

Thinking outside the big box: (Sub)Urban one-stop-shops as epistemology

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This paper acknowledges a trend I have noticed of late wherein giant retail complexes have sprung up across Toronto and other cities. By infilling ‘abandoned’ sites of production and distribution, big box shopping has come to represent an atemporization of shopping in the city.

To start, I will discuss a different form of shopping. In a 1998 article, Marianne Conroy describes the rise of the Factory Outlet Mall as a site of consumption and, more importantly, as a site of realization – where producers meet their need to have mass produced goods infused into a mass consumer society. In her article, she described a shift in retail shopping toward Factory Outlet Malls as class based, gendered, and, strangely, outside of the purview of the majority of cultural studies scholarship on shopping.

Typically, she argues, cultural studies research on shopping concentrates on urban, downtown, and mall experiences. This literature positions the consuming subject as an urban sophisticate who, most importantly, pays full price. This literature, she further argues, can be divided into two seemingly ‘incommensurate positions;’ a Frankfurt school interpretation that sees shopping malls and shopping in general as the ideological binding of citizens into roles as consumers enslaved to a panoptic relationship with sites of consumption – and is based on the ideas of commodity fetishism and false needs. The other position, as exemplified by authors such as John Fiske, is an overly celebratory belief in ‘the mall’ as a site of subversion and popular resistance to overt consumerism wherein the actions of the consumer supercede the spatial, ideological, and consumptive demands of retailers.

It is in combining these two positions that Conroy articulates a point from which to understand Factory Outlet Mall shopping, by suggesting that the Factory Outlet Mall represents the social concretization of conspicuous consumption within the material realities of class differences, gendered labour, and social distinctions. Conroy suggests that the Factory Outlet Mall not only serves the needs of retailers in a capitalist economy, but also of consumers in a social and financial economy. She describes her position as one characterized by a multiplicity of exchanges that exist in a retail relationship. For Conroy, in retail the idea of exchange is not limited to money for goods, or rather, money for use, but exists as a way of understanding the desire for maintaining or leveling distinctions. In essence, understanding the Factory Outlet Mall is not simply about understanding shopping as a cultural practice, but is about understanding the ways in which thinking about shopping is thinking about multiple forms of exchanges.

Not unlike the Factory Outlet Mall, 'big-box shops' have further altered the shopping landscape – though, unlike the Outlet Mall, 'big-box shops' are not articulated into malls, in the sense that articulation means joining, but rather attempt to stand alone as the sole site of responsible consumption. Moreover, 'big-box shops' do not stand in as the site of realization in that they are not direct outlets for producers to off-load their extra, irregular or otherwise over produced goods. Big-box shops distinguish themselves as 'retailers of presence' who, without producing anything, serve the machinery of mass industrial production by selling goods in exorbitant quantities, to a never ending stream of consumers.

In terms of their importance to cities, increasingly, big-box shops exist not as specs in the distant country side, an hours drive from downtown in the like of the Factory Outlet Mall...they occupy lands 'in-town' that were formerly populated by transfer stations where goods, once destined for downtown or even neighbourhood retailers would be unloaded from railcars bringing the wonders of objects that could not be produced locally. Big box shops embed their own unique form of exchange into a relationship with consumers, and cities, setting them apart from other forms of retail.

Today, I will discuss the phenomena of big-box shopping and what it means for cities. To do so, I will argue that the growing presence of big-box-shops can be understood paradigmatically and epistemologically as an expression of a post-temporal (sub)urban reality. By this I refer to the idea that in contemporary (sub)urban experiences of time as articulated through the big-box-shop, temporal distinctions are eclipsed by multi-tasking, on-demand production and consumption, and one-stop-find-all experiences.

This shift, in some ways, can be seen as a revolution in that revolution means return to days past. Less than a century ago, in rural communities and some urban neighbourhoods, existed the "general store" in which could be found goods from soap to snowmobiles to horseshoes; the veritable "one-stop-shop." Those stores, however, existed within a different material reality than that of big-box shopping. Historically, as the "general-store" was displaced by a growing consumer base looking for specialized services, shopping was reorganized with segments of time devoted to making the rounds.

Later, the suburban mall emerges as a collection of specialty shops in one location - reducing the time needed to go from shop to shop. In the mall, though not unproblematically, at least stores face inward to a shared "public" hallway – in the much discussed and often celebrated 'arcade' format that has existed since the 18th century.

Today, one can argue, city shopping is typified by strip plazas of separate "big-box stores;" giant "one-stop-shops," facing private cars that sit in giant parking lots. Epistemologically, then, I will argue that big-box-shops represent a further distancing of consumption from the purview of the public. Ultimately, they are not simply a shift in retail thinking, they are a shift in epistemologies of consumption, temporality, and social organization.

To start, it is important to understand what I mean by a 'big-box shop.' So-called 'Mega-

retailers' like Costco, Home Depot, Ikea, Home Outfitters, Michaels Arts & Crafts and the like all occupy the category of the 'big-box shop.' They are called this for two reasons. First, the exterior of the retail spaces occupied by 'big-box' retailers resemble, well, a big box. Generic, undifferentiated save for signage, and not unlike a warehouse. In fact, many big box retailers, particularly the Home Depot, alert consumers to the fact that they are a 'working warehouse.' I will return to this point later. Secondly, 'big-box shops' are typified by their ability to stock large quantities and bulk sized goods – literally in big boxes. By having an economy of both scale and scope at their disposal, big-box retailers claim that they can save consumers money first through the retailers purchasing power, and second, by the ability to sell goods in bulk, thus reducing the per unit price.

In reality, what big-box shops sell is not found inside the big-boxes that dot their shelves. Instead, big-box retailers sell consumers on their ability to provide everything in one place and in quantities that reduce the need for frequent return trips – in essence big-box retailers sell time, or at least the erasure of time. While it might seem ironic that a retailer's main success would be contingent on convincing consumers that they get more value for their consumptive time if by going to big-box shops they will not need to do the shopping as frequently, it is not actually time-savings that big-box retailers sell, it is time effacing. Through their ability to present an atemporal experience of find-all-in-one-place, big box retailers convince consumers that, on top of saving money, they are indeed saving time. Nevertheless, big-box retailer alert consumers to the fact that when they run out or are in need of new goods, a solution is but one giant shopping cart away.

The big-box retail model is so successful that, in Canada, DIY stores like the Home Depot and Rona Home Building Centres generate revenues in the range of \$4billion dollars. But at what cost?

In the city, or at least in my city, and in my neighbourhood, big-box retailers who occupy these former railroad 'stock yards' have come to replace the smaller 'mom & pop' operations that once made neighbourhood retail lively and local. But that picture is not a new one.

Increasingly, though, even national retailers like Zellers and the Bay have felt the crunch of the big-box powerhouses, most often transnational, typically American, of the likes of WalMart, Costco, and other large format retailers. Forced to compete or go out of business, the Bay launched an aggressive niche big-box store of it's own called 'Home Outfitters.' This strategy exists both as a recognition of the retail environment in which they compete, and also as a recognition of the impact of big-box shopping on the mindset of consumers in general.

It is this mindset that is at once peculiar and troubling. For it is not that I hold true the idea that consumption, of any sort, should be celebrated overtly. There is a peculiarity about how feeling co-opted into big-box shopping has helped consumers usurp the power of the local retailer, and thus alter their own neighbourhoods.

Not 10 minutes drive from my house, there is a big-box retail complex in which can be found three giant-sized building supply and hardware stores, two ‘mega electronics’ shops, and several industrial sized office supply retailers. Interestingly, along that ten minute drive can also be found a litany of ‘for lease’ signs, empty storefronts, struggling businesses, and repurposed smaller retail stores that used to provide the same goods to people in the neighbourhood. But where the big-box retailer provides quantity and buying power, the smaller retailer could provide knowledge of both products and of you as a member of the community. Big-box retailers simply provide you with a stockpile of products and a vision of you as a member of the consuming public.

As I take the ten-minute drive, however, to find those things at the Stock Yards Home Depot, I am always a bit ambivalent about what I might find. My ambivalence begins even upon my approach to the stores. Lucky that I have access to a car, I rarely find myself in need of taking the bus or streetcar to a big-box shop. It’s a lucky thing for me, too, because, unlike their smaller and displaced retail cousins, big-box shops are not designed to be accessible in any other way than by car. While their edifices may, at times, face the street, the exclusive entrances to big-box shops are always only ever facing giant sized parking lots, at times near a kilometer across.

As I park my car, a demur, yet practical station wagon, I am struck by the vast array of large ‘family’ vehicles that occupy the never-ending yet never available parking spaces that surround the store. Mini-vans, SUVs, urban off-road vehicles that only ever go off road by mistake. As I take-in the sight of these vehicles, I wonder if they exist in the city, as they once did in the country, for the purpose of work. In this case, I am not referring to the surplus producing form of work that involves going to a job for a wage, but rather, the work of consumption. It is increasingly clear to me that the co-evolution of the big-box retailer with its bulk goods cannot be separated from the growing presence of larger vehicles that make no sense otherwise in urban centres.

Walking up to the doors I am greeted by overturned shopping carts twice the size that can be found in a typical local grocery store. Immediately upon walking in the doors, however, I do not first notice people filling carts with goods. What I see is people, heads craned up to the ceiling, confused, looking for that which brought them to the store in the first place. Never to be found are the clerks who are supposed to have the knowledge to assist consumers to find those goods that will magically solve their needs. ...no, instead, big-box retailers are not ‘full service’ at all. They pride themselves on being ‘working warehouses’ in which employees are not invested with knowledge of goods or services, but rather act as semi-skilled, glorified stock handlers.

Acting as warehouses, big-box retailers provide outlets for just-in-time manufactured goods to be stored in the transition from production to consumption. Their sheer size assures a venue for mass produced goods to meet a mass consumer base, but, more importantly, their ability to take and receive large orders of goods directly off container ships and railcars, accelerates the ability of transnational producers to work off-shore. In this way, big-box retail exists as a necessary step in the atemporal work of global capital reproduction – thus assuring the continuing decay of the ‘modern’ ‘western’ ‘service

economy' city as a site of production for physical goods.

It is not unusual then, that big-box stores are not oriented to the street, nor are they particularly accessible by public or pedestrian transportation. Big-box retailers provide a more deeply entrenched class-based experience of shopping than even their Factory Outlet counterparts. But, in this case, the idea of class is not of overcoming one's inability to purchase goods at full retail price as is increasingly the case with Factory Outlet shopping, but is about one's material ability to buy things in bulk, and one's ability to take these bulk purchases home at the end of the day.

The big-box, then is not simply a neutral site of consumption. For the city, the big-box shop acts as an epistemological tool that reorients consumption and consumers. It creates a venue of exclusivity, designed to privilege those who drive, those who can afford to buy larger quantities, and excludes those who cannot. Big-box retailers, in effect, reshape the city as a consumptive space, and divide it along class lines, one giant box at a time.

Reference

Conroy, Marianne (1998). "Factory Outlet Malls, Consumption, and The Performance of Middle-class Identity." *Social Text* 54, Vol. 16, No. 1, Spring 1998