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ABSTRACT

Globalization, commercialization, and mass communication have brought cultural and geographic uniformity to urban spaces; a phenomenon labeled as *placelessness*, which signifies the loss of local meaning and placeness. In particular, urban tourism spaces often proposed as *placeless* are shopping complexes. Shopping complexes are largely framed as *placeless* urban spaces; symbols of homogenized urban spaces which do not impart locality but rather offer homogenized and undifferentiated experiences for urban residents and tourists (Gottdiener, 1986; Hopkins, 1990). This paper, however, conceptualizes shopping complexes in Seoul, Korea as multi-purpose, norm-governed urban sites of conversation in which interdisciplinary discourses affecting contemporary tourism are developed and contextualized. It embraces the view that there is no secure agreement about whether shopping complexes in Seoul are symbolic of *placeless* or *placeness* and instead proposes that shopping complexes in Seoul serve to negotiate the contemporary dynamics creating *placelessness* and constructing *placeness* in urban tourism. **Keywords:** Shopping complexes, Korea, planning and development

INTRODUCTION

In Seoul, Beijing, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and other East Asian cities, it is no longer surprising for Western tourists to find urban spaces that differ little from the ones in their home countries. These urban spaces, such as downtown streets, business and residential buildings, and shopping venues, are often framed as representing progress in the economies of these countries albeit it providing homogenized urban landscapes for tourists. Indeed, scholars propose that globalization, commercialization, and mass communication have all brought cultural and geographic uniformity to urban spaces; a phenomenon labeled as *placelessness*, which signifies the loss of local meaning and *placeness* (Merriman 2004; Webber 1964). In particular, urban tourism spaces often proposed as *placeless* are shopping malls. Many scholars have investigated shopping malls (Goss, 1999; Gottdiener, 1986; Voyce, 2006). Although the focus of their work varies, most of these scholars are of the opinion that shopping malls do not impart locality but rather offer homogenized and undifferentiated experiences for mall users, including tourists.

Nevertheless, shopping is one of the most pervasive activities in urban tourism (Lau & McKercher, 2004; Snepenger et al., 2003). To be sure, an increasing number of tourists choose shopping malls as urban attractions to visit; and, such visitation can be attributed to the fact that such spaces do not fulfill a single purpose, but rather provide a wide range of options, including purchasing, eating, and socializing (Reisinger & Waryzack, 1996). Therefore, it stands to reason that although shopping malls are often conceptualized as *placeless*, the continued increase in visitation by tourists certainly merits the argument that to tourists shopping malls serve as an attractive urban space that both contains and constructs a certain contemporary *placeness* and significance.

Therefore, whether representative of *placelessness* or *placeness*, shopping malls play a powerful role in contemporary urban tourism as one type of tourist attraction that enhances the whole travel experience. Indeed, under the new paradigm of an 'entrepreneurial city', city governments as well as property developers are building and managing more and more urban shopping venues to induce tourists' desire to visit and extend their stays (Yuksel, 2004). Shopping spaces, therefore, can be approached as spaces for negotiating many dynamics, particularly the forces creating *placelessness* and the forces constructing *placeness*. In particular as it relates to East Asian cities, in the past decade shopping complexes have multiplied, attracting tourists along with them. For example, several huge shopping complexes, such as COEX-Mall in Seoul, Xidan Mall in Beijing, and Roppongi-Hills in Tokyo, have already become favorite shopping spaces for tourists as well as local residents (Kwon, 2010). With this in mind, this paper discusses the concepts of *placelessness* and *placeness* in relationship to urban shopping complexes. Specifically, this paper discusses the various dynamics of shopping complexes in Seoul, Korea, because such shopping complexes, which include COEX-Mall, I-PARK Mall and Times Square Mall, are relatively new and are now ranked as the top tourist sites in the city. In so doing, the paper conceptualizes shopping complexes in Seoul as multi-purpose, norm-governed urban sites of conversation in which interdisciplinary discourses affecting contemporary urban tourism are developed and contextualized. Anchored in this framework, literature on globalization, commercialism as well as urban development is reviewed and integrated so as to explore the various dynamics influencing shopping complexes and to understand the appeal of these shopping spaces to tourists.

Placelessness
Relph (1976) first coined the term *placelessness* to signify locations and physical structures that do not reflect the unique or local ways of their immediate surroundings. The term *placelessness* is, therefore, marked by an "inauthentic attitude" which "involves no awareness of the deep and symbolic significances of places and no appreciation of their identities" (Relph, 1976, p. 82). In particular, Relph (1976) identifies tourism as one of the most influential sources for creating *placelessness*; suggesting that the landscape of tourism is a typical example of "other-directed architecture" that is designed for outsiders, spectators, passers-by, and consumers (p. 93). The concept has consequently been adopted by tourism scholars, who cite numerous tourist sites such as Disneyland (Warren, 1999), and shopping malls (Thrift, 1997) as examples of *placelessness*. In general, the rationale for the adoption of

such classification is that these places do not reflect local characteristics but instead represent modernized and illusory environments within enclosed spaces; creating *placeless* experiences for tourists.

Globalization: Homogenization

Law (2002) suggests that large urban areas are more strongly influenced by globalization because cities are nodal points. With intense competition among cities to be regional hubs (Pearce, 2001), most city governments put priority on global standards and pursue the image and designation of cosmopolitan cities. The resulting dominant perspective is that the world is being homogenized through globalization. Seoul is no exception to this global dynamic. After the 1988 Seoul Olympics, many multi-national companies have entered the Korean market, bringing with them a significant influx of Western culture. In the process, Seoul shopping complexes such as COEX-Mall and Times Square Mall have become representative spaces where cultural globalization influences place identity. These spaces provide undifferentiated spectacles, which often mimic American suburban malls. The sharing of a common aesthetic is expected when one considers that all around the world shopping malls are being designed by a few transnational architectural and design firms (Salcedo, 2003). Moreover, and central to this paper, is the notion that urban tourism is also a source for, as well as of the undifferentiated landscape of urban shopping venues. As Hoffman and Musil (1999) stress tourism provides an entry point by allowing multinational companies and Western culture to transform local culture. Consequently, under such global circumstances, tourists are provided with illusionary environments, and experience a *placeless* culture while shopping at urban complexes be they in Seoul, or anywhere else in the world.

Commercialism: Mass culture

Shopping complexes are commercial spaces owned and controlled by private enterprises. Therefore, although shopping complexes serve multiple roles as cultural, social or public spaces in cities their central purpose is to maximize profits. Moreover, since shopping complexes attract urban residents and tourists, major business corporations, including restaurant chains and fashion companies are all scrambling to gain an advantage in the new global marketplace. Consequently, the commercial landscape of shopping complexes does not facilitate a stable place identity because it is continually changing as it chases popular mass trends. Accordingly, while most shopping complexes in Seoul define themselves as "urban cultural hubs", the culture they provide is largely mass culture. According to Wilensky (1964), mass culture refers to "cultural products manufactured solely for a mass market" and results in "standardization of product" and "mass behavior" because it aims to satisfy "the average taste of an undifferentiated audience" (p. 176). Therefore, it follows that the adoption of a commercialized mass culture further promotes *placelessness* of shopping complexes as individuals consume similar types of commercial mass culture that are not usually based on local history. Indeed, unlike public-owned tourist attractions, such as parks or public museums, shopping complexes are more strongly influenced by commercialized culture than other urban spaces because they, as private enterprises, likely feel less responsibility to maintain local identity. To be sure, urban tourism has provided a

perfect opportunity for multinational corporations and homogenized mass culture to triumph over local identity (Hoffmann & Musil, 1999). This, however, may be a result of current trends which indicate that urban residents and tourists increasingly want cities to be desirable places to play, and ultimately become "entertainment machines" (Clark, 2004; Sassen & Roost, 1999).

Urban redevelopment: Gentrification

Following the Korean War in the 1950s, South Korea experienced rapid economic growth and urbanization which brought about expansion of the city of Seoul. In metropolitan Seoul, nowadays, there are over twenty millions inhabitants. Over the past 50 years, while property value in Seoul increased significantly built environments, particularly in downtown, have deteriorated. Urban redevelopment was therefore inevitable as city government wanted well-ordered urban landscapes, land owners needed valuable property, and property developers pursued development profit. Among various types of urban redevelopment, producing new commercial areas including shopping complexes which attract residents and tourists alike has increasingly been regarded as central to Korean urban redevelopment policy; understandably so, given that the building of new consumption spaces are often the basis for many urban renewal projects (Raco, 2003).

Under the new paradigm of an entrepreneurial city, the Seoul city government came to embrace the notion that urban shopping complexes are a great way to revitalize the city both economically and culturally, as well as to promote the spaces as a symbolic outcome of their urban revitalization plans. Moreover, unlike traditional urban planning of zoning, new urban strategies including Planned Unit Development (PUD) and Mixed-Use Development (MXD) have been increasingly applied to urban redevelopment. Since those strategies focus more on economic effectiveness than public interest (Neuman, 2005), new urban spaces including shopping complexes have different characteristics from existing urban spaces. For instance, as Ellin (1996) expected, urban spaces in Seoul have increasingly been reshaped to form new landscapes of consumption, often on deteriorated sites that had formerly been production spaces. Interestingly, the spaces in which many shopping complexes are now located had previously been symbolic places of modernity. For example, the space now occupied by the Times-Square Mall had previously been a large manufacturing factory, I-Park Mall was a famous railway station, and Central City Mall was an express bus terminal.

New development can, however, bring about other urban problems such as gentrification (Fotsch, 2004; Hall, 1994; Zukin, 1995). Indeed, commercial development of urban downtowns is often proposed as one of the most considerable factors that contribute to the acceleration of gentrification. For example, without exception, every shopping complex in Seoul includes a large-scale discount chain, such as E-mart, Lotte-mart or Home-Plus. Since those chains sell everything consumers need and employ various marketing strategies, small stores and local restaurants, which have constructed unique landscapes and local identity, can no longer survive or compete.

However, are shopping complexes really *placeless*?

    Placelessness has been an effective heuristic framework for understanding urban spaces such as shopping complexes. However, this existing framework is largely premised on one-directional influences and assumptions--globalization produces homogenization, commercialism fosters mass culture, and urban redevelopment leads to gentrification. Indeed, the notion that *placelessness* occurs through globalization, commercialism, and urban redevelopment largely underestimates the cultural subjectivity of locales (Roudometof, 2005; Tomlinson, 1999; Wang, 2007). For example, within the macro dynamics that produce *placelessness*, local governments have come to realize that preserving local identity and social function is an essential component of urban redevelopment. Similarly, property developers have become increasingly concerned with *placeness* as they seek to enhance property values. These approaches imply that there is another group of dynamics that are contributing to a new heuristic framework; one that calls for the centrality of *placeness* in the study of shopping complexes.

Glocalization: Cultural Mixing

    Appadurai (1995), as well as Pritchard and Morgan (1998) assert that each culture reveals a unique identity; however, this identity is not absolute, but rather contextual and relational. Consequently, as space is one arena where identity is both constructed and revealed, spaces are "in a constant state of transition as a result of continuous, dialectical struggles of power and resistance among and between the diversity of landscape providers, users and mediators" (Aitcheson, 1999, p. 29). Moreover, "though globalization has been judged as involving a general process of loss of cultural diversity, some of course did better, some worse out of this process" (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 269). Messey (1994) points out that within globalization, there might be to defensive and reactionary responses, such as certain forms of nationalism, sentimentalized recovering of sanitized 'heritages,' and outright antagonism to newcomers and 'outsiders.' Indeed, globalization enhances cultural identity because individuals come to pay more attention to their own culture and uniqueness under the influence of globalization (Wang, 2007).

    Within this context, urban tourist sites are heavily contextualized in the broader economic restructuring of post-industrial cities and serve as examples of interactions at the global-local nexus (Pearce, 2001). In particular, shopping complexes in Seoul represent a perfect example of this nexus. According to Jewell (2001), there is "a tension between the universal neutral values of global culture and the distinctive regional characteristics of a locality" in shopping malls (p. 335) Since individuals increasingly visit shopping complexes and in the process interact with other cultures they have more opportunities to reflect upon their local identity than ever before. Shopping complexes, therefore, can perform an important role as a catalyst for positive change in local identity. Actually, while individuals seem to experience globalized culture in shopping complexes, each shopping complex provides a somewhat different experience that is related and connected to local identity. For example, assuming the COEX-Mall in Seoul and the Xidan-Mall in Beijing are, to some degree, homogenized by globalization, a comparison between the two shopping venues nevertheless shows what is unique about each and the culture they reflect and represent.

Moreover, tourists may perceive these urban shopping venues as great places to experience the authentic culture of contemporary cities, unlike other tourist attractions, such as museums and palaces which provide only a historical perspective on the city.

What attracts tourists to shopping complexes?

A tourist attraction is not a fortuitous result but a negotiated reality socially constructed with a purposeful set of various forces and actors (Ley, 1981). It follows that the recent popularity of shopping complexes in Seoul is the result not only of inevitable dynamics but also of the intentional efforts of several stakeholders such as mall operators, property developers, and city governments, who hope that urban residents and tourists alike will perceive their shopping complexes as attractive spaces. Through the process of place marketing, various dynamics, which have been understood as creating *placeness* or *placelessness*, may serve as great resources for creating the appeal of shopping complexes, with respect to the consumption of the space itself, familiarity and predictability, as well as manipulation of tourist desires, and contemporary authenticity.

Figure 1. The appeal of shopping complexes in Seoul

Consumption of space itself

Baudrillard (1983) suggests that in postmodern society things no longer have an original function or utility value, rather signs and images indicate their meaning to others.

From his perspective, a commercial venue does not merely play a role in promoting particular products but it begins to be consumed as a whole; as the image of the space itself (Gottdiener, 1997). This implies that people visit these spaces not to buy a particular product or enjoy a specific type of entertainment, but rather to consume the space itself. In this sense, post-modernism perspective provides a totally different way of looking at the world and also changes the way of understanding the concept of 'placeness.'

Accordingly, the idea of the "commodification of reality", which can also be called the "commodification of space itself", has been applied by shopping complexes in their marketing strategies to attract tourists. The CEO of Time Square Mall in Seoul stated that Korean shopping complexes employ a "malling system" which refers to "the idea that visitors can visit one place and get access to almost anything they want, conveniently." (Lee, 2009). Meethan (1996) suggests that tourists perceive the urban environment itself as a commodity to be bought and sold. Indeed, shopping complexes embody the idea of "commodification of space itself" and tend to combine all actual functions of space into one created image. For example, shopping complexes in Seoul do not emphasize individual shops or restaurants but rather approach consumers through artificial images of the whole space, promoting themselves as a fantasy world, an entertainment place, or a fun space. Consequently, tourists aim to visit not any particular shop or restaurant in the COEX-Mall, but they are visiting the COEX-Mall itself with no specific shopping plan.

Familiarity and Predictability
The development of shopping complexes results in cultural and spatial exclusion, both of which serve to separate shopping complexes from their local contexts despite their quasi-public nature. However, the spatial exclusion of shopping complexes also contributes to the appeal of shopping complexes. Particularly for tourists who may feel nervous in foreign countries, shopping complexes are perceived as relatively protected spaces. This is a function of not only safety, but also familiarity. For instance, shopping complexes in Seoul usually emphasize, through their advertisements, that they are safe places for upper- or middle-class families as well as employ many strategies to provide a familiar environment for tourists, such as signs in English and receptionists fluent in foreign languages. In addition, tourists can predict what they will see in shopping complexes because the spaces mostly consist of similar brand shops and franchise restaurants as well as a similar arrangement of these stores. With few exceptions, shopping complexes in Seoul have a high percentage of multi-national brand stores and chain restaurants that might attract tourists who lack reliable information about local stores and who are wary of unfamiliar food in foreign cities.

Manipulation of tourist desire
As expected, commercialized mass culture dominates shopping complexes in Seoul. Why then are residents and tourists so driven to and by the commercial mass culture that is provided by shopping complexes? We can find one possible answer in mass culture theory. Culture, previously regarded as exclusive to the upper class, is becoming available to everyone due to the development of mass production and the mass media. As culture became

mass culture, it became closely associated with money, consumerism, and business. According to Cowen and Tabarrok (2000), creators of mass culture, such as moviemakers, popular musicians and fashion designers are primarily motivated by money, which has resulted in a mass culture that is far more attractive than the traditional arts, such as museums or classical music. As such, mass culture is not a spontaneous result but a created product related to commercial profit; within such a system, the producers of mass culture have no option but to make their products attractive, eye-catching, and sometimes addictive. Consequently, commercial mass culture, as reflected in shopping complexes, has strong appeal and induces individuals to purchase and have fun.

Shopping complexes, whose purpose is profit maximization, use diverse business techniques to attract people, and the cumulative effect of marketing strategies entices urban tourists to visit the space repeatedly and habitually. For example, even if they provide a culturally rich environment, using art galleries or performance stages for urban residents or tourists to take in, this is but one of their effective marketing strategies. Kelly and Godbey (1992, p344) assert that many people are captured by an illusion of what Marx called "false consciousness" and Huang (1986) understand this phenomenon as the distortion of human needs through the manipulation of desire. Tourism, therefore, no longer exists to satisfy an individual tourist's desire but it acts as a medium for internalizing the capitalist hegemony into an individual's life. Through urban tourism, each tourist becomes no more than an obedient consumer of commercialized tourist products; controlled, monitored, and perhaps exploited.

Contemporary authenticity
There is little doubt that several shopping complexes in Seoul already have become favorite places for Seoul residents, particularly for young individuals who are enthusiastic about globalized and commercialized mass culture. The shopping complexes in Seoul are full of numerous fashionable shops and popular restaurants, which survive the stiff competition because, whether it is due to manipulation or postmodern consumption, the shopping complexes themselves represent much of what urban residents enjoy in a contemporary consumer society. Therefore, tourists can experience an authentic urban culture that is not intentionally designed or crafted for tourists. Ooi (2002) suggests that tourists visiting shopping venues are authenticity-seeking tourists because they want to experience the authentic local culture. Indeed, Hsieh and Chang (2004) assert that shopping can be the easiest and best way to experience the uniqueness of native tourism.

The concept of authenticity has performed a crucial role in understanding tourist motivation and experience. For a long time, the focus of authenticity has been on the notion of 'objective authenticity' which implies that there is a fixed standard to determine what authentic is (Wang, 1999). However, since reality is not static but contextual and socially constructed, the notion of 'authenticity' also should be understood as a cultural value constantly created and reinvented; in the process, emphasizing cultural selectivity and interpretation (Kim & Jamal, 2007). From this perspective, various dynamics surrounding

shopping complexes in Seoul, such as globalization or glocalization, commercialism or postmodernism, and urban redevelopment or regeneration, could be all important elements that serve to create and locate contemporary authenticity and new *placeness* in Seoul; albeit some scholars claims that these dynamics destroy the very authenticity of local culture. Tourists, on the other hand, may perceive these urban shopping venues as great places to experience the contemporary meaning of authenticity in Seoul, unlike other traditional attractions that provide historical or manipulated images of the city.

Conclusion

The current paper embraces and promotes the view that there is no secure agreement about whether shopping complexes in Seoul are symbolic of *placelessness* or *placeness* and instead proposes that shopping complexes in Seoul serve to negotiate the contemporary dynamics creating *placelessness* and constructing *placeness* in urban tourism. That is to say, the present form of shopping complexes in Seoul should be considered a consequence of various social phenomena resulting from both dynamics. Rooted in the essential notion of the social construction of space as discussed by several social scientists including Lefebvre (1974), this paper asserts that shopping malls, which have been perceived physically or mathematically for a long time, should be understood as a contextual, social, cultural, and conceptual system. It proposes that in addition to exploring a variety of dynamics surrounding a particular urban space, urban tourism research must consider the correlation between dynamics in order to understand the varied meanings of space for tourists, as well as the implications that urban and tourism policies will continue to have on such dynamics.

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