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THEY TOOK THE HEART OUT OF IT: NARRATING SPATIAL EXCLUSION THROUGH THE CLOSURE OF A SHOPPING CENTRE

By [discoversociety](#) June 03, 2020 0 Comment 2020, Articles, DS81

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Sander van Lanen

...there is no heart in it anymore, like, the heart has been ripped out in my opinion, like, there's nothing... (Michael, 24)

Since 2008, the Ballymun shopping centre in Dublin, Ireland, went through a process of shop closures, long-term vacancy, and decline. After anchor-tenant Tesco Supermarket closed its Ballymun premise, Dublin City Council accelerated these processes to establish 'vacant possession' to facilitate redevelopment. Ballymun was left with a dilapidated and rundown shopping centre, rather than its promised shiny modern centre. The demise of the centrally located centre during a period of recession and austerity gave it a prominent role in austerity narratives of local youth. These narratives reveal some otherwise hidden qualities of shopping centres, including spatial inclusion and sense of place.

Shopping centres contain multiple commercial stores which provide consumers with products and services. Beyond consumption, these centres can provide local employment, a stage for social interaction, and an efficient location for non-profit functions. For customers, their extended opening times and various services facilitate flexible and multi-purpose visits. Shopping centres are complex spaces with economic, social, and symbolic functions (**Christiaanse & Haarsten, 2017**). Several of these functions develop semi-consciously and become only noticeable when interrupted. Shopping centre closure then reveals previously taken-for-granted non-commercial values. **Christiaanse and Haartsen (2017)** showed that rural supermarkets provide meeting places and contribute to village status. These social functions were most important for inhabitants worried about a decline in liveability. Most research on service decline focusses on rural areas. This article discusses urban service disruption following an economic shock.

The construction, design, and service provision of shopping centres reflect the cultural conditions, changing consumer preferences, and economic context in which they arise (**Spiller & Linehan 2006; Linehan, 2015**). While shopping centres symbolised affluence, the **emergence of urban vacancy in Ireland** after 2008 reflected the failures of neoliberal urbanism (O'Callaghan, Di Feliciano and Byrne, 2018). Combining these notions, I explore the spatial consequences of austerity using narratives around the Ballymun shopping centre. Ballymun was constructed as a high-quality, modern housing estate. However, more affluent inhabitants started leaving as it initially lacked proper neighbourhood facilities. In Ballymun, the presence and absence, of shops and services played a consistent and crucial role.

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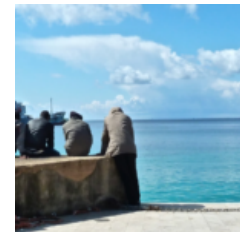
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Since 2000, Treasury Holdings had a 53% ownership of Ballymun shopping centre. In 2005, the Ballymun Regeneration Project included plans for a new shopping centre, including a cinema, bowling alley, library, creche and several restaurants. However, in 2008 Treasury Holdings went into receivership before obtaining planning permission. The economic recession severely disrupted the reconstruction of the shopping centre, which is delayed until today. Furthermore, falling employment and social welfare cuts reduced disposable income in Ballymun and, in 2014, anchor-tenant Tesco Supermarkets vacated its Ballymun shopping centre premise, citing falling revenue as a prime reason. In the same year, Dublin City Council gained full ownership of the centre and started seeking clear possession through compulsory purchase orders from 2016. In summer 2018, the last tenant left the centre after the Council approved demolition earlier that year.

During interviews in 2015, only a charity shop, post office, and the Ballymun Job Centre remained in the centre. It has since been fully cleared of activity while awaiting plans for a new shopping centre. The neighbourhood constantly develops, and these interviews provide snapshots from a particular period. The shopping centre regularly featured in narratives of young Ballymun adults, revealing themes of inclusion and sense of place.

Inclusion

When shops started disappearing, participants noticed an increasing effort required to access consumer goods and services. Although another more expensive supermarket remained in Ballymun, and young adults reached low-cost supermarkets by foot, they lamented the inaccessibility of affordable groceries for less mobile populations, such as the elderly and disabled. However, beyond the supermarket, participants regretted the lack of other facilities. The absence of shops exacerbated the often-voiced complaint that there is nothing for young people in Ballymun. The slow abandonment of the shopping centre confirmed the public and private abandonment of Ballymun under recession and austerity. The value of the shopping centre thus goes beyond its primary retail function and includes its signifier of inclusion in urban life and urban circulation. Michael narrates;

...you have a small Supervalu as I said, which I don't think is adequate to have for such a big area, like Finglas, it's a bit bigger than Ballymun but at least they have their village, they have the likes of their Supervalu, they have their clothes shops, their hairdressers, just like what a normal town should have, we don't even have that. (Michael, 24)

Compared to a similar neighbourhood, Michael expresses the lack of a commercial centre which, for him, impacts on Ballymun's status as a 'normal' place. Without the centre, the neighbourhood feels like an excluded place; its inhabitants felt abandoned as the qualities of a functioning community were missing. The abandoned shopping centre becomes an almost existential ruin, dramatically telling the story of boom and bust, of spectacular unkept promises, through the presence of its ruined neighbourhood. At the heart of Ballymun, the shopping centre reminds of past lives and forlorn future vibrancies.

Sense of place

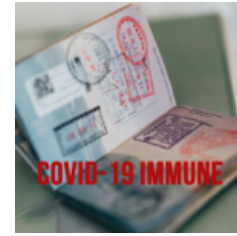
The closure of the shopping centre impacts participants' sense of place. For many, it was the 'heart of the community', and much of neighbourhood events happened in or around the centre. Memories of these events are intertwined with the shopping centre, again indicating its purpose beyond providing goods and services. It was a place of unfolding social life, of interaction between working and visiting inhabitants, and which was in tune with neighbourhood values and norms. Whether this past is romanticised is beside the point, these invocations illustrate the importance of the centre for a neighbourhood sense of place and the experience of loss related to its closure.

...the shopping centre is going to be gone, and all the shops in there are closed, and I think it's sort of, maybe, like the regeneration is takin' the community out of the community... (Donna, 23)

The empty shopping centre symbolises the loss felt around the regeneration and consolidated the youthful experience of a neighbourhood with nothing to do. Furthermore, the vacated shopping centre serves as a reference point for declining neighbourhood vitality. The lack of activity in and around the shopping centre represents the absence of meaningful activities in the neighbourhood. Progressively, neighbourhood inhabitants feel excluded from decent urban life, and they fear that a lack of vitality will further stigmatise the area.

The shopping centre thus provides a lens into experiences of broader neighbourhood developments. The denied access to a shopping centre signals exclusion from urban space and a lack of social mobility, reinforcing a sense of abjection as service decline confirms Ballymun's marginalised state. The closed shopping centre comes to represent interrupted routes to material well-being through denial of access to consumer products, local employment, and meaningful activities.

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Conclusion

This article aims to illuminate the role of the Ballymun shopping centre in narratives surrounding its closure while simultaneously employing these as a lens to understand everyday consequences of austerity and crisis in Dublin. Although the increased effort to acquire goods and services played a role, most prominent were experiences of exclusion, sense of place, and neighbourhood vitality. First, the closure consolidated participants' experiences of urban exclusion during the recession, as the absence of a functioning shopping centre depreciated the urban qualities of the neighbourhood. Second, the reduction of local service provision and abandoned mall negatively impacts on sense of place, the abandoned shops and lack of activities reinforcing the feeling there is nothing to do.

While the absence of a functioning shopping centre sustains the neighbourhood as an area of desolation and abjection, the abandoned mall reminds of a more vibrant past and unkept future promises. Finally, with the shopping centre disappeared certain activities, such as the weekly market. Participants feared that the lack of amenities will hinder future development and reinforces the already negative reputation of the neighbourhood. The abandoned and vacant shopping centre thus narrates the past, present, and future of the building, the neighbourhood, and its inhabitants.

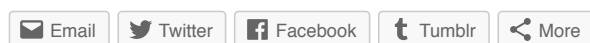
The abandoned Ballymun shopping centre is thus more than a **contemporary ruin** of a foregone past (Kitchin, O'Callaghan and Gleeson, 2014). It is a part of the **topology and topography of Ireland's neoliberal crisis** which reminds of a ruined future (O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2015). Narratives around its vacancy study the experiences of those moving to, through, and past it every day in an attempt to combine the cultural meanings of vacancy and shopping centres (Linehan, 2015; O'Callaghan, Di Feliciano and Byrne, 2018). It engages the Ballymun shopping centre as an iconic site of austerity emergence, which shapes **experiences of crisis, austerity, and recession** of its inhabitants (Van Lanen, 2020). As its shops close, Ballymun loses more than its access to consumer goods, it excludes its youth from consumption, activities, and ultimately, their valued participation in contemporary urban life.

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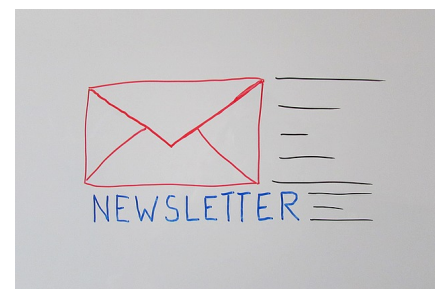
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