

# For those who've got it, mall

In Toronto in January, it's minus 35°C outdoors and it's not true what they say about acclimatizing to the cold. Cold is cold is cold.

One escape from the unforgiving Canadian climate – winter or summer – much as it is in South Africa, is to find refuge indoors, in a mall.

So when my sister-in-law suggested a trip to Vaughn Mills, the brand new million-square-metre 200-shop mega-complex, I politely agreed on the grounds that my three-year-old niece wanted to go.

She wanted to see the super-size aquarium and the grizzly bears. The family have developed a tic worthy of Gilles de la Tourette's syndrome that involves all of us blurting out at three-minute, sequenced intervals: "Isn't she amazing?" The mall, like the niece, turned out to be quite an amazing experience.

Mall culture is no longer simply a North American experience, since it has been ably exported throughout the world, but there remains a love/hate relationship with these temples of free enterprise and their denizens.

The first thing that struck me when I walked into this "cultural environment" was the ethnic mix. People of every colour

and, it seemed, every nationality packed the corridors as they navigated the "easy-flow racetrack" layout, so named for its trouble-free access to shopper's paradise.

Toronto has one of the most complex social combinations of people anywhere and, in pursuit of the capitalist dream they all share, they seamlessly merge together.

Not surprising, really, that "the eighth wonder of the world" is considered to be the West Edmonton Mall which spans 48 blocks of the city, in Canada's wild west, such is the iconic pop-culture status these places have achieved over the last half-century of their existence. Biggest is best.

No longer simply shopping malls, but destinations that offer entertainment, they have morphed into "all-malls", as Paco Underhill calls them. He is the chief executive of Envirocell, a global research and consulting firm that counts Pick 'n Pay among its clients.

Keen to sell you an experience – and perhaps a home or an office as well – progressive malls take this route. Malls, as Underhill says, are a dipstick where we can gauge our consumer society and see how we are living and what's changing. Stores follow houses: as residential trends gravitate to the suburbs, stores follow.

According to Underhill, a retail anthropologist and author of *Call of the Mall*, the cutting edge of mall culture is no longer in the US but in places such as Brazil, Mexico, Japan and South Africa, where one key advantage offered by malls is safety.

Here people can perform in quasi-public space, which no longer happens on the street. In places such as Britain, where land is expensive (another factor), space is limited and malls are hard to get to, the High Street still wins out.

Bass Pro, an outdoors shop, sells boats, camping gear and fishing rods. It has a huge aquarium stocked with many of Ontario's fish – bass, pike, trout – and hosts casting demonstrations, minus the hooks, to show how the fish react.

Rachel, the niece, went wild in the kids' shop where an interactive giant TV screen is built into the floor and reacts to children stepping on it – so, for example, they can chase a ball across its surface.

Malls have trendy bowling alleys, such as the infamous Lucky Stripe, in Los Angeles, where the stars hang out. Nascar go-karting competitions, both indoors and outdoors, will be held there soon. Of course, it



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includes the destination that gives you the energy to mall-crawl, the inevitable 1 000-seat food court.

In our aspirational culture, the most successful malls are those where high-end shops – the likes of Tiffany, Cartier, Prada, Chanel and Louis Vuitton – have boutiques.

Another growth area is shopping in airports and train stations, crossroads where people enter a different relationship with time. Both share a key feature with malls – security. Increased security means that people have to arrive earlier anyway, and that gives them more free time to spend.

Oddly, as Underhill points out, men still design, own and operate malls, which market predominantly to women. He thinks that will have to change.

By the time it does, perhaps we will all have morphed into mall moles in some kind of sci-fi existence where the outside world is a no-go zone and we all live and die under vaulted skylights.