

After 2021: Reimagining South African shopping malls

Events in South Africa in July saw shopping malls in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal devastated. Beyond restoration and restocking, can these popular places reimagine their identities to be both better and more innovative 'corporate citizens'?
By **Gerard Ralphs**

In the torrent of media coverage that accompanied the widespread looting and violence in South Africa's Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces in mid-2021, a key voice to emerge was that of Soweto community leader Nhlanhla 'Lux' Dlamini.

Over the course of one week, Dlamini and others guarded Pimville's Maponya Mall, an established Soweto shopping centre with an assortment of hundreds of restaurants, banking facilities, and both local and global retail stores.

The Maponya Mall was, because of these efforts, one of the few of its kind to be spared in a week of devastation costing hundreds of lives and tens of billions of rands.

A [Daily Maverick 168 interview](#) with Dlamini, published towards the end of the unrest period, shared his account of the significance of the mall beyond simply its economic value.

Photo: HSRC



'The mall has been good to the community, as it employs hundreds of people and feeds many communities, not just Pimville,' Dlamini was quoted as saying. 'If we destroy it, we will be destroying our inheritance from Mr Maponya.'

Although there are now thousands spread across the country's cities and towns, in the South African context, shopping malls are a relatively new phenomenon. Two of the longest standing examples, Johannesburg's Eastgate and Sandton malls, were only built in the 1970s, setting in motion a new localised – though, we should not forget, racialised – 'genre' of consumer experience.

A young entrepreneur at the time, the late Richard Maponya developed the means to acquire a long lease on the land for Maponya Mall in 1979.

It was, however, only in 2007 that the mall actually opened its doors, after nearly a billion rand in investment by the prominent South African, who received the Order of the Baobab award in April the same year.

More than just a mall

In ways similar but distinctive to metropolitan high streets, like the Champs-Élysées in Paris or 5th Avenue, New York, innovative goods and services from local and global businesses are densely concentrated in South African malls and, as such, are vital to the health of the country's retail and financial sectors.

But malls can and should also be considered innovations by mall owners, like the late Dr Maponya, who are required to strategically judge their geo-positioning, make substantial capital investments, and drive the continuous packaging and repackaging of a mall experience to align with retailer, tenant, and shopper tastes and pockets.

More esoterically perhaps, as sites and spaces that engage in invention and reinvention in relation to the preferences of their 'market(s)' or 'publics', malls can and have become part of everyday parlance, a feature of social life and cultural expression, and even sentimentality.

Scholars such as Martin Hall, Pia Bombardella and Achille Mbembe have studied South African malls like Cape Town's GrandWest, and Melrose Arch and Montecasino in Johannesburg by critically examining their adaptation of heritage symbols or in their appeals to stylised metropolitan identities, such as that of Italy's Tuscany region.

Mbembe, for example, writes playfully about the 'surfaces' of Melrose Arch in an essay entitled '[The Aesthetics of Superfluity](#)' in *Public Culture*: 'Much has been invested in the surfaces of Melrose Arch, including the streets and sidewalks. Tuscan paving stones were chosen for the road surfacing, and Port Shepstone stones were used to accentuate the design and colors (sic) of the building while maintaining an old-world handcrafted feel.'

These studies, to an extent, follow the tradition of post-structuralist scholarship like that of French sociologist Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970), about the Parly 2 shopping centre located west of Paris, which opened its doors in 1969.

Speculating perhaps prophetically in 2005 about GrandWest and Montecasino, Hall and Bombardella [questioned](#) the fate of South African shopping centres. They argued:

'It is too early to tell how these heritage destinations will shake down as competition and over-trading take their toll. But an evening at Montecasino or GrandWest will show that the use of these places is diverse. The movie theatres, food courts and up-market restaurants attract visitors across a wide social spectrum: youth, families, couples on a night out, those attracted to promotions and, of course, gamblers who range from a turn on the slots to addicts. There is an undoubted social cost, with an increase in compulsive gambling by those least able to afford it. There are also social benefits, particularly in the security provided by access control, surveillance and high levels of visible policing.'

They continued:

'They are closely linked to the formation of identity, to the definition of a new middle class, and to the mechanisms of exclusion of most of the population, who can no more afford to be consumers in the new economy than they could in the old.'

Places for innovation and inclusion

Despite marketing rhetoric boasting inclusion, it is the exclusionary practices that shopping malls – old and young – reproduce that should concern us.

This is because, at their extreme, these practices reinforce broader societal inequalities, rather than bridge vital gaps in communities already deeply fractured.

Inclusion and innovation, in this sense, should not be seen as mutually exclusive, as in the case of Workshop 17 at Cape Town's V&A Waterfront, where thoughtful place-making methods to develop opportunities for small businesses and entrepreneurs to co-grow their skills and operations alongside big brands has, to an extent, been achieved by partnerships between incubator-type organisations and shopping-mall owners.

As sites through which consumer desire is expressed in relation to disposable income and credit, shopping malls have a particular responsibility and, I would argue, opportunity: that is, to find new and creative ways for businesses to be better 'corporate citizens' in the particular societal contexts in which they find themselves. The histories and strategies of Maponya Mall and Workshop 17 could offer some lessons, to this end.

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