



Time to leave Brent Cross behind?

Are the fanciful architectural delights of modern retail destinations worth the time and expense?

Architect Marvin Shane answers with an emphatic 'yes'

Throughout history, the great religions of the world have used imposing and carefully calculated interiors both to impress the faithful, convert the unbelievers and to convey the corporate message – religious belief. The finest artists and craftsmen of the day were employed to produce these persuasive environments.

Sounds familiar? An intangible product maybe, but a product nevertheless.

Why are these observations relevant to the question posed in the title?

Since shopping evolved from a supply need in the early 19th century to meet the needs of the emerging middle classes and their desire in their new found wealth and status to 'acquire', shops developed from commodity stores to emporiums that presented extended ranges of products. Although this was in itself novel and interesting, exposing visitors to products sourced from around the world, it appeared not to be enough to satisfy local demand. There was a desire to expand its sphere of influence. So the stores employed highly decorative architectural applications to

enhance their position. When this was not enough, gimmicks were used such as the first escalator in Harrods (rising approximately 2 metres) – in a bid to attract potential customers. The product, once novel and the reason for the store, was becoming less important than the proprietors – who were trying to distinguish their offer from competitors through service and unique architecture.

So what's new?

In the 1980's design and retail were truly joined at the hip and the media was available to promote this inseparable relationship. Design had a ridiculously good press during the early and middle 80's – and that level of expectation could never be maintained. It was seen as a tool for disguising other failures such as choice, quality, service and value – a prop for unsound retail businesses and a way of propelling light-weight retailing into mainstream desirable without the underpinning of good merchandise and ideas.

However, the public's appetite for visiting shops was increasing – not just to buy, but on reconnaissance missions, and beyond that, to dream. The expansion of shopping centres had enabled collections of 'high street shops' to be



The New Bullring, Birmingham (Selfridges)



grouped within protected environments – making accessibility and comfort the reason for an extended stay. Add supporting facilities such as food and entertainment and society now had a new leisure activity: ‘shop seeing’. The pinnacle of this development was probably ‘Mall of America’, in Bloomington, Minnesota. Here is a ‘shopping town’ created under one roof, with integrated activity areas such as fun fairs, swimming pools. The whole place was marketed as a mini holiday – come and spend a weekend.

As in all things, change is inevitable and the consumer has matured. Design is now better understood, and is expected. Everybody – consumer or retailer – knows products and environments are designed. Everything has to be considered. There is no longer serendipity, but the



most casual presentation has been contrived to attract a particular reaction from the consumer.

We are currently seeing a polarisation of the retail marketplace. Middle ground stores that cannot offer cheap or special products are likely to become victims of the customers that helped build their businesses in the first place. We all believe we know what design is and we all want it. No matter the financial level of the consumer, the

shopping experience has to be a good one. All recent history demands it. So we are entering a new era of retail development.

Selling cheaper products cannot be belittled in the eye of a more discerning public. The spend may be limited but there are questions about the saturation of consumerism that the middle market is beginning to recognise. Therefore, adding status to the ‘value’ product has



Brent Cross Shopping Centre (interior)

become requisite. For example, New Look, renowned for their cheap and cheerful merchandise, have engaged Future Systems – architects known for pioneering design – to bring modern architecture to the design of their London flagship store. The Zara stores have had a big impact on the value fashion marketplace. Zara have demonstrated with their spacious stores, natural stone floors, elegant simple architecture and good lighting, that this perception of 'luxury design' can be applied to a more humble fashion product, and be appreciated and enjoyed by their customers. These simple and elegant interiors ooze 'chic' and enhance the style and design qualities of the products. The materials used in the architecture are of higher quality in relative terms than the fabrics used for the products and this adds to the customers' perception of product quality and increases the perceived value of the product.

This judgement of the product against natural, quality materials is further endorsed by the space and confidence of modern architecture. Modern architecture has always been



attractive to the rich. Although mostly conceived as a people's architecture, it has become symbolic of affluence, intellect, confidence – its space and minimalism, a self confidence above excess materialism, is gradually becoming part of everyday life. One only needs to look at the resurgence of the modern home, through loft apartments, apartments converted from offices and factories. All of us are engaging with modern architecture like never before.

So now that the average store is a white 'modernist' box, accepted and understood by us all, where does the aspirational market place move to assert their position as the 'premier'

brands, residing at the pinnacle of the retail tree?

When Frank Gehry evolved his architectural ideas using technology, it enabled him to articulate his complex curved forms, which he applied to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. This spurred a language for international Guggenheim environments. All the concepts are slightly different, but retaining enough references to be identifiable. The proposed new building in New York will finally replace



Concrete Jungle, Brent Cross Underpass

Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece as a symbol for the Guggenheim Museums. Frank Gehry has not been alone in creating challenging architecture. What we have seen emerging from the world of the built environment can no longer just be talked of as a 'movement' or an 'ism'. These exponents of emerging architecture could be described in a term much more related to consumerism, 'brand' architecture.

It is this 'brand' architecture that encourages interest and attracts the attention of ordinary people. Some examples include The British Museum Great Court, the Jewish Museum in Berlin, Tate Modern, as well as the Guggenheim in Bilbao, all visited as much for the envelope as the contents. Even the humble library in Peckham has had positive public attention. All of these designs have been used to expand the interest in what they contain, and have regenerated their immediate surroundings, by becoming a selling tool. This has not been

missed by the leading global retailers.

This statement architecture is now being sourced by the premier brands, in order to differentiate from the neat, but normal architecture of mass retailing.



The stores are profiled to attract a particularly affluent customer, a knowledgeable and appreciative customer, with a targeted age profile. This narrow profiling becomes irresistible to those who have been targeted, and very attractive to those with higher aspirations. Its focus becomes the opportunity to attract aspirant shoppers in the way a museum might

attract sightseers. To see what's new and what's right, where fashion, in all product types, is going. It is the total experience with which one is engaged. Therefore, to expand and enhance the 'point of view' statement, the architecture that wraps the collection is becoming as aggressive and personality driven as the products themselves. The fight for our attention and commitment to spend must first be won



Mall of America

by the desire to go there and architecture and design has renewed its relationship with the public and has begun to impress again.

The most recent exponent of the new architectural wave has been the Prada store in Tokyo. Accepting that in Tokyo no building has to relate to its neighbour, making a statement amongst many statements may seem subtle – but the building is as carefully detailed as a Prada handbag. Like a product that is about flair and attention to detail, a complete building has been conceived for both inside and outside experiences integrating the very essence of modernity – a mix of art, craft and technology. It is a statement of intent that throws down the retail gauntlet to Guccis, Armanis, Calvin Kleins etc. Architecture is a new currency and the top international companies are spending like mad.

Even the familiar department stores, recently thought of as dinosaurs, have had a Jurassic Park style resurrection – Selfridges, a leading example. The creation of a Selfridges in Birmingham has involved commissioning a Future Systems building, bringing together a collection of the most desirable brands and ensuring the store setting is both challenging

and exciting. It will be just like visiting a modern museum, all the desirable products of now and our immediate tomorrows. It is a reassurance that a Brent Cross shopping centre cannot deliver.

The elite fashion brands have become the new drivers for developing architecture and design. They are focused on our most innovative designers and architects and committing very large budgets to establishing clear water between themselves and the rest of retail. They are becoming a destination to visit, as a participating customer or just for 'shop seeing'. They are becoming desirable commissions for the world's best designers and architects.

Exposure to the flagships spoils us as consumers and we no longer want to settle for the ordinary. On every trip out we want to be entertained with great memories and ideas, and if we actually buy something – we want to be thanked and rewarded for every pound.

Buying a little bit of an iconic retailer gives us status – and even if we can't afford a tangible souvenir we do not want to feel ordinary ever again.

Britain's newest "mega-retail" project is the redesigned Bullring in Birmingham. From 9 in the morning until 11 at night, the centre offers a haven for shopaholics everywhere.

The Bullring in figures:

140 shops - including the stunning new Selfridges and Debenhams - are open to your credit card.

1,166 the Bullring founded as the city's historic market centre.

110,000 sq m of retail space.

500,000 pounds a day was spent building the new Bullring.

15,500 tonnes of steel are in the construction.

15,000 spun aluminium disks: Selfridges at the Bullring is covered with a dramatic metal "skin."

5 tonnes - the weight of The Bronze Bull situated in the square at the base of Rotunda is two and a half life sized.

22 trees will be planted within Bullring.

8,000 jobs were created within the new Bullring.

