



Tourism, place and placelessness in the phenomenological experience of shopping malls in Seoul



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This study sheds critical light on Relph's concept of place and placelessness.
- The phenomenological experience of shopping malls in Seoul was examined.
- Shopping malls offer both an ambience of placelessness and new appeal for tourists.
- Contemporary dynamics affecting urban tourism are experienced at shopping malls.
- Shopping malls are places where socio-cultural changes manifest themselves.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the broad conceptualization of shopping malls as placeless, malls increasingly serve as popular tourist attractions and yet remain significantly under investigated in the tourism literature. With this in mind, this study investigates tourists' lived experiences and their implications for understanding contemporary manifestations of place and placelessness. It focuses specifically on shopping malls in Seoul, South Korea and adopts a phenomenological perspective to address two research questions: first, are there particular features that give rise to tourists experiencing shopping malls as placeless? And second, notwithstanding placelessness, what is the appeal of Seoul's malls to tourists? Findings propose that malls can be understood as a negotiated reality between the forces that create placelessness and those that enhance the appeal of malls. The study affirms contemporary notions of placelessness as symbiotic with experiencing place; reaffirming space as a production of human intention where social and cultural changes manifest themselves.

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1. Introduction

For the last few decades, East Asian cities have applied global standards to their entrepreneurial urban strategies as they face intense competition to become regional and global hubs (Jessop & Sum, 2000; Maitland & Ritchie, 2009). Their efforts have simultaneously been credited with successfully creating spectacular urban landscapes that highlight skyscrapers, rapid transit systems, and cutting edge shopping malls and attract an increasing number of tourists, while also being faulted for producing undistinguished

urban environments that lack uniqueness and local flavor (Morley, 2009; Wu, 2003). This homogenization of the urban environment was thoughtfully described by Relph (1976) in *Place and Placelessness*, where he first coined the term placelessness, arguing that urban development without consideration of the "significance of place" resulted in "the casual eradication of distinctive places" and "the making of standardized landscapes" (Preface).

Shopping malls, "extraordinary tourist attractions in their own right" (Urry, 1990, p. 147), present the most notable contemporary example of placeless urban environments. Hopkins (1990, p. 10) deemed malls placeless due to "their redundant style and seemingly ubiquitous sets of chain stores"; similarly, O'Brien and Harris (1991) pointed out that the market mechanism continually transforms malls into homogenized urban landscapes. In their quest to become regional and global hubs, East Asian cities have experienced over the last decade a significant increase in the

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development of large-scale shopping malls filled with multi-national brand shops, chain restaurants and entertainment centers (Cho, 2010; Kwon, 2010). In these East Asian contemporary manifestations of placelessness, it is not surprising for tourists to encounter mall environments that differ little from those in their home countries.

Interestingly, despite the commonly unchallenged understanding of shopping malls as placeless, malls increasingly serve as popular tourist attractions and leisure spaces and yet remain significantly under investigated (Shim, Santos, & Choi, 2013; Urry, 1990). In the United States the Mall of America attracts approximately 43 million visitors per year, and in Canada, West Edmonton Mall annual visits are around 22 million (LeHew & Wesley, 2007). Additionally, malls in East Asia, such as the COEX Mall in Seoul, the Xidan Shopping Centre in Beijing, and Roppongi Hills in Tokyo, have become preferred settings amongst tourists (Cho, 2010; Kang, 2010). Consequently, although malls may display several features of placelessness, tourists increasingly appear to perceive them as desirable ‘places’ to visit. What is it, then, about these places and the experiences they enable that are increasingly attractive to tourists?

To address this inquiry, the current study sheds critical light on Relph’s concept of place and placelessness. He conceptualized places as “the significant centres of our immediate experiences of the world”, and argued that place cannot exist independently but must be explored in terms of how people experience it (Relph, 1976, p. 141). His ideas are central to tourism studies as they locate the tourist experience as a complex process of meaning-making, through which a space becomes a place with special meaning to the individual experiencing it. With this in mind, the aim of this study is to understand the experiences and meanings that tourists ascribe to their visits to shopping malls in Seoul, Korea. Adopting a phenomenological approach, which facilitates the understanding of “the focusing of experiences and intentions onto particular settings” (Relph, 1976, p. 141), this study responds to Selby, Hayllar, and Griffin’s (2008) call for a better understanding of the urban tourist experience of space. In so doing, it contributes to discussions on the complexity of the experiential dimensions of contemporary urban tourism by integrating spatial considerations in the examination of the growing phenomena of tourists visiting shopping malls. Two specific research questions guide this study: first, are there particular features that give rise to tourists experiencing shopping malls as placeless? And second, notwithstanding placelessness, what is the appeal of Seoul’s malls to tourists?

2. Literature review

2.1. Shopping malls in Seoul

Following the Korean War in the 1950s, South Korea experienced rapid economic growth and urbanization, which brought about the expansion of the city of Seoul. Over the past 50 years, while property values in Seoul have increased significantly, the downtown has deteriorated. Urban redevelopment was therefore inevitable as city government sought to have a well-ordered urban landscape, land owners needed valuable property, and property developers sought profits (Kim, 2009; Kim & Choe, 2011). Accordingly, urban spaces in Seoul have increasingly been reshaped into new consumption landscapes, often on deteriorated industrial sites (Kim, 2009; Shin, 2008). Producing new commercial venues to attract tourists and residents alike has become central to Korean contemporary urban redevelopment policy; as a result, Seoul has experienced considerable development of shopping malls, such as the COEX Mall, I-PARK Mall, and Times Square (Cho, 2010; Kim, 2008).

Moreover, following the 1988 Seoul Olympics, many multi-national companies entered the South Korean market, bringing with them an influx of Western culture. In the process, Seoul’s shopping malls have become contemporary urban spaces where global and commercial culture influence place identity. Given that shopping malls attract a significant number of tourists and local visitors, multi-national corporations, such as McDonald’s, Starbucks, and Nike, clamored to gain an advantage in this new marketplace (Kim, 2009; Robinson, 2005). For these companies, malls are not only more than just retail locations but also provide a wide array of ongoing promotional opportunities, consumer narratives and relationships. Therefore, these malls have largely focused on identifying and satisfying the needs of visitors and have come to embrace characteristics quite different from those of pre-existing Korean urban spaces, sharing common and undifferentiated aesthetic, architectural, and design features with Western suburban malls.

Interestingly, although they mimic their Western counterparts, Seoul’s malls increasingly serve as preferred leisure settings among tourists and residents alike (Shim et al., 2013). The most frequented malls in Seoul, the COEX Mall, Time Square Mall, and I-Park Mall, each attract over one hundred thousand visitors daily (Cho, 2010; Kim, 2008). This can be partly attributed to the fact that these malls do not fulfill a single purpose, but rather provide a wide range of options, including shopping, eating, and socializing. These malls approach consumers through artificial images and representations, promoting themselves as fantasy worlds and entertainment sites. Indeed, the CEO of Time Square Mall stated that Korean malls employ a “mall system” which refers to “the idea that visitors can visit one place and get access to almost anything they want, conveniently” (Lee, 2009, p. 1).

2.2. Placelessness

In the 1970s, Edward Relph rejected quantitative approaches to the understanding of space, criticizing them for underplaying the subtle meaning of human experience. Place, he proposed, must anchor its meaning within the context of human action. Relph (1976) argued that place is “where we have had a wide variety of experiences” (p. 29) and that place identities are constructed by “the individual, group, or consensus image of that place” (p. 56), invoking “a direct and genuine experience of the entire complex” (p. 64). Founded on this conceptualization of place, he first coined the term placelessness to describe places that have become abstract, a historic, and inauthentic, suggesting that rapid industrialization, commercialism, and mass media give rise to placelessness that is further advanced by kitsch and tourism which deplete a place of historical and local context (Relph, 1976). The concept of placelessness strongly corresponds with Augé’s (1996, p. 177) later notion of “non-place” and “supermodernity”, which describe “the acceleration or enhancement of the determining constituents of modernity”.

In particular, Relph (1976, p. 93) identified tourism as one of the most influential contemporary sources contributing to placelessness, suggesting that the landscape of tourism is a prime example of “other-directed architecture”, designed for outsiders, spectators, passers-by, and consumers and that long-standing local identities are replaced by “conventional tourist architecture, synthetic landscape, and pseudo-places”. Moreover, he asserted that tourism is a ubiquitously “homogenizing influence”, allowing for “an uncritical acceptance of mass values” (Relph, 1976, p. 82). Others who adopted this perspective cite such tourism landscapes as motorways (Augé, 1995), shopping malls (Thrift, 1997), airport lounges (Rowley & Slack, 1999), Disneyland (Warren, 1999), and festivals (MacLeod, 2006) as examples of placelessness. They propose that these

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