



KIT DOBSON

MALLED

**DECIPHERING
SHOPPING IN CANADA**

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This one is for Aubrey Jean Hanson.

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Preface

It is the summer of 2017 as this book heads toward publication. A lot has happened during the course of writing this book – the travels that have led to it span more than five years – and a lot more will happen. By the middle of 2017, it is clear that the landscape of shopping is changing anew. Alongside it, so too will the cultures of shopping take new directions.

In North America, 2017 is being written up as a year of mass store closures, especially in the United States.¹ That country is in a state of uprising while I write these words, with the old wounds of a racist history resurfacing in the present. On the economic front, from major department stores like Macy's to retailers like Crocs, every week seems to yield another announcement of more boarded up shopfronts. In Calgary, where I am writing this preface, downtown commercial vacancies are hovering at around twenty-five per cent.² It is unclear how we will look back on this time of market uncertainty, layoffs, industrial change, NAFTA renegotiations and CEOs abandoning US President Donald Trump. From inside the moment, however, it looks as though this time might herald a genuine series of changes.

Changes, however, are seldom straightforward. In the case of the cultures of shopping, the changes look perhaps more circular

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than anything. Earlier this spring, I found myself fortunate enough to be travelling, this time to Poland. Poland is a country from whence some of my forebears came to Canada, and I had always been keen to travel there. I was grateful for the opportunity. In the cities of both Kraków and Katowice, I couldn't help but notice the large, new malls, the Galeria Krakowska and the Galeria Katowicka. Both were built this millennium and both connect directly to their respective city's train stations. They are large, modern, efficient and sleek, with broad glassworks making the most of the available natural light. Both were busy, bustling, active.

What was remarkable about these two malls? They were, on the one hand, very similar to North American malls, at least on the surface, though these ones were particularly tidy and new feeling. Many of the stores were the same as ones back home, which still feels remarkable to me in a country that was, way back in my childhood, "behind the Iron Curtain," as the adults would have said.

More remarkable, though, was the way in which these malls showed how shopping changes in unpredictable ways. I don't think that either of these malls is a direct imitation of North American style, in spite of my first reactions. That analysis would be too easy to make at a time when conventional indoor malls in North America are closing up fast.

Instead, as I walked around the malls, in one city and then the other, I was struck once again at how shopping develops cultures of its own. That novelists, poets, graphic writers, visual artists and filmmakers choose to use malls and other spaces of consumption in their work just makes sense. What remains interesting, to me, is how infrequently we take notice. Instead, consumerism and shopping fade into the background, wallpapering our days but rarely taking centre stage. But the cultures are there.

In “If These Malls Could Talk,” writer and performer Vivek Shraya writes of Edmontonians’ love-hate relationship with shopping malls. The piece accompanied the 2015 release of the multi-authored zine *The Magnificent Malls of Edmonton*, which Shraya edited. In the piece, Shraya suggests that Edmonton’s malls are, in spite of their faults, “magnificent.” They are magnificent “because, despite how we begrudge them or dismiss them, they hold our quiet, unassuming, everyday, ordinary memories – the ones we almost forgot. We grow up in, around and through these malls and don’t even notice.”³ A zine like Shraya’s, however, brings the malls back into focus, forces us to notice how they are there, how they are parts of our memories and of our cultural lives, too.

As the times change yet again, as they always do, malls will change too. Shopping shifts. The death of the mall, which I note in this book has been proclaimed many times, is, in the end, not the real story. It seems to me that the story, instead, is one about how and where we come together. It is a story about where we congregate, where we build communities, where we laugh and cry. Shopping is a complicated thing, but in order to live, human animals (and other animals too) need to consume air, water and food, at a minimum, in order to persist on this sometimes-too-cold, sometimes-too-hot rock. Very quickly we discover that we are consumers, and very quickly that consumption can be enlisted as part of a capitalist culture that moulds our consumption in particular ways. What shape that consumption takes – and what shape it will take – says a lot about who we are and who we will be.

In the Beginning: Shoes

My lifetime favourite shoes were the blue Grover shoes, Buster Brown brand, that I owned when I was about six years old. They were totally awesome Sesame Street cross-marketed shoes, blue canvas with Velcro straps. I wore them everywhere I went and enjoyed the fact that I could do them up with little effort.

Those shoes, however, met their match on one trip to my grandparents' farm in northern Alberta. My grandparents on both sides once had small family farms on either side of the town of Athabasca, an hour and a half north of Edmonton, near the divide between Treaty 6 and Treaty 8 territories. The town sits on the banks of the troubled Athabasca River, but significantly upstream from the bitumen extraction projects associated with Fort McMurray and places farther to the north. By the time that I came along, only the farm on my father's side, to the south of town, was still in the family. I loved visiting the farm and spent time there in every season. I remember it in crisp, vivid detail, from northern lights to summer solstice. On that fateful late-summer trip, I was there with my parents and my sister, hanging out and enjoying life. The farm was always a busy, bustling place, and I would join my Granny on walks to feed the chickens and sheep, or to tour the pastures and see the cattle and check the fences for

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any fallen trees pressing down on the barbed wire. A dog or two accompanied us, and my Granny taught me to recognize plants and shared a thing or two about life. I would sometimes ride the tractor with my grandfather, too, as he fed the cows or ploughed the fields.

One day during that trip, out in the cow paddock, I stepped in a deep, fresh cow patty. I remember the squelching feeling of pulling my feet out from the ankle-deep muck. It turned out that cow shit does not come off of canvas any too easily. Try as we might, the shoes just wouldn't come clean. They looked, instead, a new shade of grey-brown. I was crushed.

That event, however, wasn't enough to deter me from my love of my lovable furry blue monster shoes. I kept them on while I was out building a tree house with my dad in the days that followed. I walked everywhere in them, right up until I walked along – balancing, my arms out and my eyes watching the spot where the poplars and birch trees met the sky – an old board that we were reusing to build the tree house. The board, unfortunately, had old nails sticking out of it. I stepped on one and it went right through the worn sole of my Grover shoe and maybe an inch or so into the sole of my foot. I remember my father picking me up and carrying me into the farmhouse to wash and bandage my foot. So long, shoes.

Although it was some thirty-plus years ago now, the thing that I remember with the most precision from that time was those shoes. My mother would likely say that I'm exaggerating points of the story, and she may well be right. I could still draw an accurate map of the farm, right down to where the gooseberries were, or drive there without thinking about it, but it's the shoes that stand out. A lot of time has passed since then, and, as it's done so, I've thought more and more about what it means to be so attached to

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those physical objects that surround us. Why do we care so much about our shoes? And yet, when I ask people, it seems like, on the balance, they do; most people can name a favourite pair without much hesitation. We are attached, stitched into, the cultures of shopping from early on in our lives.

Introduction: Chinook Centre

I started this book because I hated the mall. Today is December 26th, 2014. I am in Calgary's Chinook Centre – at the mall – so that I can enjoy the spectacle that takes place on this day, as it has on every Boxing Day throughout my life. In recent years, Chinook Centre has been able to count on over one hundred thousand shoppers to visit the mall each year on Boxing Day, making it a great day for sales, as well as a great day to liquidate merchandise that hasn't moved well all year. (I check afterward, when typing up these words from my old-fashioned pen-and-paper notebook: one source says that one hundred and eight thousand shoppers came on Boxing Day 2014, or close to one-tenth of Calgary's population.¹) The markdowns today get people shopping, and the credit card debt ratchets up a notch for all.

I have been coming to Chinook Centre on Boxing Day for the past few years (2012 excepted, as you'll see in the conclusion of this book). I often come with my partner or sometimes with my sister, when she is in town, but no one else was ready to tolerate the lines or the busyness of the general mayhem this year, so I've come on my own. I've been doing my best to make a sport out of it, to have fun with it. I think of my malling on Boxing Day not as a serious attempt to shop, but rather as a chance to participate in

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a display of human behaviour that would look as strange to any visiting alien species as it must to the birds.

I arrived about an hour before I started writing. I began with an end-to-end walk-through in order to get my bearings. Chinook Centre is a mall that runs north-south; its main pedestrian corridor branches in a few places toward exits or smaller wings. Aside from the parkades and the office tower, it is two storeys tall. The open galleries in many of the corridors allow you to look from one floor to the other. The mall has been redone in beige tile work – off-white, really – with white walls, wood accents and subtle skylights that supplement the halogen and fluorescent lighting throughout. The exits, as is conventional in postmodern mall architecture, are out of the way. You don't see them while shopping unless you are looking for them. Demographically, this mall caters to an aspiring, young, middle-class crowd. People seem to dress up to come to Chinook. I have at least managed to put on pants. From where I am sitting, I can see several security cameras pointed at me and my fellow shoppers. The stores are what we might think of as “everyday posh”: Nordstrom, Anthropologie, Scotch & Soda and the Apple Store are all within a few strides of me. I could spend a few thousand dollars (that I don't have) with the swipe of a card, thanks to the rather reckless system of credit that we have evolved in North America.

My first walk-through has suggested to me that today is going to be busy, but that it could be less busy than it has been the last few years. Or at least that's how it feels. Last year, there was a cordon to limit how many people could get into Victoria's Secret at a time; the same was true for Banana Republic. I don't see any red velvet ropes this year. I wonder if the Black Friday phenomenon is picking up as much steam in Canada as it seems to be and, as a result, is taking some of the punch away from December

26th. I still think of Black Friday first and foremost as Buy Nothing Day, the annual challenge to avoid consumerism launched by Vancouver's *Adbusters* magazine. Today, however, consumerism appears to be winning out. Boxing Day has long been the biggest shopping day of the year, but the US tradition of having massive sales linked to their Thanksgiving weekend has spilled north of the 49th parallel. But Black Friday doesn't seem to be as big a deal here – at least not yet. Or, at least, no one died while shopping in Canada this year on Black Friday, so the event doesn't seem as threatening. Sadly, dying while Black Friday shopping is a common enough occurrence that there is a macabre website, blackfridaydeathcount.com, devoted to cataloguing such events.

I ran into one of my students during my walk-through – he works as a plainclothes security guard at a women's clothing store. I typically run into one or two people I know whenever I visit Chinook. It is the closest indoor shopping mall of any size near to where I live – and Calgary's oldest example of an enclosed mall – and it is also the closest one to the home I lived in as a teenager.

After I finish my walk-through, I return to the entrance where I started and get myself a tea in a wax paper cup. I need to pace myself today. I sit at a large table in the middle of the corridor. The wide table seats eight, and I am at one corner. People come and go as I sit here and write. At first, a young woman wearing a deliberately tacky Christmas sweater sits at the other extreme corner of the table. Next comes a middle-aged South Asian couple who sit opposite me, then a pair of white teenage girls beside me, and then two Asian women at the other end of the table. No one sits for long. The food kiosks in this spot are for simple recharges, not substantial meals. This is a spot for caffeine and carbohydrates mostly – as I've been having too (with a good-sized tea spill on my notebook to show for it). In the time that I sit here,

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hundreds of people file by, each bag that they hold proof of having conquered another long line. By and large, their purchases are smaller in size than I might have expected.

A security guard strolls by, and I wonder if my presence here, writing in the mall, will draw any attention. The people who notice me either glance right over or else stare quizzically, and briefly. I am interested in how strangers interact with each other. One of our ongoing family projects is something that we call Sushi Quest, a perpetual search for Calgary's best sushi. Our best results tend to be unexpected ones, little hole-in-the-wall places in suburban strip malls, run by families. We have a set of rules for Sushi Quest, one of which is that, if given the option, we always sit as close to the window as possible, so that we can get a good view and see what happens. Doing so inevitably seems to bring more people in the door. People like to be around other people, but, at the same time, they'd rather not be too close, either. The people at my table are replaced by a young, very blond family. The two boys, who are about five or six, look at me, look at my journal. Their mother very pointedly does not look at me.

Best shopping slogans of the day so far: "shop. schlep. repeat." (on a cloth carrier bag) and "get it or regret it" (on a store wall). The moral imperative to shop remains strong years after George W. Bush made the outlandish claim that shopping was one way to defeat terrorism. I finish my tea and get up, ready for a move.

—

I never expected to move back to Calgary.

When I was eighteen, I couldn't leave fast enough. I grew up in cities around Canada, but ended up in Calgary for those formative teenage years – the ones that many of us might want to