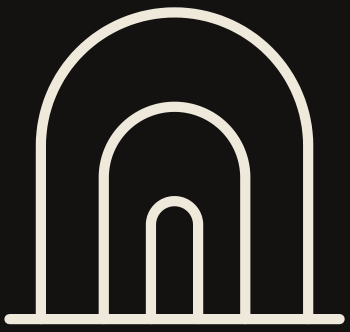
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NOTES TOWARD A THEORY OF THE ABANDONED MALL

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APOCALYPSE CULT

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NOTES TOWARD A THEORY OF THE ABANDONED MALL

R. Tamsin Voigt, 2003

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1. A factory that closes becomes a ruin. A church that closes becomes a ruin. A shopping centre that closes becomes something else, for which there is not yet a word. The others were built to last and failed. This was built to be replaced and was not.

2. Consider the materials. Plasterboard, laminate, suspended ceiling tile, glass held in rubber. None of it is meant to weather. A stone ruin improves, in the common view, as it decays; it acquires ivy and dignity. A mall acquires stains. Within one winter the ceiling tiles sag and drop, and what is disclosed above them is not a vault but ductwork. The building has no interior. It has a lining.

3. The mall was an inside with no outside. From the road it presented blank walls and a car park. All its architecture faced inward, toward the walks, the atrium, the planted court. It is the only public building type in history designed to be looked at solely from within. Closed, and seen from the car park, it is a box. It was always a box. We were simply never asked to stand here.

4. It had weather of its own. A constant temperature, a constant light, music at a constant level. The seasons were supplied by the shopfitters, slightly in advance. One went there in part to be relieved of the day. When the power is cut the building returns, abruptly, to the

climate of its region, which it had spent thirty years denying. The cold inside a dead mall is unlike other cold. It feels like a correction.

5. There were no clocks. This is well known and was deliberate. What is less noticed is that there was no dirt, no shadow and no age: nothing by which the passing of time might be read. The mall was a machine for the abolition of duration. Its ruin is therefore peculiarly shocking, since decay is nothing but time made visible, and this is a place from which time had been excluded on principle.

6. It imitated a street. There were lamp posts, benches, kerbs, sometimes a clock tower that told no time. But it was a street from which everything unpredictable had been removed: no traffic, no rain, no begging, no politics, and a security guard to remove whatever arrived uninvited. It was a street with the public taken out. Its designers called this a town centre. The town it was the centre of lay elsewhere, on the far side of the car park, and was allowed to decline.

7. Here is the bitter symmetry. The mall killed the high street by offering a purified copy of it. Then the mall was killed in turn, by something that offered a purified copy of the mall: shopping with even the walking removed. Each copy was more convenient than what it replaced and had less in it. I do not know what the next abstraction will remove. There is not much left.

8. I have walked through three of these buildings. In each, the planters still held their plants. They were artificial and had not died, having never lived. In a ruin of any earlier period the plants would be the first sign of nature returning. Here they are the last sign of the management. They will outlast the roof.

9. People say such places are haunted. I do not think the word is wrong, but it is misapplied. A haunted house is troubled by what happened in it. Nothing happened here. Millions of transactions were completed and left no residue, which was the intention. One cannot be haunted by a purchase.

10. What haunts the dead mall is its confidence. It was built for an expansion that was assumed to be permanent. The car park was sized for a Saturday that would always be busier than the last. The anchor units were scaled for retailers that would always grow. Every dimension of the building is a forecast, and every forecast was wrong. To walk through it is to walk through a prediction. One is not in the presence of the past. One is in the presence of a future that was cancelled.

11. The escalators are the most affecting things in the building. Stopped, they become stairs, but stairs of the wrong proportion, too steep and too shallow at once, so that the body, which remembers being carried, stumbles on them. I know of no better image for the condition of the towns around these places. We were being carried. The mechanism has stopped. The steps are still there, and they do not fit our stride.

12. It is objected that nobody loved these buildings and so there is nothing to mourn. That is half true. Nobody loved the mall. But a great many people spent their Saturdays there, were young there, met there, worked their first jobs there. It was the only public room that a certain kind of town possessed. That it was a poor one, owned by a pension fund and patrolled by a contractor, makes its loss worse and not better. It was all the commons we were offered, and it has been withdrawn, and nothing has been offered in its place.

13. The proper comparison is not with the cathedral or the castle. It is with the exhibition pavilion: a structure put up to display the goods of an era, in the full expectation that both would be superseded. We do not usually keep those. Perhaps one ought to be kept. Not restored; a restored mall would be a mall. Kept as it is, with the tiles down and the fountain dry, as the monument of a civilisation that believed it had found a way to make an afternoon last for ever.

14. I am told there is a proposal to convert the building I have been visiting into a distribution warehouse. The walks will be cleared for racking and the atrium roofed over. Goods will pass through it more efficiently than they ever did, and no member of the public will enter it again. I cannot decide whether this is the building's death or its completion. It was always for the goods. We were only how they left.

ABOUT THIS TEXT

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R. Tamsin Voigt wrote these notes after a winter spent, by her own account, "trespassing politely" in a shopping center that had closed two years earlier and not yet been demolished. She was a planner by profession and wrote the essay for nobody. It was photocopied for a few colleagues, passed on, and acquired a small reputation among people interested in what would later be called ruin studies.

It predates the fashion for photographing dead malls by some years, and it is notably free of the mood that fashion brought with it. Voigt is not nostalgic and does not find the ruin beautiful. Her question is exact: what kind of building is this, now that it has stopped doing the one thing it was for, and what does its particular way of decaying reveal about the purpose it served?

Her central observation, that the dead mall is haunted not by its past but by the future it was built to accommodate, is taken up in Rust Belt Metaphysics. The fifth plate in our grotesque gallery is a response to the thirteenth note.

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