

## Culture



# Exhibit and Marketing Techniques in Shopping Malls: The Example of Oakridge Centre

Absolom H. Mulongo

Volume 8, Number 2, 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085916ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1085916ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this document

Mulongo, A. (1988). Exhibit and Marketing Techniques in Shopping Malls: The Example of Oakridge Centre. *Culture*, 8(2), 87–93.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1085916ar>

### Article abstract

The architecture, organization and activities within a large shopping mall are described and analyzed. The mall is shown to both reflect and recreate the values of middle class Canadian culture. Both explicit and implicit comparisons are made with Zambian culture.

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1988

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**Érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

# Exhibit and Marketing Techniques in Shopping Malls: The Example of Oakridge Centre

Absolom H. Mulongo

National Political Museum of Zambia

**Editor's Note:** All anthropologists would surely agree that, whatever else it may be, anthropology is comparative: *They* are always being compared to *Ourselves*, even if the explicit comparison is between several *Others*. In this commentary there are a few explicit and many implicit comparisons, but the *Ourselves* is Zambian. Readers are invited to imagine an anthropology that includes more such comparisons.

**Note de la rédaction:** *Tout anthropologue admettrait certainement que l'anthropologie soit, entre autres choses, une discipline comparative: Ils sont toujours comparés à Nous-mêmes, même si la comparaison explicite est entre plusieurs Autres. Il y a dans le commentaire qui suit quelques comparaisons explicites et plusieurs comparaisons implicites, mais le Nous-mêmes est Zambien. Les lecteurs sont invités à imaginer une anthropologie qui inclut davantage de ces comparaisons.*

The architecture, organization and activities within a large shopping mall are described and analyzed. The mall is shown to both reflect and recreate the values of middle class Canadian culture. Both explicit and implicit comparisons are made with Zambian culture.

*L'architecture, l'organisation et les activités d'un grand centre commercial sont décrites et analysées. On y démontre que ce centre situé au Canada à la fois reflète et recrée les valeurs de la classe moyenne. Des comparaisons explicites et implicites sont faites avec la culture zambienne.*

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which public culture is expressed in shopping malls, especially through exhibit and marketing techniques<sup>1</sup>. The rituals which take place in a mall are related to the architecture, spaces and interior decor which form the iconographic programme. Malls reflect the cultural practices of western society, and the country and place in which they are found. Efforts to portray these cultural performances influence display methods, signage, advertising, shows and the mall's physical and social environment. A mall's organization and activities are strongly influenced by the values and realities of the society and social group it seeks to project. This study is based on observations made at Oakridge Shopping Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia. Oakridge, like other modern malls, is an integrated shopping centre, providing many retail, business, service, cultural and social activities, all geared to merchandising public taste and a comfortable style of life.

## *Mall Architecture*

Malls in the western world represent a trading process in which the merchandising of different kinds of commodities takes place in one small area as opposed to "downtown". The idea is to create downtown in a microcosm where the physical and social environments are controlled.

The architecture is crucial in creating a mall environment. A mall in its architecture portrays meanings, values and experiences reminiscent of temples, churches, palaces, museums and other cultural institutions. Duncan and Wallach when discussing museums say that a museum is a complex architectural phenomenon that selects and arranges works of art within a sequence of spaces which organizes the visitor's experience as a script organizes a performance. The architecture and the decorative elements form what art historians call an iconographic programme. By following the architectural script the visitor engages in an activity described as a ritual (Duncan and Wallach, 1978: 450-451). Horne defines ritual as an act in which people come together: "It involves the participants symbolically in a common enterprise calling attention to their relatedness and joint interests in a compelling way, promoting conformity and satisfaction in conformity" (1986: 69).

At Oakridge mall the ritual experiences are programmed by the architecture and ritual space it creates. Oakridge is an enclosed mall which eliminates the conflict between traffic and shopping. As a covered mall it controls climate throughout the public space it houses. One of the reasons for enclosing the mall was to remove the bad effects Vancouver weather had on shoppers, particularly rain and sometimes snow. The temperature in the mall is warmer than the outside in winter and cooler than the exterior on warm summer days.

The shopping environment has been controlled by the selection of shops. The mall is dominated by a large Woodward's Department Store, Woodward's Yarns and Crafts Store and Woodward's Bookstore. Woodward's until recently owned the mall. The other retail units tend to duplicate Woodward's functions, and the number of shoppers visiting their shops is smaller. The other units open into the two Galleria or hallways where many other activities take place and thus lure shoppers away from the shops. Woodward's Stores on the other hand are so large that once you enter in any one of them you are not affected by what is going on in the Galleria and hallways. A shopper emerging from any of the Woodward's Stores feels disinclined to enter another shop and tends to wander about in the Galleria and passageways. The Oakridge mall design is such that it influences the shopper's response to the created environment. "Mind control and subjective guidance" are also effected by the exhibitry, colour, lighting, signage and activities in the Galleria and other parts of the mall. This type of control allows certain rituals to take place.

One of these rituals is window shopping. Window shopping is viewing of merchandise displayed in show windows and shop interiors. Window shopping is a trait forming part of western capitalist culture. Window shopping reveals other cultural practices. One of these is affection for physical objects. Objects are displayed not only to show their function, but also for their aesthetic appeal. Objects are believed to evoke educational, pleasurable and edifying feelings. Thus people enjoy looking at objects of high quality such as gold, silver, bronze. At Oakridge mall most of the objects in the shops are of high quality. Shoppers look at most of the merchandise not only for its utility purposes, but also as objects of art. The style and artistry embedded in a table, pot, spoon, couch, dress, trousers and so on is sought, identified and admired. Efforts are made to authenticate the style used in the manufacture of an object to ensure that it conforms to what is already known about similar objects, its manufacturer and place of manufacture. These objects project changes in public taste and fashion.

When people select or buy an object they are exercising their taste and preferences for art. So people do not go to retail shops to buy only, but to look for their tastes, re-enacted on the public market, and communicated to each individual shopper privately. The majority of the people I met in most shops had not bought anything at all. They wandered from shop to shop, or from one part of the shop to another admiring objects. The shopkeepers did not seem bothered by this behaviour. In fact the mall itself and its interior decor is set up so as to encourage window shopping. Objects are attractively displayed in many sophisticated ways. Most clothing is hung on racks which facilitate handling and close inspection. Some of the merchandise is stored in open shelves for the same purpose. Window shopping is accepted as part of the shopping tradition.

Shopping is a ritual done on foot. In fact the idea of a mall is to cater to pedestrian traffic uninterrupted by motor vehicles. Malls are thus arranged in such a way as to deal with problems of walking when shopping. At Oakridge mall entrances, parkades, parking lots, elevators and escalators are designed in a co-ordinated manner so as to reduce distances walked before entering the mall, or to move from one part of the mall to another. In most shops aisles between racks and display cases are wide enough to allow two people to walk side by side. Passageways leading to entrances are spacious to prevent people from being pushed along by the continuously flowing traffic of shoppers, to avoid traffic tie-ups and to enable shoppers to push trolleys without inconven-

encing other people (Parnes, 1948: 245-246). The design of the mall is such that all shops are easily accessible by foot traffic.

Walking for leisure is part of western culture and often occurs along beaches or river banks and in parks. (In Africa, where vehicular transport is scarce we walk because we have to.) At Oakridge I met a lot of people who appeared to be walking around just for leisure, showing little interest in the merchandise in the shops. The Galleria and hallways have seats to deal with fatigue resulting from walking.

Shopping in malls recalls the historical marketing tradition in western societies. The shopping walk started when peddlers settled down to fixed sidewalk traffic. Since then, creation of the shopping environment has played a vital part in the design of shops. City and suburban market places were first organized for foot traffic only. Displays and advertising, store fronts and signs were designed for sidewalk traffic and in such a way as to be in direct contact with the crowd. However, when horse-drawn, and later motor-driven, traffic came into the picture this ideal contact between the merchant and the consumer was destroyed. In the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, western shopping districts lost all resemblance to older and quieter market places (Hornbeck, 1962: 13). It is this lost, quiet, less dangerous shopping in market places that malls are recreating.

At Oakridge mall a shopper is thrown into an environment in which an "indoor version of an outdoor shopping centre" is created. The manager told me that the design of the mall is "progressive" with bright colours, lots of glass and bright lights. The aim is to create a bright mall, similar to an outgoing, outdoor environment. To create this atmosphere ceilings are vaulted and the arcades of the two Galleria are sunlit. The passageways where no natural light comes through are brightly lit, the floor is white and silvery terrazzo, which produces pleasant reflections from the lights. The shops are similarly brightly lit. The landscaping enhances the outdoor feeling — trees and shrubs are found in the Galleria and upper level of Woodward's Department Store. Four circular fountains are found in the northern gallery. The two Galleria and hallways have an aura of outdoor, downtown streets with large crowds of people moving to and fro.

Oakridge, like many malls, expresses a casual country atmosphere. This casualness is emphasized by the presence of services such as hair salons, barber shop, optical shops, shoe renew, laundry, public library, airline agency, banks and other facilities. So, when you go to shop at Oakridge mall, you can go

where you like, and do what you want at your own pace. This is the spirit of suburban shopping which Oakridge enacts for its patrons.

Oakridge mall is a socializing centre. Socializing occurs between shop clerks and shoppers. Socializing takes place in dining places. Dining in a mall is part of the larger phenomenon of eating outside the home in a neutral and relaxed atmosphere. Dining reveals the popular foodstuffs in North America. People reaffirm their food tastes to themselves and to others by eating in a public place. Socializing also takes place in many parts of the Galleria and hallways where seats are provided for this purpose, at the Lotto 649 ticket booth and at the seniors' drop-in centre. Closely associated with socializing is entertainment offered at cinema theatres and the auditorium for meetings, weddings, receptions, dances and bingo. A pub has been excluded because it is not in keeping with the general elegant mood of the centre. Socializing and entertainment are efforts to seek relaxation and break the monotony and boredom in the home which are part of modern living.

### *Exhibition Techniques at Oakridge Mall*

Marjorie Halpin when discussing ethnology exhibits at the British Columbia Provincial Museum talks about the technical skill used in modern day exhibition. She says that this cultural performance is part of the exhibition culture in western societies. Exhibition techniques are used to convey messages, often saying more than what is intended (Halpin, 1978: 40, 41, 45). This practice is evident at Oakridge mall. Many shop interiors emphasize visual merchandising using eye-catching displays which highlight the important features of the objects. Goods are kept "quite open and visible so that the shopper can see them, examine articles, touch and feel them, check the prices, read factual information, and bargain in his own mind" (Parnes, 1948: 54). The displays are geared to self-selection and self-service which do not only increase sales, but express the cultural value of individualism. Although shopping occurs in public space, it is individualized and privatized. The visual impact of the displays motivates people to move from one part of the shop to another, often singly, communicating privately with objects. Objects make shoppers recall their private exploits and fancies.

Free-standing racks are widely used at Oakridge mall. Fixtures in the mall are designed to facilitate handling and removal of merchandise by shoppers and shop clerks. Fixtures resemble methods people use at home to store goods, but more

importantly they symbolize the freedom with which people conduct their lives; they also privatize shopping. People shop without constantly asking for assistance.

Mannequins are extensively used to display high quality clothing, changing fashions, beauty and attire in work and leisure situations. As Neil Harris says, mannequins are draped in dress that court women customers by settings that play upon their fantasies of luxury. Mannequins are displayed "as mistresses of taste to teach people how to embody their secret longings for status in things of great price" (Harris, 1978: 151). Mannequins are used as advertisements which address customers individually in public space. Mannequins sell images of success, affluence and self-satisfaction. However, most mannequins are young and female. Canadian culture tries to make old people feel young. Secondly, young people do the bulk of the shopping. Mannequins thus appeal to widely held notions about shopping — economic success, fashion, shopping attitudes among age groups and between the sexes.

In Woodward's Department Store goods are classified according to their functional categories. The shop has three levels and each is devoted to certain kinds of merchandise. The ground floor has a free-flow plan created by free-standing racks and wide aisles between displays to allow people to move about freely. The ground floor is devoted to men's, women's and children's clothing, each separately located. Men's clothes are located near the entrance to exploit the idea that men do not waste much time when buying. A greater part of the ground floor is devoted to women's clothing of different kinds. This arrangement makes use of the idea that women prefer to shop in a more leisurely and private manner, comparing one type of cloth with another before finally making up their minds. To enhance this, mood music is played softly.

The upper level in Woodward's Department Store is dominated by house furnishings and goods which are expensive and of slow turn-over. The assumption is that people must be serious enough to undertake a trip to the top floor and carefully examine samples of goods on display in a less congested atmosphere. Some goods on this floor are sold under conditions simulating actual use. Thus, there are many dining situations with tables, chairs, plates and cutlery. There are also many living room set ups and bedroom scenes re-enacting ideal contemporary home conditions.

The things sold on the upper level reveal society's cultural practices. Sale of toys is associated

with fun, and this is amplified in the model of a PLAYMOBIL depicting a countryside scene showing snow covered ground, houses, motor vehicles and trees with children playing all over the place. But toys are symbols of middle class homes, providing not only entertainment, but also supposedly enhancing a child's academic achievement. (In Zambia, Africa, many homes do not have toys. If a child wants one he or she has to make one.) Bags are sold lying on the floor, the same way they are used when travelling. Bags symbolize modern living which entails a lot of travelling. Sportswear shows modern leisure and recreation: skiing, skating, wind-surfing, jogging and cycling. These are activities culturally determined and embodied in notions of fitness and staying healthy, losing weight and having sound mind. (In some parts of the world, like the area where I come from, people do not worry about sporting.)

The basement floor displays cooking utensils and musical instruments (such as pianos, radio cassettes, stereos and television sets). The setup in the basement has deliberately been made lively and attractive to lure people into an otherwise unattractive environment. Entertainment in modern societies can be highly individualized. Listening to a radio cassette or stereo, watching television and playing a piano are individual activities. The commodities are cultural productions, showing how people fight against boredom and loneliness in the home — all side-effects of industrialization. These gadgets socialize people into the local idiom and disseminate information on which community gossip is based. To own them is to participate effectively in one's culture. They also adorn the home and are a status symbol. All these values are being merchandised, and by owning these things a person gets a feeling of belonging with his or her peers and contemporaries.

### *Promotional Activities at Oakridge Mall*

Promotional activities perform two basic functions: they celebrate society's cultural perspectives and advertise the mall. Manning when discussing celebration says that celebration is dramatic presentation of cultural symbols, it is entertainment, it is public, it socializes personal meanings, it is participatory and involves people in the community. Celebration embodies play and ritual (Manning, 1983: 4-5). A number of cultural performances take place at Oakridge mall.

One of these is Christmas. Though Christmas is essentially a religious ritual, it has become part of western cultural practices. Christmas is associated

with gift giving, wining and dining, and the coming together of members of each family. Santa Claus and the Christmas tree are Christmas symbols. When I did my research, the celebration of Christmas was evident at Oakridge mall. There were many advertisements about Christmas gifts or Christmas Gift Sales. Some parts of the mall were decorated with Christmas trees and a Santa Claus show took place.

Charity is an integral part of modern society. Concerts are held for charity. Thrift shops exist for charity. Contributions are frequently solicited for charity. At Oakridge mall charity shows are geared to community needs. Crafts and arts fairs are held in which local art is promoted. Big bazaar charitable sales are held and the money is donated to the less fortunate.

Other shows held at the mall are: fashion shows to introduce the latest pieces of clothing or celebrate clothing of bygone days; gardening and landscaping to teach people in the Oakridge area horticultural techniques. Once in a while, over a period of 1 1/2 week large displays of art take place in conjunction with Vancouver's sister city in the United States. The mall during such times is like an art gallery or museum. The role of the mall as any museum "is not to chronicle art as a fact but to enact it as an event and to dramatize its function. Its role is not of custodian but that of a showman" (Harris, 1978: 167). Like the rest of society Oakridge mall celebrates sidewalk sales, birthday sales and Christmas promotions. This demonstrates that the mall is part and parcel of society and its habits.

The mall observes a British week. In 1986 this was highlighted by Margaret Thatcher's visit. A lot of people in Vancouver and Canada cherish their British origins. In the Oakridge area 50 per cent of all the ethnic groups have a British background (Mak, 1978). Horne talks about fragments of once traditional culture surviving but transformed by existing society different from that which produced it — this he calls neo-traditionalism (Horne, 1986: 150-158). For many people in Canada observance of British traditions refer to an imagined glorious past. There are many British relics in many Canadian homes, and Oakridge mall is sensitive to these values.

The mall appropriates to itself beautiful images about people, places and business enterprises to form its own image and identity of a bright, outgoing mall. Famous names in the business world such as Tahari, Edward Chapman, Bally of Switzerland, Henry Birks and Son are used in the mall's advertisements because of what they mean to many shoppers. Frequent reference is made to places like Paris, known world-wide for fashions. The mall wants

people to have an image that is cosmopolitan in outlook. Hence one Oakridge brochure reads "Shop the World. Oakridge Centre." By going to shop at Oakridge the impression is given that you do not miss anything in the world of fashion.

### *Realities Expressed in the Mall*

Horne says that the realities by which we see existence are not reality, but an intellectual creation through our senses. Reality is socially constructed and provides us with theories from which we think and act. We create realities but act as if they are existence (Horne, 1986: 4-5). Oakridge creates certain realities, but excludes others. Most of what is expressed centres around consumerism. The commodities on display, the services provided and the entertainment are intended to facilitate consumption. Horne says that capitalist societies are organized around the consumer ethic. The seductions of consumer marketing are one of the dominant aspects of public culture (Horne, 1986: 123-124). Once you walk into Oakridge mall there is no way you can avoid spending money. Consumerism is linked to the work ethic. The Oakridge Centre developers are aware that the area in which they operate has people belonging to the high income groups. The average annual income per head is about \$30,000 (Bennett, 1986). Twenty per cent of the people in the Oakridge area are in managerial and professional fields and another 20 per cent run their own businesses (Mak, 1978). The manager of the mall told me that the posh mall premises are geared to the affluent community around Oakridge.

The large concentrations of merchandise found in the mall, and the invitation that an individual can have as large a share of it as she or he can afford or desires, is a statement about the dominance of materialism in North American life. Prior to the secularization processes of the 19th century, acquisition of material things was regarded as undesirable by societies dominated by religion. In modern industrial states, a person's worth is judged in terms of his material possessions. There is obsession with property owning. You own by buying. Oakridge incorporates this world view in its merchandising techniques.

Oakridge mall is a statement about the nature of big business in capitalist societies. The mall re-enacts the myth of the free market embodied in the myth of free enterprise. The mall has an appearance of a place in which there are many business enterprises competing with each other in a free market. But the mall's structure favours Woodward's. Apart from a few shops which are parts of chains, there are

many others which are small scale and have to struggle against the big enterprises.

The mall also signifies the myth of freedom in which democratic societies take pride. It is part of western public culture that a person is free to do what he or she likes at any place and time so long as he or she does not break the law or infringe upon other people's rights. At Oakridge a person has freedom to park his or her car at the parking lot or parkade he/she considers convenient, and can go anywhere in the mall. However, the structure of the mall directs the movements of a person. Availability of services and facilities has been decided by someone. What a person finds at any of the places in the mall has already been pre-determined. The exercising of the right to freedom is thus subtly managed.

Another myth promoted by the mall is that the world in which we live is glamorous, clean, rich and consists of beautiful objects. Ugliness, poverty and misery are excluded. Oakridge mall makes you believe that "shopping is a genteel style of life". The glamour it associates with the middle class (to which the manager said the mall is dedicated) is clearly exaggerated. Oakridge mall also gives the impression that success and prestige are linked with the middle class, and to belong to this class is to achieve one's goal in life. The mall is guilty of homogenizing the community it seeks to portray. This is a practice which derives from the misconception that Canada is primarily a country of people of British descent.

Oakridge mall nurses the fallacy that a person can get all his/her needs in one location. It is to this end that residential accommodation is provided on the premises. It is unthinkable that people can be contented to live, work, shop and entertain themselves in one place for most of their lives. However, as a business gimmick this philosophy works. People flock to Oakridge mall because a shopping trip can be combined with a trip to the doctor, bank, library and recreation.

One unintended message portrayed by the mall is the importance of technology in modern life. The architecture of the building is complicated and impressive. The co-ordination of parkades, parking lots, escalators and elevators to the mall's spaces shows how technological innovation can ease our lives. The exclusion of natural weather elements from influencing the mall's activities demonstrates humankind's ability to control and conquer nature. The message is clear: trust modern technology to create your happiness and comfort. The merchandise itself is a product of technical ingenuity. The new inventions displayed and sold in the mall present the mall as a supporter of industrial breakthroughs.

## Conclusion

The experiences that shoppers undergo at Oakridge mall are organized by the architecture, display and social activities which take place in the mall. The developer's objectives to create a bright and progressive mall are successful. The mall has successfully embodied many aspects of western culture. The mall is like many other malls in Vancouver, providing services and facilities which enhance sale of merchandise. The language used to communicate the mall's messages is not unique to Oakridge mall. The values reflected bear a relationship to the community served. But the mall fails to transcend society's myths and prejudices. Also without realizing it the mall has over-emphasized the role of modern technology in creating happiness and satisfaction in life.

## NOTES

1. This study was produced for a graduate seminar on public culture offered at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, September to December 1986, by Professor Michael M. Ames, Director of the Museum. It was subsequently presented in a session on popular culture at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Ethnology Society, Quebec City, May 1987. The author, who spent two years in the graduate programme of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of B.C., is curator of history at the National Political Museum of Zambia.

## REFERENCES

- BENNETT, Diane  
1986 *The Shopping Mall: An Iconographic Analysis*, Paper presented to the Graduate Seminar on Public Culture. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.
- DUNCAN, Carol and Alan WALLACH  
1978 "The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalistic Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis", *Marxist Perspectives*, 1: 28-51.
- HALPIN, Marjorie  
1978 Review of 'The Twelve Thousand Year Gap: Archaeology in "British Columbia and First Peoples: Indian Cultures in British Columbia"', *Gazette* 11(1): 40-48.
- HARRIS, Neil  
1978 "Museums, Merchandising and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence", in Ian M.G. Quimby (ed.), *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, New York, W.W. Norton.

HORNBECK, James S.

1962 *Stores and Shopping Centres*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company.

HORNE, Donald

1986 *The Public Culture: The Triumph of Industrialism*, London, Pluto Press.

MAK, Eunice

1978 Oakridge Community Profile: A Technical Report prepared for the Vancouver City Planning Department.

MANNING, Frank

1983 *The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performances*, Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green University Popular Press.

PARNES, Louis

1948 *Planning Stores That Pay: Organic Design and Layout for Efficient Merchandising*, New York, F.W. Dodge Corporation.