

# Exploring Shopping Malls as Sites of Suburban Computing

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## INTRODUCTION

We have the dubiously good fortune of living in Irvine, CA, a famously planned suburban community in affluent Orange County. Disneyland is 12 miles away. This may not seem a likely site for urban computing, but *suburban* computing abounds.

One location that supports a great deal of such suburban computing is the Irvine Spectrum Center, a carefully crafted shopping experience for Orange County residents and visitors. While it is unabashedly a commercial establishment, it is also a human-scale, open, public place in a municipality that is mostly scaled for the automobile. Initially we believed that the Spectrum was a case of people adapting to what they had; with no organic urban downtown, residents used what was available. Upon visiting the web site of the Irvine Spectrum, however, we found that it was designed with these needs in mind:

Set on what was once 80 acres of strawberry fields, Irvine Spectrum Center was envisioned by The Irvine Company as what would be a gathering point for the community... a unique and energetic place where Orange County residents as well as tourists could shop, dine and be entertained, or simply stroll the paseos and relax in the beautiful courtyards. [1]

This realization highlighted for us the interactions between the design and management of public spaces in suburbia and the negotiated, emergent uses of those spaces by their inhabitants. This interface between public and management is a point where purposes may harmonize or conflict, or anything in between.

Over the last ten weeks, we have been hanging out at the mall a lot and engaging in “participant observation”. Using our observations supplemented by background research into the architecture of the built environment and interviews with mall-goers and management personnel, we hope to better understand the relationship between management intent and public use, and how each group may use technology to further their goals.

## PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

The Irvine Spectrum Center is rife with media and technology. Large flat-screen televisions draw customers into many of the shops and entertain (or distract) diners in many of the bars and restaurants. The gym located at the mall equips exercise rooms with surround sound and projection TVs. The movie theatre features an eight-story IMAX theatre. The mall sound system is ubiquitous and well-coordinated: anywhere you go, you’ll hear *exactly* the appropriate music for the space you’re in. Neon lights cultivate the impression of bustling modernity. In many ways, the technologies used by the management reflect and support their values and methods: they are expensive, monolithic, and showy. They are immersive. They inundate the senses. They support meticulously crafted experience design, a practice in retail venues that is heavily informed by theme park design and Disney’s approach to branding [12]. Much of the technology in the Irvine Spectrum Center is directed towards the creation of spectacle, starting with the floodlights that are visible not only from the highway but from the UC Irvine campus.

Other studies of shopping malls and “retail theatre” venues suggest, however, that the relationship between designer intent and customer experience is far from deterministic, no matter how sophisticated the experience design. A recent ethnomethodological investigation of food courts revealed the primacy of individual negotiations of personal space in the mall-goers’ experience even of carefully designed public places [10]. Our own preliminary observations reveal mall-goers not only shopping and dining, but wandering, sitting, lingering to listen to a free performance of live music, showing off their fashion sense, displaying affection, talking on their cell phones. Cell phones indeed, are a commonplace technology amongst mall visitors, and they also reflect their users’ values and fit into their practices. Cell phones are personal and social, generally affordable, and highly variable in design. Organized behaviors and gatherings can emerge from the seeming chaos of many individuals calling and texting one another, much as unspoken rules of the food court emerge from a chaos of conversation, body language and eye contact.

Further investigation, as it is wont to do, revealed much more going on.

### **ACCESS AND SPATIAL GOVERNMENTALITY**

It is useful, first of all, to think of the Irvine Spectrum not as a self-contained unit of commerce and entertainment, but as an integrated part of a carefully planned suburban community. Significantly, it is owned by the Irvine Company, which is responsible for planning and managing the Irvine Ranch, which includes the whole municipality of Irvine. From their web site:

We are master planners, community builders, real estate investors, and asset managers committed to a comprehensive master plan for the Irvine Ranch drafted in the early 1960s. [2]

Like most modern urban planners of the early 1960s [8], the Irvine Company designs for a separation of functions within the community, a design made evident by the division of their website into sections for living, work, play, shopping, and learning. The heterogeneous, multi-functional street life of dense urban areas is largely missing in Irvine, but the Spectrum appears to be an attempt to fill that niche. On the Irvine Company's web site, it appears under both the "shop" and "play" sections.

At the same time, however, the move to the suburbs of large segments of America's population after WWII has been characterized by – among other things – racial and socio-economic homogeneity and a desire for security [9]. Irvine and the Irvine Spectrum provide a good example of spatial governmentality [11] in action. Governmentality as described by Foucault, establishes a link between successful government of a state to the ability of its citizens to govern themselves and their families [7], while Merry describes spatial governmentality as the reservation of space for those citizens who are capable of governing themselves and behaving appropriately; those who do not are removed rather than punished. Chappell describes the enforcement of spatial governmentality in the case of police officers and the lowrider community in Austin [4]. Lowrider aficionados were occasionally arrested, but more often simply ticketed or told to move on.

In suburban environments – and the Irvine Spectrum is no exception – removal is rarely necessary because access is restricted in the first place. Every person we interviewed at the Spectrum had arrived by car, and in fact one informant described an incident in which he was arrested (but not charged) after being discovered walking near the Spectrum late at night. Bus and train service does exist, enabling custodial and maintenance staff to commute to work, however Irvine residents attest to long waits and missed connections on public transit. Indeed many bus lines run in one direction for three hours in the morning, in the other direction for three hours in the evening, and on weekends not at all [3]. For all practical purposes, to visit the

Spectrum, one must have enough money to own and maintain a car.

### **MALL PANOPTICISM, TECHNOLOGY & CONCEALMENT**

Access restriction alone, however, is not sufficient to enforce spatial governmentality. We gained personal experience in this arena as our study of The Mall as a Public Place rapidly became a study of The Experience of Being the Object of Mall Security Scrutiny<sup>1</sup>.

Foucault describes the parallel yet opposing structures of the spectacle – structured like a circus in which many people may view a few objects – and the panopticon – in which one or a few may view many without being viewed themselves [6]. These are metaphorical rather than physical structures. Mike Davis [5] has previously discussed panoptic shopping malls in the slums of Los Angeles, though in contrast, the architecture of the Spectrum is not marred by a central security 'observatory'. We have come to regard the Irvine Spectrum as a panopticon disguised as a spectacle.

The Spectrum is constructed as a more-or-less public space where one can go to see and be seen. People-watching is part of the appeal of the place<sup>2</sup>, and indeed most of our informants admitted to engaging in it. This would seem to make it difficult for police and security personnel to see without being seen, but in truth the trick lies in being seen, but not recognized. In practice, there is always some visible security presence, and indeed much of the effectiveness of the panopticon lies in knowing that there is a watcher present. Plain-clothes policemen or security guards also patrol the mall, and, as we learned first hand, the back hallways used to deliver supplies to the storefronts are equipped with security cameras. None of this was a big surprise.

The surprise came when Eric tried to interview a non-descript man whom we had seen wandering around the mall for some time, occasionally talking on his cell phone. Eric's field notes speak for themselves:

E: Just out of curiosity, can I ask what you're here for?

S: I'm the chief of mall security.

E: Oh. (oh shit! I think to myself)

In this case the cell phone he was using was not just a channel by which one might receive information, but a source of information in itself. Or more accurately, it was a

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Paul Dourish for the creative re-titling of this study.

<sup>2</sup> The people-watching aspect of the Spectrum actually makes it an incomplete panopticon. One aspect of Bentham's panoptic prison design was that the inmates could not see each other.

hider of information where another device might have been a source. Security guards are typically identifiable not only because of their uniform, but because of their communication devices. Radios are usual, as are ear pieces. Cell phones, on the other hand, provide no cues that their user is anything but an ordinary mall-goer. Using a cell phone doesn't allow security personnel to know any more than they would using radios, but by making them harder to identify it decreases the knowledge that everyone else has to work with. By increasing the knowledge *differential*, use of cell phones may empower mall security personnel.

Descriptions of popular uprisings in the Philippines and Seattle coordinated by SMS have ingrained in us the idea of cell-phones as the technology of the people. However, tools tend to be politically neutral, and "the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge". [6]

We do not wish to paint a wholly pessimistic portrait of the Irvine Spectrum. In fact, we were surprised – and I suspect the security chief would be as well – by the difficulty of finding a "typical" mall-goer to interview. We did, however, meet some Christian missionaries and former drug addicts, none of whom managed to offend security, at least on the evening that we spoke to them. Security guards are not the only people in the mall who are skilled at concealment.

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## BACKGROUND, INTERESTS & CURRENT WORK

Amanda Williams is a first-year PhD student with a background in industrial research and design. Her current research, conducted under Prof. Paul Dourish, is in the area of ubiquitous computing. Recently she co-created a tangible, manipulable soundscape, or perhaps a distributed, multi-user musical instrument, and explored how people understood sound interactions of varying complexity within the system. During the next few months, distance and radio signal strength measures will be added, tying the audio space to physical space. Over the coming years, her research will continue in the area of ubiquitous computing and its interaction with people's perception of space and place. While urban computing excites her, she notices that it has been focused largely on charismatic American cities like New York. Therefore, she is trying to persuade NSF to pay her to study urban computing in charismatic Asian cities like Bangkok, and in anticipation of the minute chance that this will actually happen, is taking a course in anthropology of cities this quarter.

Eric Baumer is a first year Ph. D. student in the School of Information and Computer Sciences at the University of California, Irvine, where he works with Assistant Professor Bill Tomlinson. Previously, he studied at the University of Central Florida, where he received his B.S. in Computer Science. There, he completed an honors thesis under the advisement of Assistant Professor Christine Lisetti on work towards an emotion-like state generator for a robotic office assistant. His current interests are varied but include, among other things, autonomous agents, synthetic characters, social software, and human-computer interaction.