

Greyfields

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After the Crisis
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When a shopping centre is dying, its patronage slipping away, it is referred to as a greyfield. At this point annual sales have slumped below \$200 a square metre. The centre slowly hollows, tenants are given notice and town planners swoop with schedules for demolition. The centre will stay open until a third of the tenants find other lodgings. The empty shops close their roller-doors and the arcades shut down in dark rows, one by one. The centre is sealed, locks are placed on the doors and the car park buckles at the edges, weeds pushing up the bitumen in anticipation.

This will happen to one in every four shopping centres. Shopping centres die in stages: like retail lepers, they lose limbs. Anchors are what keep them alive. They are the heart – a popular franchise, supermarket or department store that directs traffic past the smaller stores. Anchors such as food halls and cinema complexes are placed at the end of long stretches of glazed windows. The industry standard states that the maximum distance shoppers are prepared to walk between anchors is three hundred metres. This is called anchor drag.

Competing centres will often anchor-steal in an attempt to attract tenants and shoppers alike. When an anchor leaves, dead zones appear. Pedestrian traffic diverts like a dammed river. Blank corridors. Roller-doors. To survive, the weak gather around the strong.

Joe Raffino owns a café next to what was a large department store in Perth's Bentley Plaza, selling breakfast, lunch and snacks to the anchor's employees and passing shoppers. The day after the anchor closed its doors for good, Joe's business halved. 'We used to put on twenty-five ham and cheese croissants in the morning,' he says. 'Now I put on two.' This is the third anchor to set him adrift.

Shopping centres die every year. Rising land prices revalue a centre's worth, and property owners have no emotional attachment to an ageing complex. Closure is sometimes quick and painless: demolition can take as little as ten days. But the cost of evicting tenants often drives an ugly alternative. Property owners let maintenance fall by the wayside. Arcades become sallow and bleak; leaks are left dripping, the roof blisters; shoppers leave, street urchins move in. The corridors reek of urine and mould. Roller-doors signal the end.

The Heart of Victoria Park was a maze of brown-tiled shopping arcades hidden

behind the street. Not far from Perth's central business district, it was an area brimming with business potential covered by an ageing facade. For three years I worked in an office overlooking the centre's rear entrance.

The anchor was a dilapidated supermarket whose workers seemed to be teenagers skipping school for the day. The floors were streaked with trolley rubber; the lights – dimmed, to save energy – cast an unhealthy pallor on the sullen faces of the staff. If you stayed long enough you could hear the merry-go-round music grind to a halt, the clunk of the tape-flip over the PA system. Renovations doubled the number of registers, the cost of which halved the number of checkout staff. This was the heart of Victoria Park.

As overseas investor-owners waited for the right price to sell, the centre was left to decay. Drains overflowed after heavy rain. Electrical fittings were left bare, arcades caught in a flickering, fluorescent seizure. Two and a half years before the walls eventually came down, only eighteen of the centre's forty-two shops were occupied.

The local newspaper followed the shopping centre's demise. 'The only people that shop here are our loyal customers,' the owner of the centre's café is reported to have said. 'But it is dangerous. One lady recently fell and broke her leg.' He and his wife had been operating their shop for fourteen years. 'We stay because we have to. Nobody will buy us out.'

But even this owner is gone now. The centre was finally put out of its misery, and the space where it once stood now resembles a concealed bomb site. Only the anchor remains.

Alive, shopping centres are filled with anxiety. They fight against the retail slump, the lack that defines a failing retail venture. This can be the result of anything from an inefficient layout to what is referred to as visual pollution – which includes people, undesirables who sour the retail mix.

I made some enquiries about security at the Galleria shopping centre.

'Well,' Pam says, running a packet of frozen peas past the scanner, 'don't go near the toilets. They're purely for show: everybody knows this and everybody stays clear. The toilets are the most dangerous place in the centre; it's the only place where they can't see you.' She nods up in the direction of a camera

jutting from the ceiling. 'In the toilets, nobody can hear you scream.'

I laugh, but she tilts her sunglasses down her nose so that I know she wasn't joking. 'Do you want to know why I wear these sunglasses? It's because I've been working checkout since I was twenty-two.' Pam looks like she's pushing forty. 'The lights give me migraines. It also helps distance me a bit from the customers. This way they can't see what I'm really thinking.'

I've tried talking to security about security, but my questions have been answered by slow shakes of the head, silence over the phone. Perhaps if you don't talk about crime, it doesn't exist.

'Don't use the rear car park after dark,' Pam interrupts. 'Don't park on the second floor. Don't use the stairwells. If you think someone's following you to your car, they probably are. Don't let your woman walk back to the car alone. Don't rely on security guards – they don't have the jurisdiction to do anything. Taxis will take twenty minutes to arrive, so order one early and don't wait outside. There are basic rules, and there is common sense. Don't use the rear entrance.'

'The music is to deter youths from hanging around. There are studies done that say teenagers' brains are susceptible to certain kinds of classical music. It gets to them like a dog whistle. Do you know why the balconies have angular railings? It's to make it uncomfortable to lean on for any length of time. These are all policies. We only have one set of benches now.'

'See those men over there?' She gestures to a group of fading Italian men gathered around a set of benches, clasping and unclasping their hands. 'They're the only people who get benches. They've been here as long as I have. Only they've always been old. They used to sit around by the shoe store until they were moved, then they were up next to the newsagent, but they kept reading the papers and then putting them back on the pile. They were out front of the manicurist for a while, until the lady found out they were looking up the skirts of the female customers. Now they're stuck between an ice-cream shop and a fishmonger. There's not much trouble they can cause there.'

She considers the length of a zucchini. 'Is this gourmet zucchini or normal zucchini?'

*To survive, the weak
gather around
the strong*

Gourmet.

'I've had marriage proposals from six different men in the time I've been working checkout. There's a man who comes in with his mother each week on a Tuesday and asks me to marry him. I've said no so many times that now I say yes. The other proposals are from legitimate-looking people, you could say. People like fast service, I guess.' She forces a smile.

'A lady came through the other day and threatened to call the cops on me because I asked her for her FlyBuys card.' Pam fans her fingers out in front of her face as she becomes the lady. 'FlyBuys are illegal,' the lady hisses at me. 'Why are you asking me about something illegal? You'll get in big trouble for talking about things like FlyBuys.'

Pam does a price check on a tamarillo. 'There's a certain type of person that buys a fruit like this.'

'See that man there?' She points to a man fondling a grapefruit. 'He comes in every day at 9 am dressed like he is now, in a suit and tie, and walks around till 6 pm, then leaves. Some days he buys something; most days he doesn't. One day I ask him why he doesn't just go to the park. "The park never changes," he says. And then he looks up at the lights as if he's looking at clouds in the sky.'

The man delicately places the grapefruit back on the shelf. He tucks his hands into his pockets and moves off down the aisle, trailing his fingers across the fuzz of a peach pyramid.

'A guy comes in the other day and gives me a sheet of paper that says: Unable to talk, they are listening. Sometimes I wonder whether it's shopping that people are after or just someone to talk to. Stewth, everyone has a different story to tell. I'm like a church confessional. It's punishment for asking people how their day's going.'

My bags are gathered like a train wreck at the end of the counter.

'Are we finished?' Pam asks.

'I guess so.'

'Good. My lunch hour's about to start.'

Dead shopping centres are the tombstones of failed enterprise. In Perth the suburbs stretch a hundred and twenty kilometres from north to south, and more than fifty kilometres east. It's not uncommon to commute for more than an hour to work each day. This massive grid of barren suburbia has its own name, Greater Perth, an appalling realisation of the great Australian dream: a backyard, two cars and a Victa mower. The suburbs follow the arterial roads out, veins congested with double carports, patched lawns and swimming pools. The sprawl is made for cars, not people. □

Shopping centres make this possible. On average, people will travel two to three kilometres for food and five to eight for clothing and household goods. The sprawl demands satisfaction. Yet the smell of decay is always on the wind. Retail giants squeeze the smaller shopping centres out of the market. With plans approved, sixty thousand square metres of retail space can be operational within one year. Retail gravitation takes its course, and the small centres rot as the big players draw the clientele away.

We walk under the glass-plated awning of the Harbour Town shopping centre. 'Beautiful isn't it?' My guide points to the transparent roof. 'We're bringing back the "marketplace" feel to these centres.' The tinted light casts an antiseptic gaze over the shoppers passing by. 'It's been shown that the sun has a really positive effect on a shopper's state of mind.'

Michael Tulley is a shopping-centre surgeon; he takes fading centres and reinvents them.

'This,' he says indicating a row of discount bins, 'is a new era in shopping-centre philosophy: outlet selling. Every day is a sale day.' Beside us, two large women in T-shirts and leggings sift through a pile of business ties. 'There was a massive build up of ex-season stock coming back through the distribution lines, clogging up the system to such an extent where at certain times of the year the cost of freighting goods back to the manufacturer was starting to outweigh the cost of just shredding them. It was such a waste.' Tulley talks about sale stock in the way other people talk about starving kids in Africa. 'I mean, something like this,' he says, pulling a size 14 sandal from a nearby table. 'This is perfectly good merchandise. Would you shred this?'

'I'm size 11.'

'I know! But for the right person it still holds value. Sure, maybe not as much as it did a few months ago, but still a price.' He looks the shoe up and down again, as if measuring up his own size. After a few moments he places it back on the pile. 'This style of retail is so popular that we don't even require anchors anymore.'

We slide sideways to get past a clump of shoppers crawling over a pyramid of battery-operated blenders.

'But it's not enough anymore to simply stick every type of shop you can think of into a hulking great cube. Box shops are dull, drab, austere. We spend far too much of our time in them to make them boring. The challenge is to make people want to stick around. Time spent is money spent.'

Harbour Town uses the merry-go-round retail plan. A circular arcade only has one direction. You get on at the entrance and take the ring road to the exit. It's a continuous flow of traffic that forgets no store.

Tulley talks about 'synergy' with his hands close to his chest. 'Imagine a shopping centre as a cluster of retail possibilities. Individually, these stores have to offer merchandise that is attractive or essential to the average shopper. But as a whole, customer services fit together, creating what we call the ultimate shopping experience. Shops work off each other. When a customer searches for ladies fashion they expect to find two things: range and affinity. Which shirt should I buy, and what can I buy to go with it.'

This is synergy.

'We're all looking for critical mass, you see.'

Critical mass?

'The point at which it all comes together. It's a chain reaction of expenditure: the more you buy, the more things you need to buy.' A meltdown of retail efficiency.

A growing trend in the industry is to theme centres to make them more alluring. 'This can be good,' says Tulley. Earlier he had shown me a coloured sketch of a fashion boutique arcade, all straight lines and white space. Sophistication. A themed décor or design gives context to the surrounding outlets. Food halls and supermarket sections are often combined with themes of the garden, the farm or natural elements. 'But there are mistakes. Fashions change; themes grow

old and outdated. They work against you. A centre is a changing entity and you have to keep up.'

Tulley stops by a blank shopfront. Within, snakes of insulation cord lay abandoned; a small pile of dirt has been swept into the corner; a discarded chair is visible. Metres away, an escalator diverts the flow of traffic away from the store. 'Vertical circulation', they call it. Tulley points to a faded logo on the window.

'They call these "label scars",' he says softly. 'It's the mark left from the previous owner's sign.' This one is for a discount travel-goods store. Tulley rubs the spot with his fist. 'Really difficult to get rid of.'

Five months later, a yearlong renovation of the Heart of the Park Shopping Centre is finished. The brown tiles are gone; the leaks are fixed. The sagging roof has been torn off and replaced with vaulted skylights. The floors squeak like a hospital ward. Disinfectant hangs in the air. The fluorescents are steady and white in the same way you think of God's bathroom being white. The shopfronts are lathered in wet reflection.

The anchor now has express lanes, clean tiles, a health-food section and golden lights over the bakery. But the checkouts are piloted by the same sour faces. Only the girl at the cigarette counter is smiling.

Of the old faces that waited behind the glazed shopfronts, there is none that I recognise. New faces, pulled into smiles, wait eagerly by the counters. The shopkeepers seem optimistic that shoppers will return, but only the anchor is still doing regular business.

Perhaps it's the mix. Two hairdressers now compete for business; a small greengrocer battles defiantly with the anchor. At the entrance, a franchise coffee shop attracts a small crowd of middle-aged businessmen pawing their newspapers, but few venture inside. At around three, the quietest time of the day, the centre has a high-noon flavour. Shop owners are caught up in the retail silence, and stare across the empty hall at each other.

Four weeks later the bookshop has gone, its window paint so fresh I can hardly see the scar.