



## Shoppers, Slum Dwellers and the Homeless

### Extremes in the Age of Globalization

It is a common cinematic ploy, designed to manifest guilt in any movie-goer. The limo pulls up to the curb. The door with the mirrored window opens. From under the floor-length mink, a well-toned leg emerges. The very wealthy lady alights, and manages somehow, not to trip over the body of a homeless man as she makes her high-heeled way toward the store with the Prada bags.

It could be Madison Avenue in New York, or Water Tower Plaza in Chicago. It could be The Admiralty in Hong Kong, Naughtiness City in Shanghai, or the Champ Elycees in Paris. But the obvious contrast is what is supposed to hit you. The limo. The mink. The body in the street.

These images were played for laughs in the 1980s films *Down and Out In Beverly Hills* and *Trading Places*. But as UN-HABITAT's new publication *The State of the World's Cities Report -2004*, soberly points out, they are no longer the images of celluloid comedies. Increasingly these contrasts are the realities of everyday urban life.

### Scenes from a mall

The enclosed, indoor shopping mall, once exclusively found in suburbia, with its anchor stores and high-end designer boutiques, has made its way to the big city. Be it the Mall of America, in Minneapolis, or Shangri-la Plaza in Manila, The Philippines; the walls went up, the air conditioning went in and the security guards were hired to keep out the riff-raff. Shopping has become both the common denominator and the public face of these projects of globalization. It represents a way in which almost everyone can 'buy into' the symbolic economy, pursuing his or her private dreams in a public space. The danger in this kind of globalization is that enclosed public spaces represent a more limited form of citizenship, one for which the poor need not apply.

Like the cultural districts that are built for performance and display, these new, mixed-use shopping developments are spaces where residents of the city can perform the role of modern – or global – consumers and display their knowledge and wealth. This space is not, as many critics charge, 'American' so much as it is 'modern' and 'global.' Or, rather, while it began in the US, it has been re-territorialized in every city of the world.

According to *The State of the World's Cities Report 2004*, many countries have recently experienced a long wave of intensified shopping. This does not just reflect the fact that, with economic development, consumers have more leisure time and spending money. Shopping has been intensified by the concerted actions of an institutional network of retail stores, manufacturers, marketing experts, display designers, advertising agencies and independent critics who write reviews of products and styles; it is shaped (or stimulated) by government policies on wages and taxes and, increasingly, by multinational treaties on trade and free-trade zones.

Globalization and free-market reforms have helped bring western-style discount shopping to people the world over. But these same trends are also linked to negative impacts on the urban poor. Economic structural changes at the local, regional and global levels have benefited some people tremendously, but many more have not enjoyed the fruits of globalization. There are more jobs, but not nearly enough. The gap between rich and poor is growing. Slums are proliferating. The number of homeless people is rising. The rest of us, apparently, are going shopping.

### Purchasing power

The global intensification of shopping has been stimulated by governmental decisions to lower entry barriers to foreign-owned retail merchandisers, who have negotiated to open more stores in some developing countries. Shopping has also been enhanced by the proliferation of credit cards. Most important to governments, however, is the fit between shopping and their social and cultural goals.

Intensification of shopping today also reflects the strategic expansion of global brands. Luxury products are no longer just works of individual artistry and collective artisanal skill; they are names that get their value from association with a famous designer, and they provide value to the corporation that sells them, in various forms and at various prices, as a portable display of social status. Changing luxury goods into brands requires that companies intensify their promotions, and building new stores in major shopping districts around the world is one of the most effective forms of advertisement. Multinational luxury goods corporations hire the same multinational architects who design the mixed-use and cultural districts and are eagerly courted by city governments.

### **Hanging at the mall**

Teenagers and young adults are the most enthusiastic shoppers. Shopping is, after all, a way of trying on identities, and young people naturally gravitate to this type of experimentation. For teens, shopping is also a means of socializing, and for the current young generation that is hardly involved in politics or labour unions, it offers a way of entering the public sphere. But this is not the public sphere of the *café du quartier*, the marketplace or other forms of traditional local culture. Shopping for products that are globally recognized as signs of youth, such as jeans, shoes and music, is a means of resisting the traditional public sphere. It is a modern-day form of rebellion. As one writer says of young people in Singapore, they draw fashions from a 'globalized "image bank"' that is familiar from movies, TV and music videos, and consume them as a form of protest. Shopping for global products, then, signals rejection of a politics that is identified with traditional or local culture.<sup>2</sup>

### **The "other" teenagers**

The costs of metropolitan life determine levels of welfare, as well as social mobility. For growing numbers of the urban poor, the city no longer promises a better life for one's children. Rather, in the absence of skills and health, a low-wage future is the only alternative. At city traffic lights, more and more children are washing car windshields. Programmes to provide only basic education and skills rather than high-quality training for the poor contribute to the problem: in order to compete, young people must have skills that can add quality to the production of goods and services. Yet, providing such quality education is prohibitively expensive in most cities.

Poverty then becomes increasingly concentrated in certain neighbourhoods that have, generally, become the habitats of the urban poor and minority groups: racial minorities in some societies, immigrant groups in others. Historic and existing racial and ethnic inequalities within and between nations have generally been exacerbated in the current process of economic globalization. Furthermore, the youth, who grow up in an environment that lacks jobs and education, are likely to remain in poor areas, often exposed to crime and insecurity.

### **Homelessness in the advanced economies**

The unprecedented level of homelessness in advanced economies is one of the most visible symptoms of social change in the new era of globalization. In the *banlieues* of Paris, some inner-city areas of London and in the ghettos of New York, poverty and inequality have reached alarming and unacceptable levels.

The number of homeless people in Western Europe is at its highest level in 50 years, with homelessness levels not seen since the end of World War II. An estimated 3 million West Europeans were believed to be homeless during the winter of 2003. However, the rise of homelessness has not been limited to Western Europe. In the US, about 3.5 million people are homeless, including 0.9 to 1.4 million children. In Canada, the number of homeless people has steadily increased to a level now far beyond anything seen one generation ago. The total estimated homeless population of Western Europe and the US combined is equivalent to the entire population of Denmark.

Since the late 1980s, poverty has also been linked to the state's decreasing capacity to provide, to the majority of citizens, the minimum conditions for entry to the market. In the developed world, safety nets are failing some of the most vulnerable sections of society. The urban poor who end up homeless become, at some stage, unable to mobilize social capital in the form of family, networks, community bonding and shared values. Stripped of their capacity to compete in a market economy, deprived of state welfare support and devoid of social capital, most of those who fall into the trap of homelessness are people whose vulnerability has been exacerbated by health, drug and alcohol problems, as well as by physical and sexual abuse.

One out of four people living with HIV in New York City is homeless or marginally housed. A Los Angeles study found that two-thirds of people with AIDS had been homeless. Depending upon who is counting and where, HIV infection rates in homeless communities run from 8.5 per cent to as high as 19.5 per cent in the US. People with HIV/AIDS are more likely to become homeless as their incomes are drained by the costs of healthcare.

Homelessness in the advanced economies has changed significantly over the past decade. 'The old, derelict "wino" on the park bench has been joined by younger men, unemployed and destitute; by the confused and mentally ill, frightened by the pace of surrounding activity; by women and children, escaping violent and destructive domestic situations; by young people, cast off by families who can't cope or don't care. But stories about the homeless do not only relate to individuals, but to families in ways that suggest the failure of traditional welfare systems to adapt to today's changing social and family circumstances.

As the UN-HABITAT report makes abundantly clear, the sharp rise in homelessness in the last decade is projected to continue at a steady rate. At the same time, recurrent racial, religious and cultural resistance continues to lead to the formation of slums. This, in turn, leads to the newly gated communities and enclosed shopping malls for the most affluent. For city governments, the challenge goes beyond combating homelessness. Effective responses to the spatial constructions of poverty currently taking place, as well as the trend towards social segregation arising from inadequate urban policy, have to be found.

*Down and Out in Beverly Hills* and *Trading Places* were very much films of their decade. In the age of globalization, homelessness can no longer be played for laughs.