

WHAT MAIN STREET CAN LEARN FROM THE MALL

A guided tour with a landscape architect and retailing specialist who believes that shopping malls -- vilify them though we might -- can offer moribund cities what they desperately need: practical lessons in the psychology of commerce

by Steven Lagerfeld
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Shopping with Robert Gibbs is like being shown around a museum of retailing by an eccentric curator. He mutters frequently, counting under his breath and pointing vaguely at store windows. He expounds enthusiastically upon footcandles and price-point-to-aperture ratios. He is cast into gloom by what he calls internally illuminated signs.

Gibbs has the sort of occupation Anne Tyler might invent for a character in one of her novels. He is a retail consultant who travels the country telling towns and small cities how to survive and prosper by learning the lessons of the shopping mall. Trained as a landscape architect at the [University of Michigan at Ann Arbor](#), Gibbs worked for a dozen years as a retailing specialist in the service of strip-shopping-center and shopping-mall developers, studying, debating, and adjusting virtually everything that might affect a shopper's mood in the marketplace, from color schemes to the location of escalators. In a well-run mall, Gibbs says, even the benches are positioned so that the shopper at rest cannot help gazing at the wares offered in store windows. The overriding imperative is to lose no opportunity, no matter how small, to make a sale.

Gibbs walks down Clematis Street, the main shopping street in West Palm Beach, Florida, as if he were navigating a maze, seeming utterly

distracted even as he searches intently for clues to the street's secrets. At forty he still has something of the smirking manner of the high school wise guy. But on Clematis Street he is all business.

Gibbs is impressed that most of the trash cans and newspaper vending machines have been painted the same dark green, a fashionable hue now used in many malls. Even a pair of two-by-fours supporting a tree have been painted. "A little detail you would expect in mall management," Gibbs says approvingly.

At the corner of Clematis and Dixie Highway, one of the main intersections in town, a new gym has opened, its large plate-glass windows displaying its clientele to passing pedestrians and motorists. The gym is what Gibbs calls a "generator": the traffic it draws will help attract related businesses, such as restaurants, fast-food outlets, perhaps a sporting-goods store, to the empty storefronts nearby.

The gym is also a brilliant piece of street theater, telling all who pass its windows that West Palm is young, hip, and attractive. It is not here by accident. Borrowing a page from shopping-mall management, the city's Downtown Development Authority and the City Center Partnership, an allied local nonprofit organization, have used loans and other incentives to manipulate the "tenant mix." They worked for four years to lure the gym to this important location. The DDA is a significant advantage to West Palm Beach, as is the energetic mayor, Nancy M. Graham. The city has attracted several plum projects in recent years, including a massive new county courthouse. In 1992 the city council approved a \$12 million bond issue to renovate the downtown district. Other money was appropriated to convert Clematis from a one-way into a two-way street and to install new sidewalks, lights, and palm trees.



Half a block east of the gym, at 331 Clematis, Provident Jewelry & Loan offers more evidence of the city's ability to shape the street. A pawnshop that once lent a vaguely disreputable air to the neighborhood, Provident has been transformed with the aid of loans from the City Center Partnership. With a fresh coat of paint, a dapper awning, and a prim new sign that doesn't shout "pawnshop," it has become an upright citizen and an asset to Clematis Street. The Imperial Gallery, a frame shop, and The Last Resort, a Generation X clothing store, both opened up with loans and other help.

Elsewhere on Clematis a large old building is being carved up into smaller stores. To lend their operations a bit of local flavor, well-managed malls often create tiny low-rent spaces called "incubators" and recruit local entrepreneurs to set up shop; some of them will thrive and open bigger stores. West Palm Beach is doing the same thing.

There are reasons to be hopeful about West Palm Beach, and about other towns and cities that are willing to borrow intelligently from the lessons of the mall. For the first time in decades strong trends in the national retail market seem to be working in their favor. A reaction is setting in against the monotony and homogeneity of the shopping mall. People are spending less time in malls--an average of only an hour and a half to two hours a month this year, according to one source, as compared with three and a half hours a month in 1990--and few new malls are being built. Only four new regional malls (800,000 square feet or larger) opened in the United States last year, as compared with twenty-seven in 1989.

Part of the explanation for this change is simply that suburban markets have become saturated, and part is that strip shopping centers, "big-box" retailers, and "power centers" that bring high-volume discounters together in one location are drawing customers away from the malls. But mall fatigue is a potent factor. In focus groups people tell Gibbs that they are tired of shopping in malls filled with the same stores that they can find everywhere else in the country. Many say they want to shop in downtowns, in quaint, one-of-a-kind stores. Gibbs does not have a monopoly on this intelligence. Retailers are already responding. Nordstrom has recently agreed to open a store in downtown Norfolk, Virginia. Even major discount retailers like

Caldor and Kmart are feeling the lure of downtown markets. Kmart plans to open a store in Manhattan next year, in the historic Herald Square shopping district. "Signs of an urban boom can be found almost everywhere," the trade publication *Shopping Centers Today* reported last fall.

Gibbs came to West Palm Beach, a city of more than 70,000, two years ago, to work on a new master plan for the city with Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, the Miami-based pioneers of the New Urbanism. This small but influential movement among architects and urban planners proposes to revive nineteenth-century town-planning principles, using denser development and gridded street systems, among other things, as an antidote to suburban sprawl. Duany and Plater-Zyberk's greatest success so far has been the much-publicized new town of Seaside, a resort community in the Florida panhandle. But Gibbs's enthusiasm for the New Urbanist cause and for downtowns in general doesn't stop him from working for the occasional shopping-mall company that seeks his services. And his own office, with its small staff, is located not in a gritty city but in the genteel downtown of Birmingham, Michigan, an affluent Detroit suburb.

What Gibbs contributes to complex cooperative projects like the one in West Palm Beach is a commercial sensibility unlike anything possessed by the urban planners and architects who usually design downtown-renewal efforts. Addressing audiences of such specialists, Gibbs takes a puckish delight in shocking them with his views on conventional urban planning. He shows them slides of a generic "success" in street design and then points out, feature by feature, how the design actually hurts the town's businesses.

The shade trees and planter boxes? Lovely, he says, but they block shoppers' view of shop windows and signs. Those handsome groupings of benches and tables? They seem inviting until Gibbs points out that they often attract teenagers and other loiterers, who scare off shoppers. The elegant Victorian streetlamps, the expensive trash cans, and the distinctive granite paving stones --"so beautiful that people will stare at them as they walk by the storefronts," Gibbs says--are little more than money down the drain. Their costs must be amortized over many years, but long before they have been paid off (and before the town can afford to replace them) they

will be old-fashioned, marking the entire street as out of date and out of step.

Gibbs sometimes clinches an argument by showing his audience slides of some of the world's most opulent shopping streets, including Palm Beach's Worth Avenue, which happens to be located about a mile (and a world) away from Clematis Street. The Worth Avenue slide reveals a pleasant but extremely plain street. It is lined with a row of palms and simple light poles. Its sidewalks, conspicuously, are mere concrete.

As Gibbs and I traverse Clematis Street over the course of two days, he pauses time and again to consider the textured sidewalk paving blocks that have been installed since his last visit. There is no question that they are attractive. But are they too porous to keep clean? Too fancy?

This is not the kind of question that planners and architects often ask themselves. They tend to see streets and sidewalks strictly as a civic realm, a social environment where people meet and interact, and they tend to favor the sorts of attractive sidewalks and streetscapes that seem to promote sociability. If they are not greatly concerned about the impact of their work on the welfare of haberdashers and stationers, that is not surprising. They belong to professions that are often at war with commercial interests.

Gibbs sees the street first as a commercial space. Nourish commerce, his implicit credo goes, and the people will come. A dirty street, a sidewalk spotted with old chewing gum and grime, is a turnoff for shoppers. And if people won't come downtown to shop, there simply won't be a civic realm.

Fear of crime is one of the things that keep them away, and grimy sidewalks are one of many signs that hint at disorder, in Gibbs's view. Standing outside the gym at the corner of Clematis and Dixie Highway, he discourses at length on an untidy collection of benches, tables, and chairs outside a café across the highway. This is civic space only in theory. In fact it poses a threat to civic existence. "Those benches make it look like this is a very difficult place to walk," he says, putting himself in the shoes of the average (that is, female) shopper. "You've got to squeeze between those benches. And if a teenager or some street person happens to be there, you would have to touch them, because

you're so close together. That is like a sign saying DON'T ENTER."

Ironically, one of the forces working in favor of downtowns today is the erosion of the shopping malls' image as a safe haven from crime. Only a few years ago, Gibbs reminds me, it was rare to see uniformed security officers in malls, because the mere sight of a uniform was thought to be unsettling to shoppers. Today uniformed guards seem reassuring, and they can be seen in malls everywhere. Even janitors are equipped with thick, military-style belts and walkie-talkies. Parking lots are patrolled by security vehicles that proclaim their presence with roof-mounted flashing lights. The Palm Beach Mall, just a few miles from Clematis Street, is so notorious locally as a dangerous place that all pretenses have been abandoned: the parking lot is studded with tall observation towers, making it resemble nothing so much as a prison yard.

Towns, Gibbs insists, must follow the malls' example in dealing with the public's fears. That means ensuring a visible police presence, removing or rearranging benches and other features that encourage loitering, and keeping the streets and sidewalks clean. Mall managers, ever inventive, are now improving the lighting in their parking lots. The norm for illumination was a footcandle or less just a few years ago, Gibbs says. Now it is closer to three footcandles. Many self-service gas stations, which must offer a reassuring prospect to lure passing motorists off the road, are now lit up like Hollywood sound stages. The lighting in West Palm Beach? Three quarters to one footcandle, Gibbs estimated.

A town's retail planning, Gibbs says, should begin where a mall's does--far from the selling floors. A simple example of mall thinking is what Gibbs calls the "no-left-turn rule": Never locate a shopping center in a place where commuters will have to make a left turn to get in. People tend to shop on their way home from work, the thinking goes, and they are less likely to stop if it involves making a turn against traffic.

This is no idle observation. At one point in his career Gibbs traveled around the country as a member of a team evaluating sites for future shopping malls. Gibbs recalls that the opinion of the traffic consultant mattered most. He vetoed so many sites that he was called The Terminator.

There is a corollary for towns and strip shopping centers: coffee shops and doughnut stores ought to be located on the workbound side of a main road, grocery stores and other services on the homebound side. "Just one left turn will kill you," Gibbs says.

Mall merchandising begins in the parking lot. Gibbs points out that at the Gardens of the Palm Beaches, an upscale mall several miles from West Palm Beach, the plantings around the building and parking lots, with their lush, tightly trimmed shrubs, seem to suggest that shoppers are arriving at a special place, and that perhaps they are special as well. It's almost like having a doorman. It's certainly a far cry from the feeling one gets in the rundown West Palm Beach parking lot where Gibbs and I parked.

Once, guiding me into a lavish urban mall called Georgetown Park, in Washington, D.C., Gibbs was able to predict which way I would turn upon entering. Most casual shoppers who are not immediately bound for a specific store--which is to say most shoppers--travel counterclockwise. Nobody knows why, though it's reasonable to suppose that driving on the right-hand side of the road has something to do with it. A good mall designer will take special care to ensure that entering shoppers have a powerful unobstructed vista of storefronts to their right. Rarely will that vista run the length of the mall, however. It is a cardinal rule to keep shoppers' eyes on the merchandise at all times. Designers try to configure malls with enough twists and turns that the shopper looking ahead is constantly looking toward a wall of storefronts. Gibbs is so convinced of the importance of what he calls the "deflected view" that in laying out the main shopping street of a small new development in Novi, Michigan, he put two thirty-degree turns near its middle. Straight streets, he believes, are one of the biggest commercial handicaps of a town like West Palm Beach.

There are other rules. Clothing stores, for example, should never be located next to restaurants: for some reason the smell of food hurts clothing sales. In downtown areas clothing stores should never be located on the north side of a street: the colors of clothes displayed in a shop window with a southern exposure begin to fade within hours. Western exposures are bad for restaurants: the setting sun at dinnertime makes customers uncomfortable. Restaurants can prosper on side streets and in other less-desirable

locations, because they usually do not rely heavily on drop-in business. They are destinations. Most retail stores count on drawing a lot of impulse shoppers, and thus need to be located in high-traffic areas.

Designers also know that the average shopper, strolling along at three or four feet per second, walks past a storefront in about eight seconds. That's how long a shop owner has to grab a consumer's attention with an arresting window display. Downtown merchants must live with the same eight-second rule, but they can also sell to passing motorists--and the window of opportunity for "merchandising to the car," as Gibbs puts it, is less than a second.

Sophisticated retailers use a variety of subliminal clues to attract shoppers. At Georgetown Park, Gibbs pointed out a high-priced stationery store that had created a window display featuring a small old wooden desk with a few pricey writing implements casually strewn about, including four ordinary-seeming lead pencils in a wooden box, priced at \$215. The tableau, Gibbs informed me, was "lifestyling" par excellence--focusing the shopper's attention not on the goods themselves but on attractive things associated with them. Buy these outrageously expensive pencils, the display suggested, and you will have taken one more step toward a life of tweeds and contemplation in the English countryside.

The lifestyling message was amplified by the window designer's skillful exploitation of what is called the price-point-to-aperture ratio. The appealing desk-and-pencils tableau was framed inside the window, much as a picture is positioned inside a mat in a picture frame. In retailing the size of the aperture is often used to provide shoppers with clues about what is in a store. A relatively small enclosed space suggests high quality and prices to match. This is one reason why Tiffany & Co. displays its wares to passersby in tiny vaultlike spaces. Big windows and big displays generally suggest lower prices.

The Duany and Plater-Zyberk plan for West Palm Beach calls for a revitalized downtown core and also thousands of units of new housing in the surrounding area, now a depressing jumble of empty lots, old buildings, and gas stations. The dimensions of the challenge facing the city became clear to me after I drove through the area for the first time on heavily traveled Dixie Highway: I sped through the intersection with

Clematis without realizing that it was the heart of downtown West Palm Beach, not just another cross street in the area's endless grid of semi-urban sprawl.

In the past the neglect of commerce by planners and architects was compounded by an inability to cope with the automobile. The car has generally been treated as an enemy, with disastrous results for downtown commerce. During the 1960s and 1970s, for example, there was a great vogue in planning circles for banning cars from downtown streets and creating pedestrian malls. The experiment was disastrous. Many downtown malls have since been ripped up, and the streets rebuilt for automotive traffic.

Surveying a small parking lot just off Clematis, Gibbs says that a conventional urban planner would waste no time converting it into a park, with benches, trees, and perhaps a fountain. "The shoppers will be happier if they have a place to sit and watch the fountain," he says, in disdainful deadpan imitation of a hypothetical planner's argument. In Gibbs's view, the problem is that people won't stop, park their cars, and get out to visit such a park. And if they don't do that, the merchants of West Palm Beach won't have an opportunity to sell them anything.

Slowly, however, towns are coming to grips with the car. At the intersection of Clematis and El Campeon Boulevard, Gibbs can barely make himself heard over the roar of heavy machinery. Even before he and his colleagues were called in to help draw up the new master plan, city officials had decided to reroute the traffic that flows over one of the Palm Beach bridges and around the outskirts of town onto an extended and widened El Campeon, recently renamed Quadrille. The goal, virtually unheard of in late-twentieth-century America, is to pump more cars into the downtown.

For Gibbs's purposes, not just any kind of traffic will do. Just east of that intersection Clematis Street is bisected by U.S. 1--which is actually two one-way roads when it passes through West Palm Beach. Cars and trucks speed by, creating a forbidding double moat that slashes through Clematis and discourages pedestrians from walking the length of the street.

The city's new master plan calls for a radical alteration of the traffic pattern. Both branches of U.S. 1 will be converted into two-way roads,

with on-street parking, one lane in each direction, and a turning lane. Instead of flowing through town as quickly as water, traffic will slow to the speed of syrup. The idea is to transform this soulless thoroughfare into a vital city street.

As Gibbs sees it, Clematis Street is fighting the same problem that a lot of other American main streets are: it doesn't have a purpose anymore. During the 1920s it connected the train station, on the west end of town, with the ferry to Palm Beach, on the east end. But after two bridges, on either side of town, began funneling traffic around Clematis, its fate was sealed. The Woolworth's, the McCrory's, and the Sears, Roebuck all continued to prosper for a while, but business inevitably followed the cars.

Historians analyzing the decline of America's towns and cities after the Second World War usually put most of the responsibility on the federal government's head. The interstate highway system and federal mortgage subsidies for single-family homes spurred suburban growth, the argument goes, and doomed the downtowns. In Gibbs's version of urban history, based on his travels, another force looms large: the highway bypass. As the number of cars on the road soared after the war, town merchants and residents sought relief from traffic-clogged streets. Their demands coincided with the interests of the state highway departments and traffic engineers, who wanted to keep building roads and whose highest professional goal was the unimpeded flow of cars. Routing highway traffic around the outskirts of town must have seemed the obvious thing to do. The downtowns thus unwittingly initiated their own march to a commercial grave.

Retailers flock to what Gibbs and other retailing specialists call a "main-main" intersection--the place where the two most heavily traveled roads in an area meet. Historically, towns grew up around main-mains. In one town after another across the country, the opening of a new bypass created a new main-main outside town. There, beginning in the 1950s, strip shopping centers began sprouting. Then came the interstate highways, creating where they crossed state highways or other interstates a new set of main-mains still farther from the old downtowns. It is usually at these new crossroads that one finds large regional shopping malls today.

Standing on the south side of Clematis under a hot Florida sun, Gibbs launches into an impassioned diagnosis--almost an autopsy--of a men's clothing store on the other side of the street, at No. 335. This touches on the matters that seem closest to his heart. Minutes before, he dragged me into the store almost against my will. Housed in an eighty-year-old two-story building painted the color of putty, the store features a large blue umbrella awning overhung by a large internally illuminated white-plastic sign. The store's name appears in big letters of washed-out blue over the tag line MEN'S WEAR--SHOES. The sign seems to date from the 1950s or 1960s.

Inside, the store was everything I had feared--small, cramped, dark, and, in more ways than one, stuffy. Shoes and sport coats were displayed in closed glass cases, and the store was dominated by a counter with cash register in the middle of the floor. The proprietor seemed to watch us suspiciously.

On the sidewalk Gibbs is almost angry. "You wouldn't have gone in there if I hadn't made you," he declares, "but he sells a lot of what you wear." He reels off a list of brand names he spotted in his expert visual frisking of the store: Corbin, Cole Haan, Allen-Edmonds, Bass, Sperry Top-Sider. These are "very fine names," Gibbs says, the kinds of brands that would interest affluent locals and tourists (not to mention visiting retail consultants and writers). But the store offers passersby barely a clue about what it has for sale.

Its most prominent signs should promote the brand names it carries, Gibbs says, to take advantage of the millions of dollars that big companies spend on advertising to shape perceptions of their products. And what would be good for this store would be good for West Palm Beach.

"People will see 'Cole Haan' and they will drive off the road," Gibbs explains. "They will say, 'I thought this was a dump area. If they sell Cole Haan, they can't be that bad.'"

The store could give itself an even bigger lift, according to Gibbs, by making use of a few rudimentary lifestyling gestures. To hear him tell it, lifestyling is the late-twentieth-century equivalent of the barber pole, announcing to shoppers what's for sale. It is ubiquitous in the mall but virtually nonexistent on Clematis Street

and other American main streets. Its vocabulary is easily acquired. Simply placing a canoe paddle or a bicycle in the window of the men's store, Gibbs says, would telegraph several messages to passing shoppers, including the vital (and correct) information that it is selling clothes that fit what Gibbs classifies as "the L. L. Bean look."

Down the street, at Mac Fabrics, we count seven signs with the store's name on them, and none displaying brand names. "Brands are what give you credibility," Gibbs says. If he had his way, signs advertising brand names would hang from the imitation-antique light poles that line the street.

This, obviously, is not a sentimental view of the American town. Gibbs is not proposing to restore the cozy village of the popular imagination. Nor does he think that the town will ever eradicate the malls, Wal-Marts, power centers, and other commercial innovations of American retailing. The American shopper's expectations have by now been completely conditioned by malls and national advertisers. The shopper wants, at the very least, much more choice than the traditional town ever provided.

The same people who tell Gibbs in focus groups that they are tired of malls complain that many small towns are, well, too small. Why drive half an hour to browse through only a handful of stores? Gibbs's rule of thumb is that a town needs at least 200,000 square feet of retail space, about the same amount as in a small mall, to become what retailers call a destination--a place that people are willing to travel to.

And once they get to their destination, people don't really want to shop in old-fashioned small-town stores. Americans, in their time-honored way, want a variety of often contradictory things. They may like quaint, one-of-a-kind stores that seem to sell unique merchandise, but they also want the comfort and security of national brand names on the goods they buy, and they don't want to pay a lot for them.

Mall operators and national retailers are moving quickly to give people what they want, and Gibbs's message is that towns must do so too if they wish to survive and prosper. That still leaves plenty of room for individuality. Each town must build on its unique strengths and its unique markets. What can't be escaped, however,

is the need for a conscious strategy for commercial survival.

Gibb's prescriptions for the streets of West Palm Beach and of other American towns and small cities borrow so heavily from the mall that it becomes difficult to see how, except for the absence of a roof over its streets, a place reconstructed along such lines would differ from a mall. It might be a town, but would it be a community?

When I ask him about this, Gibbs just shrugs his shoulders. He is not a philosopher-king. He does not pretend to know how to deliver an active civic life and a sense of community, but he believes that these things are impossible without a vital commercial life. That is something that he *can* help deliver.

He is not particularly worried that his prescriptions will lead to the homogenization of Main Street. The mall is a machine for shopping. In contrast, the pieces of the downtown shopping machine lie about unassembled, and in all

likelihood they will never be put together in the way that they can be in a mall, with its single corporate owner. Main Street will always retain a certain redeeming randomness. But if it does not learn the ways of the shopping mall, it will not retain much economic vitality. People who care about cities, Gibbs says, should be outraged that mom-and-pop shoe-store owners renting space in a mall or a strip center enjoy the benefits of the latest thinking in retailing, while those who open for business downtown get virtually no help at all.

It is hard not to feel some trepidation about the world Robert Gibbs imagines. But it is also hard not to agree with him that commerce matters, even to the world his critics might prefer. The Greeks, after all, cherished their agora, but it was always first and foremost a place of business. It is probably true that community and civic spirit, like happiness and love, are often found when you're not looking--sometimes even when you're out shopping.

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