



## Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Life in a Mall

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In his new book, *Call of the Mall*, Paco Underhill explains that the reason the rest rooms in America's shopping malls are typically located at the end of a long, gloomy corridor – the suburban equivalent of a city alley – is because malls are built by real estate developers, not merchants.

Real estate developers, says Underhill, so resent having to dedicate any space to a non-revenue producing amenity, that they tuck it out of the way. If you are looking for a rest room at almost any mall in the U.S., Underhill advises, look for an uninviting, dimly-lit hallway. You're there.

Paco Underhill knows this sort of thing because his retail consulting firm, Envirosell, has conducted hundreds of research projects for stores in some 300 malls located in 44 of the 50 states. Underhill's specialty is hiding behind a potted palm (or its equivalent) to observe and take notes on what shoppers do. Envirosell advises clients (among them The Gap, Radio Shack, and Estee Lauder) on such matters as display, counter height, where the checkout counter should be placed and the like.

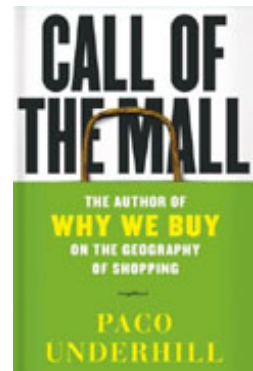
Underhill has been called a "retail anthropologist" because he studies such cultural customs as the fact that most people entering a store will turn first to the right, rather than the left and that 65% of men who carry a pair of jeans to a dressing room will buy them but only 25% of the women. Underhill wrote about these and other habits of shoppers in a best-selling book *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping* published in 1999.

Now, he is letting us in on life in the enclosed suburban mall. ("Are we really going to spend an entire book inside a mall?" Underhill asks in the book's introduction. And he replies: "Yes, we are.") Underhill takes readers along on successive visits to an (unnamed) upscale mall on Long Island as a springboard to a wide-ranging portrait of malls in general.

Underhill explains why the stores closest to mall entrances tend to be occupied by hair salons or banks, not shops catering to impulse buyers: "When we enter any building we need a series of steps just to make the adjustment between out there and in here," he writes. "We need time to allow our eyes to adjust. We are not ready to make any buying decisions. If there is a sign close to the door, you won't read it."

Thus the best locations are further in the mall. And since the mall owner charges tenants a flat rent based on space plus a percentage of sales, it is in the mall's own interest to have the hottest stores in prime locations, says Underhill.

He says every mall has a food court because they prolong a shopper's stay. The food court is usually noisy and the offerings not exactly gourmet. But, he asks, "is there another place where the quasi-foodstuffs of Mexico, China, Italy, Thailand, Greece, Japan and South Philadelphia



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come together like this?"

He notes that malls are primarily designed for female shoppers. Women's apparel is the number one category. Men, he says, much prefer strip shopping centers – places where they can drive to a parking place in front of a particular store, shop, get out and not have to ask directions.

Not that they would get anywhere asking for directions in the typical mall, he adds. Nobody, including security people, seems to know where the various stores are. He says his firm has timed "how long people stare at those big wall directories." It's about 22 seconds which, according to Underhill, is a long time to study a map. And many never find what they are looking for.

Underhill identifies lots to complain about in the typical suburban mall. Malls, in general, he says, are architectural wastelands – big, boxy, featureless – nothing at all like the retailing palaces built by the department store magnates of yore. If there is greenery outside a mall, it's "generic greenery," says Underhill. "It's only job is to be green." You rarely see a display window facing the parking lots, he notes.

That may be just as well. "If you decide to examine the store windows, you'll crash your car," he admits. Still, he wishes mall exteriors weren't quite as boring as they are. And, here again, he puts the blame on the fact that real estate developers are the ones who approve (and pay for) mall design.

To some, it's a plus that there is no weather to worry about when shopping at a mall, that you won't be handed any political leaflets unless mall management agrees and that there is no danger of being run over by an out-of-control taxi. But Underhill (who lives in Manhattan ) makes it clear he personally prefers shopping in a city. He finds urban settings more stimulating.

Research shows, he says, that pedestrians move and shop rapidly in urban settings – perhaps, he theorizes, to indicate they have other important things to do. In a mall, however, shoppers – perhaps the very same people – move at a leisurely pace and are much more willing to wait in a check-out line. Shopping, after all, is what they are there to do.

Forty years ago, the suburban mall transformed America's retail culture, killing off many downtown shopping districts. Forty years ago, malls were the way suburban housewives could escape the house. But times and shopping habits have changed. "We're never going to love them in the same way again," says Underhill. In the boom years – the '70s and '80s, a new mall would open somewhere every three or four days. Now you don't see many malls being built and many have closed. "We're malled up" he says. While well-located malls will continue to thrive, the hey-day of the enclosed mall is over. Underhill isn't sorry.

In *Call of the Mall*, Underhill writes about individual stores in the malls, as well as the malls themselves, and drops some of the same kind of shopping lore he wrote about in *Why We Buy*.

For example, he says that research has shown that if a clerk approaches a shopper who comes up to a department store cosmetics counter in the first 30 seconds, it scares her away. The customer has to first browse unaided, but "if she raises her head even a little," writes Underhill, "it's like a jerk on a fishing line."

He reveals that the reason fragrance is traditionally right inside the entrance in a department store

is "because back in the days before cars, the perfume section was a bulwark against the stench of horse manure coming in from the street."

From intimate info about Victoria's Secret (they don't display sexy underwear for large women, but stock plenty of it) to preferences about parking lot landmarks (men like numbers and letters, women like colors, and lots of people need help from security guards to find their car no matter what the sign says), *Call of the Mall* is a chatty, funny, detail-laden expedition into a world of consumerism that most of us are usually too busy shopping to think about.

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