopping malls aims to identify and evaluate similar archetypes or at least some environmental cues with similar meanings to those identified by Goss (1993; 1999), Shields (1989) etc. This preliminary study also represents a unique attempt to introduce the investigation of the retail built environment into the human geography research agenda, where similar works have been severely neglected. It aims to foster research interest in the new topic of recently emerged retail environments.

#### Selected shopping malls

Three shopping malls in Prague were chosen for observation and a critical reading of the retail built environment (Figure 1). One of the selected malls is in the centre of the city (Palladium), another lies in the inner city (Atrium Flora) and the last one is located in the peripheral part of Prague (Chodov Center). These malls represent the most upscale examples of the retail environment within the particular city zones. They offer a quality tenant mix, a sufficient supply of services and entertainment and leisure facilities as well.

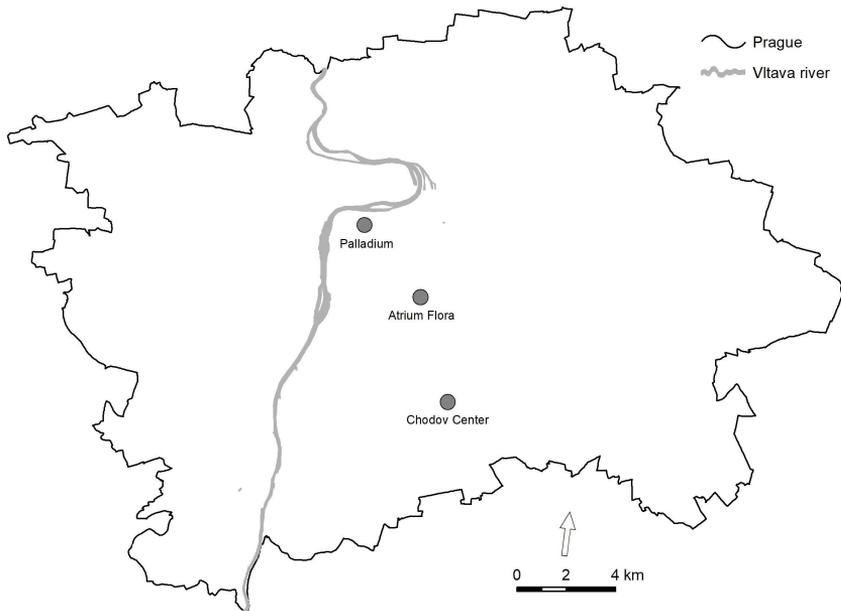


Figure 1 Location of malls selected for the survey

Palladium opened in 2007 and is the shopping mall with the widest assortment mix in the historical centre of Prague. Its building combines a historical barracks with a modern reconstructed building. There are five floors with 185 shops, 26 bars, restaurants and cafés and the largest garage in Prague 1 offering 900 parking spaces. It is a mixed-use center since there are also some 20,000 m<sup>2</sup> of office space. Atrium Flora, opened in 2003, offers its visitors four floors of services, 130 brand stores and entertainment facilities on the area of 20,000 m<sup>2</sup>. On the fourth floor, there are restaurants and a multi-cinema Cinema City with a 3D auditorium IMAX, and there are four-floor underground garages. Atrium Flora also has 18,000 m<sup>2</sup> of the best office space in Prague thanks to its location and the parking space available. Chodov Center opened in 2005 and is a new shopping and entertainment complex providing a wide selection of shops and services. The modern four-story complex now provides 264 shops, 40 restaurants, sport and entertainment facilities and services, together with 2,600 parking spaces.

### **Means of research**

The research methods employed were mainly participant observation, critical reading of meanings (Seamon, 1984; Gottdiener, 1986; Jackson, 1989; Sack, 1992), text and document analysis, and photographic documentation. Participant observation is defined as the longtime, systematic and reflexive observation of activities that take place right in the environment under study and its goal is to identify and represent social life and processes. The participant observer plays two roles at the same time: first as a participant in the interactions (who, however, differs from the others in the scope of their participation – observing rather than initiating the activities) and second, as an observer who differs from the other actors. Through this method it is possible to describe what happens, why it happens, when it happens and who participates in the activity. The observer is not only a passive actor, but actively participates in the activities (Hendl, 2005).

In the text analysis the researcher tries to reveal how the text was written with the intention of conveying a certain message to the readers. Photography is often used for research, particularly by sociologists. Photography may be unambiguous, but it facilitates the formation of a typology, analysis of structures, changes in the environment etc. In this case, photography may become a rich source of information about the development of a phenomenon under study (Flick et al., 2004).

Goss (1993, 1999) in his observations of American shopping malls traced several specific elements, the proliferation of certain symbols in the retail built environment, and dialectically evaluated them. These meanings were mainly identified in the reproduction of the mall built environment in civic, liminal and transactional forms and in spatial archetypes of public space, market place, festival place, nature or temporal archetypes of childhood or heritage.

Goss (1999) chooses these archetypes, finds them in the environment of a mall, locates different attractions of stores carrying these archetypes and identifies tenants producing these archetypes. Goss's work inspired many scholars worldwide to look at the built environment differently (either in further studies of retail built environ-

ment in the USA – see e.g. Staeheli and Mitchell, 2006; or in the European context – Frenkel and Walton, 2000; Warnaby and Medway, 2018; for Australian context see Bridge and Dowling, 2001; in Asia – Chang et al., 2004; South Africa – Housay-Holzschuch and Teppo, 2009; or Latin America – Stillerman and Salcedo, 2012; Miller, 2013).

However, this topic is rarely covered neither in Slovak nor in Czech literature. Therefore, the above-mentioned archetypes, themes and cues related to the mall are the themes under study in this paper. This approach has been applied to the selected shopping malls. The analysis is based on extensive fieldwork and semiotic reading of the retail built environment. The sought archetypes and themes were identified, read from the point of view of their meaning, documented by photography and described in the fieldwork notes and observation sheets.

#### **4 SYMBOLIC MEANINGS, SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL ARCHETYPES**

It is obvious that in Czech shopping malls, as revealed in this research, these symbolic meanings and cues are hard to find. Elements depicted by Goss (1999) as archetypes are not present in the same numbers in the selected malls as in the much more developed environment of American shopping malls. The Czech retail built environment does not operate with these elements and it is oriented purely towards function and effectiveness. Restaurants in shopping malls, despite their stylish interior design, do not aspire to create a feeling of “elsewhere” nor do they use exotic or utopian names. The element of nature is suppressed in Czech malls and often reduced to a few corners with plants or artificial flowers. The most frequent element found in the shopping malls is that of childhood, although in the form of isolated attractions (carousels, flip-flaps, play machines). The element of heritage or temporal transport “elsewhere/elsewhen” is also used only sporadically. Some shopping malls try to incorporate design or art objects into their built environment, but even these examples are rare.

##### **Palladium**

The Palladium shopping mall is located on the edge of the city center, in a reconstructed historical barracks, a truly original design solution (Figure 2). Components of the former facades were retained and the interior of the centre is very rugged. In the central area there is a huge glass cylinder with shops and in view of land prices in this part of the city it is evident that use of the available space was maximized in the construction of this mall. As the mall is located in the central business district of Prague and attracts not only Czechs but also tourists, the Palladium is the most luxurious of the three malls selected in this study. It creates a certain feeling of intimacy, a romantic rendezvous under the open sky, by giving a sensation of public space even inside. A classic food court is set aside from enclosed restaurants and cafés, so that within the Czech historical city centre, a consumer can enjoy the consumption of a different space in a Japanese sushi bar, American café, Italian



made up of upwardly mobile residents from Vinohrady and Žižkov neighborhoods and also by many foreigners who have come to like these neighborhoods and often settle here. It is clearly the core mall of Prague's yuppies, providing luxury shops, basic convenience goods and arbitrary services. The entertainment element is represented here by the multiplex cinema and the first Czech IMAX. From the themes under study, only that of childhood is obvious here and even this is limited to some indeterminate see-saws, a kids' corner and a small castle with a dragon.



**Figure 3** Heritage elements in the Palladium

We can also identify some weak spatial archetypes in the case of e.g. Paul bakery and delicatessen that resembles a French café of the thirties (Figure 4). Not even these attempts truly create a feeling of something else, of “elsewhere” and consumers do not perceive them in this way. The delicatessen serves rather for quick purchases of delicatessen food “to go” and the restaurant only livens up during the evenings.

It seems that in the hyper dynamic world of business, social meetings and short escapes from the work reality (and subsequent returns to the office environment) there is no time for lingering in the liminal space of a shopping mall. On the basis of the observation results, Atrium Flora can thus be classed under the heading of “civic space” according to Goss (1993). To a very limited extent, there is also an element of art in this centre, e.g. in the form of a design chandelier (Figure 5).



**Figure 4** Spatial archetypes in the Atrium Flora – Paul delicatessen

### **Chodov Center**

From the outset, the Chodov Center was conceived as a shopping mall with a wide mix of shops and services which would serve the southern and southeastern areas of Prague, which were (so far) underserved in terms of retail provision but strong in population. It is the largest shopping mall in the Czech Republic when measured by the number of shops. It offers a typical food-court, restaurants, a kids' corner, an outdoor playground on the roof, and a fitness centre (Figure 6). However, the mall's interior is almost without exception targeted to facilitate consumption, commodity exchange and the flow of customers, leading to more time spent in the centre and to higher expenditure. In Goss's qualification of shopping mall space functions (1993) this centre is closest to a transactional space, where everything converges to favor consumption and spending.

The size of the mall means we can find some of the studied elements of the retail built environment, although again only to a very limited extent and without any aspiration to convey ideological or utopian meanings to customers.

Thus, it seems that Czech shopping malls are in still rather initial phases of their retail built environment evolution (compared to U. S. shopping malls). These phases are (as yet) oriented towards the utility of the environment and its effectiveness, which should lead to higher consumption and foster shopping and the consumer's



**Figure 5** The theme of art in the Atrium Flora



**Figure 6** The theme of childhood in the Chodov Center

desire to stay as long as possible. Although it was not confirmed that Czech shopping malls operate as a symbolic spatial context of consumption which aims to transport the consumer into different worlds, it is obviously true that these malls already act at least as transactional and public spaces.

## **5 THE SHOPPING MALL AS A SPATIAL SYSTEM AND INSTRUMENTAL SPACE**

A shopping mall functions as a spatial system, creating its own social differentiation within the retail built environment. The space of the shopping mall can thus play a certain role in the process of social structuration (Giddens, 1984). Shopping malls are usually designed so that they meet the needs and desires of those customer segments living in the catchment area. The design of the mall and the use of certain elements may enable socio-spatial segregation of shopping and related activities. Within the mall social segregation is practiced by the separation of various functions into smaller areas, comprised of shops oriented to certain socioeconomic group. It is common that the shops for the middle class are placed on the lower floors (hypermarket, traditional shoe and clothing chains, drugstore chains), whereas on the upper floors there are luxury boutiques, specialized shops with selected products, etc. This is termed high-end and low-end retail and these two forms are separated in almost every modern shopping mall. Developers of the malls exploit the social structuration of consumption and design a multiply coded retail environment which emits different stimuli to different “spectators”, users. Shields (1989) calls this practice the spacing of classes, moralities and cultural universes within the mall environment.

Elements of social segregation and spatial profiling of particular social classes are explicit in the environment of Czech shopping malls. Often there is a clear difference between the floors with high-end and low-end retail. The switching to an upper level often evokes a move upwards on the social ladder, a shift to a higher social class, a step to higher prestige.

Of the processes and cues described by American sociologists and geographers of the retail environment it is the fact of mall operating as an instrumental space that is the most obvious in the Czech environment. Goss (1993: 30) warns against overlooking the fact that the shopping mall is a purposely created space which only resembles a spontaneous public space. In reality, it is a space that controls the consumers in their movement through the mall so that the customer would be still tempted and persuaded to shop and consume. In this choreography of the shopping mall the spatial layout and transport elements are wisely exploited. A typical example is the placement of escalators in such a manner that the customer has to walk around the escalator to continue with another one in a different part of the mall.

The suppression of services and elements that do not enhance consumption works on a very similar principle. A typical example may be seen in the number and location of toilets in shopping malls. The luxurious five-storey Palladium mall, for

example, offers customer toilets only on the lowest and highest floors. The situation in the second mall studied, at Flora, is very similar.

## **6 Conclusion**

The results of this study show first that the selected malls did not encompass all (or at least the majority) of the spaces, themes or archetypes mentioned in the theoretical background. Rather than functioning as a civic, liminal and transformational spaces, the selected shopping malls represented one type at a time depending on the location within the city pattern, targeted customer segment and purpose of the activities conducted in the mall by the consumers. The Palladium operated at the level of liminal space as an exuberant and exotic place in the historical centre of a modern and dynamic European capital, serving the needs and desires of both Czech urban professionals working and residing around the CBD and the tourists visiting the historical core of the city. The Atrium Flora as a lively mall in the gentrified inner city served as a civic space offering all the daily-use facilities, restaurants and cafés and entertainment for the customers who reside in the vicinity, but mainly for the people employed in the inner-city office complexes or just travelling around. Thanks to this incessant inflow and outflow of customers the mall captures an idea of fluidity which fully corresponds to the character of its built and social hinterland. The Centrum Chodov in the peripheral part of Prague adjacent to major transport routes, on the contrary, clearly displayed all the features of a transactional space, enclosing the shoppers in a fantasy world of commodities and pushing the consumers through the environment of a mall in a ceaseless circulation of consumption and spending.

However, with increasing competition on the developer market and also with growing marketing segmentation of the consumers we can expect that the future development of the retail built environment in the Czech Republic will match the trends from developed economies and mainly the USA. We can thus expect another characteristic shift of the new shopping centers to more abstract meanings of the retail built environment. The first evidence of this trend is already evident with the urgent need to offer the consumer a unique experience within the booming Czech mallscape (e.g. the emerging classification of new or reconstructed malls with stars, in a similar manner to hotels etc.). Though research into the retail built environment is still in its infancy there are already several topics that deserve attention: the adoption of the mall environment by its different users, pronounced social spatialization in the malls, the use of elements and cues that support non-shopping uses of the mall etc.

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## **Čtení fyzického prostředí maloobchodu a jeho symbolických významů: Případová studie vybraných českých nákupních center**

### **Súhrn**

Studium fyzického prostředí maloobchodu, nebo také architektonické geografie, stojí trochu stranou současného okruhu témat české a slovenské humánní geografie. V anglo-americkém prostředí se však vyskytuje mnoho prací, které se věnují symbolickým významům architektonického prostředí. Tento článek si klade za cíl představit teoretický rámec architektonické geografie dle Jona Gosse a v rámci své empirické části pak identifikovat některé prvky, které Goss (1993; 1999) popsal pro americké maloobchodní prostředí, v rámci vybraných českých nákupních center. Goss (1993) popsal fyzické prostředí nákupního centra jako soukromý prostor designovaný k tomu, aby umožňoval co nejefektivnější cirkulaci komodit, ale přitom aby byl sám o sobě komoditou, vytvořenou pro tvorbu zisku. Nákupní centrum je tedy nástrojem na výrobu peněz, prostorem institucionálně řízeným k tomu, aby udrželo zákazníka uvnitř co nejdéle a umožnilo mu tak utratit co nejvíce peněz. Z abstraktního pohledu je pak nákupní centrum prahovým či přechodovým prostorem (Turner, 1982 cit v Goss, 1993) mezi obyčejností a exotikou, mezi realitou a snem, mezi lokálním a globálním apod. Vytváří časoprostorový kontext spotřeby, který zahrnuje různé archetypy (dětství, historie, umění, přírody apod.) a dává zažít něco „jiného“ (ať už z pohledu časového – dojem jiné doby, retro design, či naopak hi-tech design – neb prostorového – styl jiných krajin, zemí, sémantické metonymy připomínající daleká místa apod.). Z metodického hlediska se článek snaží uplatnit kvalitativní metody výzkumu (zúčastněné pozorování, etnografii, fenomenologii, sémiotické čtení apod.) pro akademickou práci v rámci velmi dobře etablované, byť spíše kvantitativně orientované, české a slovenské geografie maloobchodu.

Článek prezentuje výsledky kvalitativní studie ve třech vybraných nákupních střediscích v Praze – Palladium, Atrium Flora, Centrum Chodov. Ukazuje se, že česká centra zatím neobsahují tolik zjevných prvků, popsanych v teoretické části. Každé sledované centrum tak představuje spíše samostatný typ prostoru a závisí na tom, ve které části města se nachází, jakým zákaznickým segmentům slouží a jaké aktivity jsou v něm prováděny a vyhledávány. Palladium funguje jako skutečný přechodový prostor, jako živé, exotické místo v historickém centru moderní a dynamické metropole, sloužící potřebám a touhám jak českých městských profesionálů pracujících a žijících v okolí CBD, tak turistů, kteří navštěvují historické jádro Prahy. Atrium Flora je energické místo v gentrifikované části města sloužící jako komunální prostor nabízející zázemí pro každodenní aktivity, restaurace, kavárny a zábavu pro zákazníky, kteří žijí v blízkosti, ale hlavně pro ty, kteří pracují v kancelářských komplexech vnitřního města nebo zkrátka jenom jedou okolo. Díky neutichajícímu proudu zákazníků centrum vytváří dojem fluidity, která plně odpovídá charakteru jeho fyzického a sociálního zázemí. Centrum Chodov v okrajové části Prahy, v blízkosti hlavních dopravních tepen, naopak jasně vykazuje všechny rysy transakčního prostoru, zahrnujícího zákazníky do svého nitra, do fantastického světa komodit a nikdy nekončícího oběhu utrácení a konzumace. Přesto, že ve vybraných centrech nebylo nalezeno tolik symbolických archetypů a významů (jako např. v amerických mallech), tato centra vykazují jasné známky toho, že fungují jako prostorový systém a instrumentální prostor. S rostoucí konkurencí na developerském trhu a také se stále více zřetelnou segmentací zákazníků však můžeme v brzké době očekávat další rozvoj fyzického maloobchodního prostředí ve smyslu dohánění trendů známých z vyspělých ekonomik a USA, tedy i posun ve výrazu nákupních center směrem k abstraktnějším významům jejich architektonického prostředí.