

vitalized communities where word of mouth spoke louder than marketing clout.

The chains still did big business in inner cities, on the road, and in the malls, but the market had long since matured. New growth took place only in foreign countries, particularly Third World countries and former Soviet satellites. These so-called emerging markets would have to experience the same destruction of their own traditional ways before realizing the value of what they had lost and then initiating their own quality revolutions.

The United States, the first country to succumb to “the Reign of Quantity,” was also the first to recover from it.

THE PALL OVER THE MALL

But recovery did not take place across the board. In the huge world of retail sales, the trend toward bigger and cheaper marched forward to its logical conclusion. The shopping malls that put mom-and-pop stores out of business in the sixties and seventies were themselves falling prey to the power centers and megastores of the nineties: the barracudas eaten by the killer whales. Between 1993 and 1995, regional mall net profits fell 6.4 percent, while power center profits rose 15 percent. In 1995, 14 percent of the nation’s mall space was vacant, up from 7 percent in 1993.

Dealing entirely in standardized, mass-produced products, whoever could sell cheapest beat the competition. By locating in out-of-the-way, hence cheaper locations, by ruthlessly eliminating any hint of atmosphere or design, and by dealing in massive volume, the power centers prevailed. Around the country, the shopping mall—which in two short decades had come to feel almost like an American institution, a kind of architectural processed apple pie—had become an endangered commercial species.

With economic fallback increasingly severe, price-conscious shoppers bought their staples at bottom dollar. Since power centers were normally inconveniently sited, people planned shopping forays in advance and bought everything at once.

In areas where it usurped the former city, town, or village commercial center, the mall had served for a generation as an unsatisfactory surrogate social community. It became a sort of dysfunctional indoor Main Street—when Main Street turned into Mean Street.

In the start-from-scratch, faceless, soulless suburbs, the mall was an even more unsatisfactory quasi-community. Developers and economic-development agencies, motivated by bottom-line interests rather than human/social needs, had created a suburban wasteland. There, the mall was effectively the only game in town.

The mall was never a genuine substitute for the village green. But the mass warehouse steel and asphalt atmosphere of the power center provided no possible socializing context at all. Like the dying downtowns before them, the stricken malls would acquire a nostalgic glow of their own, and efforts were made to preserve these surrogate Main Streets. The malls looked for survival strategies as power centers pulled away a big chunk of the commercial action.

THE WRITING ON THE MALL WALL

The malls began developing a potential they had never been designed for. In a long-term recessionary economy, with scant funds to build, thousands of square feet of unused space could be turned to innumerable other uses. The typical mall had evolved over time into a virtual community. Now, new, actual community-oriented uses were found for commercially obsolete malls. Individual situations demanded individual solutions, and often these were found. There were relatively few ghost malls.

Higher-tier malls, well-positioned, strategically located, and solidly established, went through the hard times relatively unscathed. This pertained particularly to those in prosperous, high-density suburbs where real estate values, taxes, zoning laws, and community action combined to keep the power centers at a distance.

Upscale specialty shops still did good business. Middle-scale stores selling products you could get anywhere at a cheaper price were driven out and department stores again consolidated. Burgeoning high-tech entertainment emporiums filled some of the vacant spaces, along with craft and hobby centers.

▶ TRENDPOST *Prosperous malls will increasingly function as social venues. Evacuated department stores and national retail chains will be converted into multipurpose, multimedia entertainment/fitness/sports/recreation units, catering primarily to a market ranging from preteenagers to young adults. ◀*

Along with the middle class, middle-tier malls were taking an economic pummeling. Nevertheless, by 2000, many were able to recast their priorities and reengineer facilities and services. The phased-out former shoe stores, apparel shops, and houseware outlets were converted into inexpensive municipal and private office space and annex classrooms for overcrowded schools, existing together with a mix of surviving shops and entertainment facilities.

On the low end, malls that would have become derelict were transformed completely. The worst became shelters for the homeless and/or temporary subsistence housing, as well as emergency medical clinics. While hardly ideal, this was a way of grappling with costly, intractable social problems that otherwise could not be funded. One tier up found malls serving as training centers, storage areas, and elder- and day-care centers.