The New York Times

"All the News That's Fit to Print" SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2024 Reprinted With Permission

SundayStyles

What Do We Want From the Mall?

There may be some hope yet for mega retail centers, long a shorthand for bland suburbia.

By VANESSA FRIEDMAN

Recently, a retail mirage of sorts appeared just off the Hempstead Turnpike on the Queens-Long Island border, next to the Belmont Park horse racetrack and the UBS Arena, home of the New York Islanders hockey team and the occasional Harry Styles concert.

A haven of red brick and creamy clapboard, with tree-dotted walkways lined by glittering vitrines and spotted by iron benches and picnic tables where one might enjoy a pick-me-up macaron from a Ladurée kiosk, it is officially known as Belmont Park Village.

Unofficially, you might call it a luxury outlet mall.

Created by a real estate scion named Scott Malkin, it is the first American outpost of Value Retail, a mini-mall empire founded on the cornerstone of a British shopping center called Bicester Village, opened in 1995 in Oxfordshire, England. Populated by brands like Armani, Balenciaga, Dior, Loro Piana and Valentino, Bicester Village now has about seven million visitors a year; it is the second-most-popular destination for Chinese tourists in Britain after Buckingham Palace; and generates among the highest sales per square foot of any shopping mall in the world. And it is but one of 11 similar villages in Europe and China.

Now, the question is whether what worked in Europe and Asia will work in America. After all, Mr. Malkin's latest project comes to U.S. shores at a time when the mall — once a halcyon reflection of the American dream, latterly a symbol of its Teflon banality — has widely and loudly been declared dead. These days, there is no quicker way to establish period bona fides than to set a show ("Stranger Things," say) in a mall. It practically screams "1980s."

Yet with Belmont Park Village, Mr. Malkin is suggesting that malls, which have always occupied a very specific place in not just the national landscape, but the national psyche, have not actually been expiring so much as experiencing a kind of extended identity crisis, from which a new order is emerging.

PHOTO BY GRAHAM DICKIE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

A shopping "street" in Belmont Park Village, with architecture conceived to bridge the Hamptons and 1930s SoHo.

Recent conventional wisdom has leaned into the idea of repurposing the mall as a consumption Disneyland offering a bit of everything (Sneakers! Paint ball! Lipstick! Walk-in health care! FedEx!) for everyone.

Mr. Malkin has a different idea.

Think of it as a sort of pure play shopping Brigadoon for grown-ups whose allegiance is less to the neighborhood than the airport lounge. Of the more than 150 stores that are slated to open in Belmont Park Village (currently there are 15; next year there will be 75), most will be occupied primarily by European high fashion, cosmetics and silver and crystal brands. There will be no movie theaters or ski slopes, no major department stores. What there will be is hands-free shopping, so whatever you buy can be delivered straight to your car; a concierge to help navigate your stay; and restaurants like Frost & Fry, from the executive chef at the Connaught Hotel in London.

Mr. Malkin is decoupling the mall from the suburbia in which it was born, and from which it grew in tandem with the baby boomers, Gen X-ers and millennials, until it became a kind of fun house mirror for a culture in which consumption was a form of identity unto itself.

But if malls 'r' us, or at least a critical mass of us, what does it say about us

PHOTOS BY GRAHAM DICKIE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The concierge room of Belmont Park Village, decorated with leather club chairs and oil paintings sourced from vintage fairs.

that when Mr. Malkin looks into the polished glass and terrazzo surfaces of his creation, he sees not a family outfitting their starter home or a gang of teens, but something else entirely?

‘Pyramids to the Boom Years’

There are few people in America who do not have some memory of interacting with a mall. It has been a defining feature of American culture since the first enclosed mall, Southdale, was created in 1956 by Victor Gruen, a Jewish refugee who became known as “the father of the mall,” in Edina, Minn., just outside Minneapolis.

Mr. Gruen had utopian visions of his shopping center bringing the best of urban civic life to the suburbs: recreating a safe, climate-controlled version of the arcades of Paris and Vienna and Baudelaire’s flâneurs in the haphazard housing sprawl. There, as visitors milled around a skylit central court-yard modeled after the Greek agora, they could be united in the peaceful communion of exercising their postwar right to consume.

“People came in and looked and their mouths opened,” Herman Guttman, who supervised Southdale’s construction, told The New York Times in 1986. “The impact was phenomenal.”

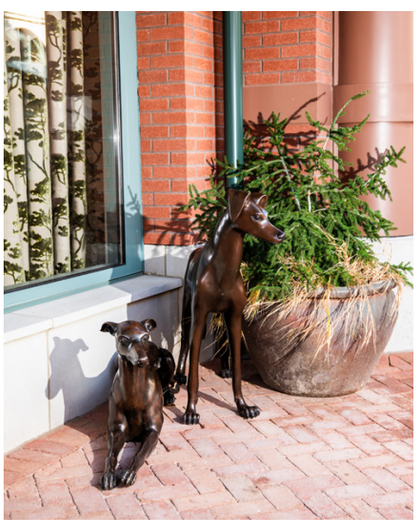
Little wonder that malls proliferated along with the suburbs, colonizing the empty expanses beside highways with what Joan Didion would call “pyramids to the boom years” in her essay “On the Mall.” As commuter towns with manicured lawns and cookie-cutter houses multiplied outside urban centers, so, too, did these pseudo town squares, with their plants that were always in bloom and anchor department stores dangling muchness. Soon it seemed that wherever there was an off-ramp and space for a parking lot, there was a mall.

“The mall fills an important human function,” said Alexandra Lange, an architecture critic and the author of “Meet Me by the Fountain,” a book on (yes) malls. (Mall literature is practically a subgenre unto itself, inspiring extended meditations from critics, psychologists and cultural anthropologists.) “It’s a suburban manifestation of the need for people to get together.”

As much as they were designed to connect, however, malls — which became largely the purview of real estate developers rather than architects or retailers — also served to keep people out. They almost all required a car to access, and their blank outer walls seemed to symbolize a corresponding inner sameness.

It’s not an accident that George Romero set his 1978 zombie film, “Dawn of the Dead,” in a mall — the same year Mr. Gruen repudiated his own creation, announcing in a speech to the European Conference of the International Council of Shopping Centers in London: “I would like to take this opportunity to disclaim paternity once and for all. I refuse to pay alimony to those bastard developments.”

It was a cry into the void. By the 1980s and ’90s, the mall had come to define not just physical space but psychological space, too — especially for the disaffect-



Iron dog statues are stationed on the streets as nods to the area’s horse racing history.

Not your usual fast food joint: the Ladurée food kiosk.

A saleswoman finalizing a transaction at the Rene Caovilla shoe store.

PHOTOS BY GRAHAM DICKIE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Most goods are "authentic surplus" and sold at 30 to 65 percent off regular season prices.

Every restroom at Belmont Park Village is different.

ed teens of Gen X. Their sense of alienation from the deflating promise of the American dream was reflected in the denatured environment of the mall, with its interchangeable chain stores, fast-food courts and escalators to no-where; memorialized in films like "Fast Times at Ridgemont High," "Back to the Future," "Valley Girl" and — of course — "Mall Rats."

And it wasn't just teenagers: Paul Mazursky's 1991 film "Scenes From a Mall" framed the demise of a marriage against the white noise of a mall, as if the ersatz construction around stars Bette Midler and Woody Allen was an outward expression of their ersatz relationship.

It was a portent. As malls were entering the pop culture pantheon, they were losing their place in the real world.

The Death of the Mall

In 2000, two hobbyist retail historians, Brian Florence and Peter Blackbird, founded a platform called Deadmalls.com dedicated to tracking and memorializing what they called "the dead mall phenomenon."

"The collapse of the great American mall was largely due to the over-proliferation of the great American mall," said Mark A. Cohen, the former director of retail studies at Columbia University's business school.

In 2007, for the first time since the 1950s, not a single new enclosed mall was built in the United States, according to the book "America at the Mall: The Cultural Role of a Retail Utopia" by Lisa Scharoun. The recession of 2008 "was the big wake-up call," Mr. Cohen said.

The spread of social media meant that kids could hang out online rather than in a food court, and no mall could compete with e-tail in transaction efficiency, ease of purchase or even pricing. Department stores, once the key tenants of the mall — the names that attracted all other brands — began to close.

The obvious conclusion was that the mall was on its way out, a victim of the transition from physical to digital life, and the Amazonization of shopping. People began to talk about "ghost malls" and "zombie malls": malls that were still standing but were spotted with empty storefronts and emptier parking lots.

But Stephanie Cegielski, the vice president for research of the International Council of Shopping Centers, the mall lobbying group, argued that the obituaries for the mall were premature. "We just haven't seen the decrease to match what the narrative happens to be," she said.

What they are seeing, she went on, is "more redevelopment or revamping" — with a corresponding change in the tenants. The department store and generic fashion chains have been replaced by service providers — hair and nail salons, or urgent care and fitness ventures.

Paco Underhill, the author of "Call of the Mall," pointed out that in Fort Worth, the Department of Motor Vehicles is in a mall.

"There are fewer and fewer places in the real world where people are getting together, and this is still one of them," Ms. Lange said.

That's why some malls, like American Dream in New Jersey, with its ski slope and water park, and Westfield Garden State Plaza, with its Nerf Action Xperience, are positioned more like amusement parks that also include shopping: fun for the whole family! And why the malls that are monuments to the glamour of shopping — Bal Harbour in Florida; the Galleria in Texas —and that are still anchored by their original department stores, are leaning into their identity, the better to serve an emerging class of consumer. Meet what Ms. Lange calls the "fly in, fly out, shopping vacationer." For them, the mall is less a social experience than one of solo self-indulgence.

A Cocoon of Luxury

To understand the difference between Belmont Park Village and the malls that came before, it helps to go to the bathroom.

In "Call of the Mall," Mr. Underhill notes that the bathrooms, one of the most trafficked parts of any mall, are often the most generic, boring and overlooked. In Belmont Park Village, the bathrooms look as if they were airlifted from fancy country homes. Each contains a lounge, with two deep-pile armchairs and some oil paintings, which leads to the restrooms, which are wallpapered in different styles: big cabbage roses for one, pen and ink drawings of Art Nouveau dandies in another.

In this, the bathrooms are perfect expressions of Mr. Malkin's Great New Mall Theory, which takes the approach of a specialty boutique, focusing on curation rather than commoditization, splicing it with the lessons of duty-free shopping, and framing it all as a special experience made for a community whose allegiances are defined less by the color of their passport than the logos on their handbags.

There's a reason his mall is a 15-minute drive from Kennedy Airport and 25 minutes from LaGuardia, a reason it's a 30-minute ride on the Long Island Rail Road from Penn Station in Manhattan. A reason Mr. Malkin muses about "the hedge fund guy" who has to check out of his hotel by noon and has a few hours to kill before a flight and instead of visiting a museum, or hanging out in the soullessness of the airport, pops into Belmont to pick up last-minute treats from the Thom Browne shop, an expanse of glass and gray flannel, or the Rene Caovilla salon, outfitted with jewel-toned velvet benches and shelves of crystal stilettos.

"The brands here, most of them won't mean anything to anybody who lives immediately around the project," Mr. Malkin said. He's not expecting Belmont Park Village to be part of a weekly routine, like going to the hairdresser.

But "we would be thrilled to have unique visitors," he said. "If we got them once a year, or once in 10 years, they are leaving with memories." Get enough of them and you have what he has in England, as well as in Paris (where his village is next to the local Disneyland) and in Shanghai (ditto).

The goal, Mr. Malkin said, is "to create a cocooning sense of engagement, so when a guest visits us, she's in that space, that emotional space, of being on holiday away from daily concerns."

That's why Mr. Malkin hates the word "mall" (he prefers "village), and doesn't like the word "outlet." He calls what his malls offer "authentic surplus," meaning mostly last season's stock, sold for 30 to 65 percent off original prices, though some brands have a smattering of current or classic pieces at full price. (Unlike other outlet malls, like Woodbury Common, Mr. Malkin asks brands to contractually commit not to sell made-for-the-mall "factory stock.") For him, the language of the mall needs to be revised to reflect the new realities of the mall — and the new reality of the global mall customer.

In a way, rather than compete with his kind of mall, the rise of Amazon and the digital marketplace has actually enabled it. Online shopping has underscored the one thing these stage-set "villages" can provide that a click of the phone cannot: the ability to see and feel a product, to try it on, to test it — and feel as if you are getting some kind of deal on it, all while sipping a glass of champagne and snacking on a gourmet chicken finger. And to do so in an environment that is not real life, exactly, but rather a version of real life that has been optimized for the fantasy shopping experience in our increasingly fractured world.

Mr. Gruen might not recognize it. The mall rats certainly would not. But frequent fliers would. Mr. Malkin thinks it's as much a modern destination ideal as climbing the Statue of Liberty or checking out the Duomo in Milan. In the annals of the mall, it could be the next chapter.

PHOTOS BY GRAHAM DICKIE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The entrance to one of the village's bathrooms.

Orchids and Art Deco wallpaper in another bathroom.