

The visitors' perspective of the mall

A research on the functional, architectural, identifiable and social aspect of the mall

Summary: Since its origin, the mall has undergone many architectural changes to facilitate undisturbed shopping. Nowadays 6-7% of the shops in neighbourhood malls are vacant and over the last five years, the number of visitors to shopping areas has fallen by almost 50%. This raises the question of what the visitors think of the concept of the mall. This research reports and discusses the visitors' perspective of three different malls in the Netherlands: The Mall of Schalkwijk (Haarlem), Leyweg (Den Haag) and Plein 1953 (Rotterdam). In order to achieve this, 15 visitors per mall were interviewed. This report focuses on the functional, architectural, identifiable and social aspects of the mall. In general, the visitors considered functional aspects most important at the mall. 'Grocery stores' and the fact that the mall is 'nearby' were mentioned a lot in the interviews as things visitors value about the mall. Visitors indicated that 'vacancy' is something they disvalue about the mall. What was remarkable was the lack of mention of architectural aspects in most of the interviews. When rethinking the concept of the mall, it should be considered that visitors think in a functional way, something which architecture can facilitate.

Key words: mall, vacancy, visitors' perspective, functional aspects

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Introduction

“Far too many items in the world are designed, constructed, and foisted upon us with no understanding—or even care—for how we will use them”.

- Norman, 1998, p 21

Although Norman (1998) is writing about the design of objects, it is interesting to think about it in terms of architectural design. It is required to see what users, residents or visitors themselves value about the architecture. This research is about the concept of the mall.

As Kooijman (1999) describes in his book ‘Machine en theater’, the mall emerged in the Netherlands in the fifties as an innovative concept for the shopping street. The innovation of the mall was the undisturbed space for shopping it offered. This has been made possible by the separation of the residential and shopping functions, the unity of the mall, pedestrian access only and the separation of the supply of goods from the shopping functions. Since the origin, the typology of the modern mall has evolved over time. Architectural changes have been made to facilitate undisturbed shopping, such as covering the mall and adding large car parks adjacent to the mall (Kooijman, 1999).

However, the whole concept of the shopping mall has been under threat in recent years. In the past five years, the number of visitors to shopping areas has decreased by almost 50% (Retailtrends, 2022). More and more consumers are buying their products online. The online share of non-daily products grew from 26% in 2018 to 32% in 2021 (I&O

research, 2021). As a result, many shops offering non-daily products disappeared in the past few years. Approximately 6-7% of shops in neighbourhood malls are vacant (AM, 2022).

In order to prevent a further decline in the number of visitors and vacant shops, solutions are now in demand. Area developer AM (2022) did research on the use of neighbourhood malls and suggests that the mono-functional character needs to change by adding other functions such as facilities in the food sector, dwellings and public functions. In this way, the mall could be the heart of the neighbourhood again (AM, 2022).

Although this could be a possible solution for vacancy, it is important to investigate the opinions of the visitors as well. Returning to Norman’s quote, understanding the preferences of the visitors to the mall will provide more insight into their needs and motivations for visiting the mall, and can help to match the demand with supply, rather than the other way around. This research will therefore examine how visitors assess different malls. The main research question is:

How do contemporary visitors assess the mall on its functional, identifiable, architectural and social aspects?

By answering this question, a contribution can be made to the future concept of the mall in which the visitors’ perspective is taken into account.

Theoretical framework

With the theories of several scholars, various aspects of the modern mall and its qualities can be analysed. With the theory of Bos (1946) and Fledderus (1955), the functional aspects of the mall are addressed. The theories of Gehl (2010) and Holland et al. (2007) address the general social aspects of public spaces.

Functional aspects of the mall

In his book 'De stad der toekomst, de toekomst der stad', Bos presented the mall mainly as a functional facility for the neighbourhood. He built on the theory of Howard with the garden city model (Blom et al, 2004). Howard's theory of the Garden City Model (1902) was a reaction to the poor living standards in the large cities during the Industrial Revolution in England. In turn, Bos' theories were a response to the war damage and the housing shortage after The Second World War (Galema & van Hoogstraten, 2005).

By centralizing the public facilities, and making them accessible and attractive, Howard tried to stimulate the use of them (Korthals Altes, 2004). Bos has done this in a similar way. He framed a schematic layout of the city of the future, which is subdivided into city districts, neighbourhoods and neighbourhood districts. In his theory, the division of the city into smaller parts is regarded essential for the functioning of people and the feeling of community, 'the neighbourhood spirit'. Stable and healthy social communities were needed in a changing world of anonymity, moral degeneration and tantalizing amusement. Those communities would

serve as a buffer against the dangers of the modern city according to Bos (1946). A lot of neighbourhoods were built according to the neighbourhood spirit (Harbers et al, 2009).

Facilities, including malls, should correspond with the subdivision of the city (Bos, 1946). According to Fledderus (1955), malls can be divided into three categories based on their size; the city centre has its city mall, the neighbourhood has its neighbourhood mall and the smaller district has its district mall (figure 1). All types of malls have to comply with the needs at their scale level. In this way, the neighbourhood could function by itself with all the providing facilities (Fledderus, 1955).

Social aspects of public spaces

Another way of looking at the mall is by focusing on the social aspects of the place and the social function. Different scholars have written about the social aspects of public places and how social interaction can be stimulated by architecture or urban planning. Gehl (2011) has written extensively on how urban design and architecture can promote social contact by considering the quality of the city's physical environment and human scale. According to Gehl, public places and in this case, malls can serve as a place for social interaction.

The physical environment is one factor that influences people's activities in public spaces. According to Gehl in his book 'Life between buildings' (2011), outdoor activities in public spaces can be divided into necessary, optional, and social activities. In ci-

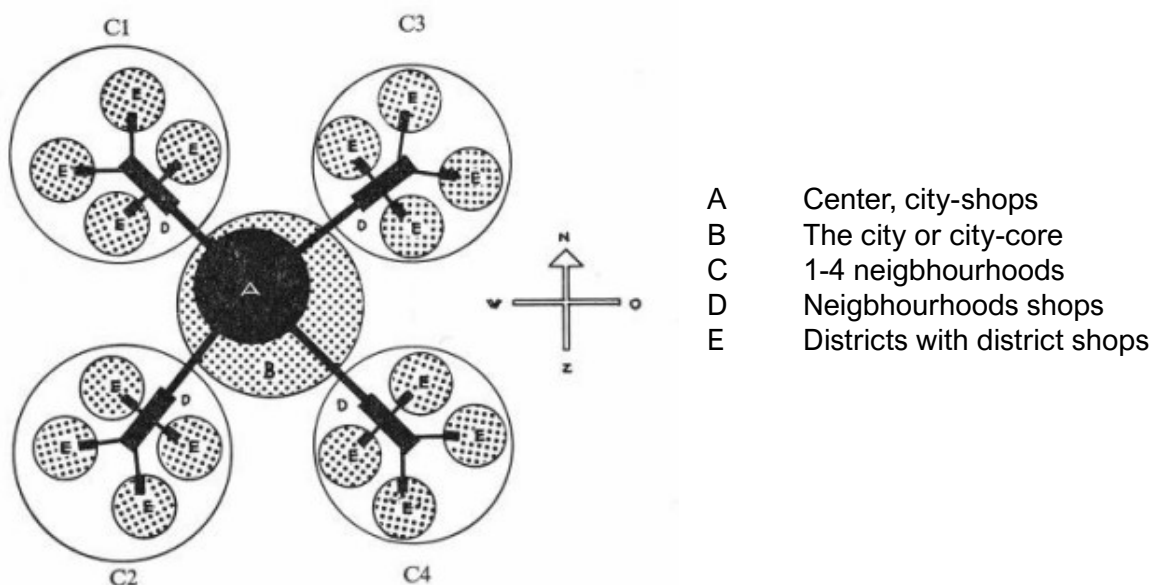


Figure 1: Theoretical representation of a city (Fledderus, 1955)

ties with a low quality of the physical environment only necessary activities will take place, whereas in a cities with a high quality of the physical environment, a wide range of activities will take place (figure 2). The incidence of necessary activities is only slightly influenced by the environment because the activities are necessary. These activities mostly involve everyday tasks often related to walking. These activities will take place under almost all conditions throughout the year and are almost independent of the exterior environment. However, even necessary activities will take longer when the quality of the environment improves (Gehl, 2011). Optional activities, such as sitting and sunbathing or taking a walk, will only take place when exterior conditions are pleasant and the place facilitates them. Social activities, including communal activities, greetings and conversations or children's playing, will in most cases evolve from necessary or optional activities. They occur in combination with other activities because people meet each other. The most widespread activity is through passive contact, such as seeing and hearing other people (Gehl, 2011).

Gehl also made a systematic overview of the criteria that contribute to the quality of the city in an architectural way. The first category is 'protection'. He writes that it is crucial that the criteria for 'protection' are met. Safeguarding the other qualities can prove meaningless if protection isn't ensured. The next step is to create spaces that offer comfort and invite people for activities – walking, standing, sitting, seeing, talking and playing, which is

the category 'comfort'. The last criterion of the category 'delight' works as an umbrella category for the other criteria. Architecture and design which is what's about in the third category, cannot be dealt with without the functional aspects of the first two categories (Gehl, 2010).

According to the theory of Holland (2007), public spaces give space for all kinds of people to meet in planned and unplanned ways, to interact with each other within the context of the whole community. These interactions are between people with all kinds of relationships: families, friends, neighbours and so on (Holland et al, 2007). Public spaces can contribute to the cohesion of communities. It must be taken into account that a lot of factors in the design of the public space influence the use of it. The use of street furniture is an example of how design can influence how people use a space. (example 1). The benches, from which the users have a good view of the space, were used a lot by all kinds of people. The benches which were located less conveniently, for example in a windy position, were ignored more often. A lot of factors affecting how people will use public space also relate to the program of a space. This can differ for certain age groups. For example, the lack of public toilets in public spaces can be a problem for older people or parents of young children (example 2).

With these examples, a distinction can be made between what is influencing and contributing to the quality and use of a public space: the programming (example 2) and the combination of programming and design of a place (examples 1).

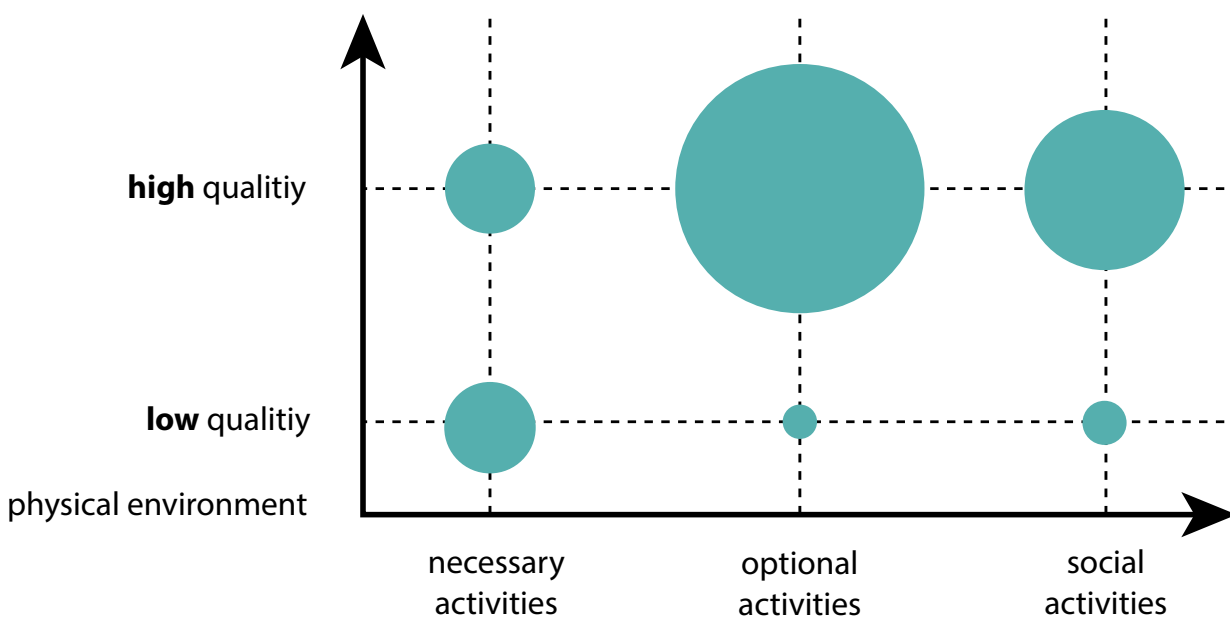


Figure 2: type of activities in the physical environment (Gehl, 2006)

Methodology

Within this research, three modern malls of post-war neighbourhoods were selected as case studies. The different malls were: 'the Mall of Schalkwijk' (Haarlem), 'Leyweg' in Morgenstond (Den Haag) and 'Plein 1953' in Pendrecht (Rotterdam) (figure 3 to 5). These case studies were chosen based on their size and number of residents in the neighbourhood they are located in. The neighbourhoods vary from smaller, middle to bigger neighbourhoods (figure 6). Pendrecht has 12.298 residents (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2022), Morgenstond has 20.687 residents (Gemeente Den Haag, 2023) and Schalkwijk has 35.167 residents (Gemeente Haarlem, 2023). Another difference between the malls is the spatial layout. The shops of the Mall of Schalkwijk are connected with a covered passage. Leyweg has a very clear layout with all shops along two streets and the shops at Plein 1953 are situated around a square (figure 7). As there are two variables, (the size of the neighbourhoods and the spatial layout of the malls) comparisons between the malls cannot be made. Nevertheless, there can be looked at the influences of the variables on the results.

For the research question 'How do contemporary visitors assess the mall on its functional, identifiable, architectural and social aspects?', structured interviews were conducted at the site of the three malls. Per case study, fifteen residents were interviewed about their experience of the mall they were visiting. The interviews were held from the 24th to the 26th of May 2023 (Wednesday to Friday) in the afternoon. The temperature was around 16 °C and it was sunny. The questions of the interviews are included in the appendix.



Figure 3 Schalkwijk (Noord-Hollands Archief, 1978)



Figure 4: Leyweg (Haags archief, 1966)



Figure 5: Plein 1953 (fototechn. dienst Rotterdam, 1966)

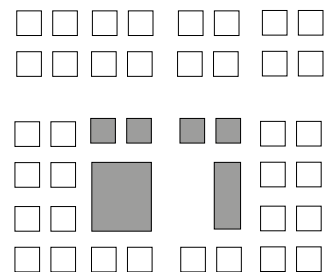
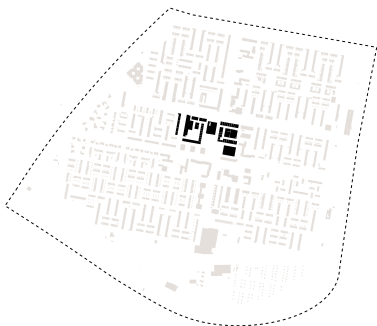
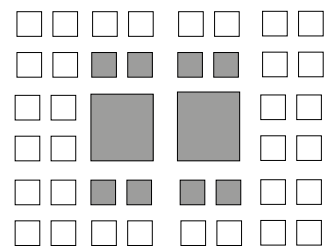
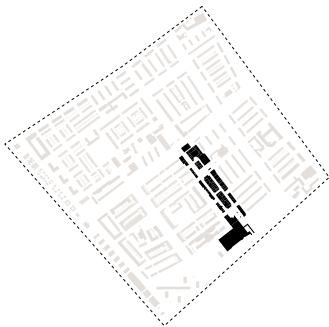
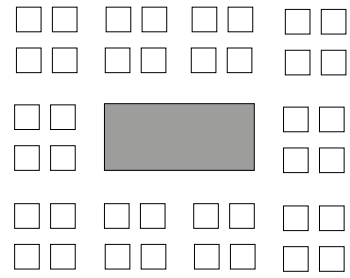
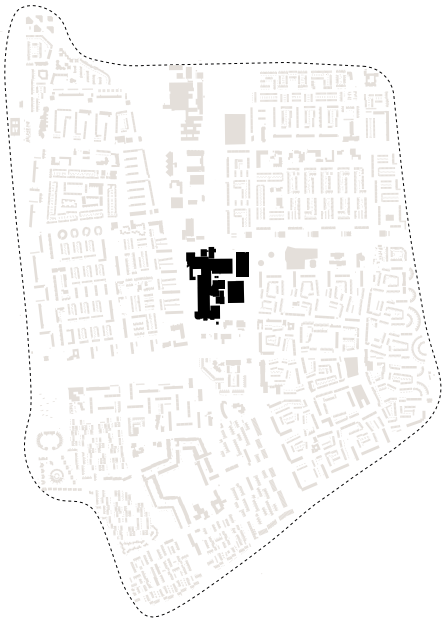


Figure 6: location of the different malls in the neighbourhood (own image)
 Top to bottom: Mall of Schalkwijk, Leyweg, Plein 1953

Figure 7: spatial lay-out of the different malls in the neighbourhood (own image)
 Top to bottom: Mall of Schalkwijk, Leyweg, Plein 1953

Methodology

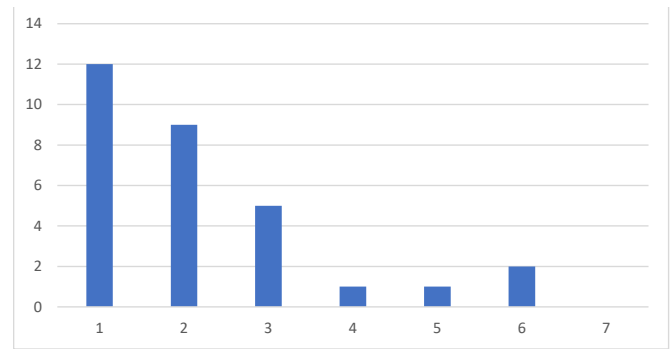
The personal data (figure 9) collected are the 'age category' and whether the visitors live in the neighbourhood or city of the mall they visited or not. All age groups were represented in the interviews, but the number of people per category differed per case. The age category of >68 was most presented in the mall of Leyweg and Plein 1953. At the Mall of Schalkwijk the age group of 58-68 was most represented. It depended on the size of the mall whether people lived in the neighbourhood or in the city. People who took part in the survey in Plein 1953 (87%) were more likely to live in the neighbourhood than people in the Mall of Schalkwijk (73%) and Leyweg (66%).

The frequency of visits to the shopping centres in Schalkwijk and Leyweg varied widely, from every day to every two months. At Plein 1953, the answers were much more ambiguous, 93% of the visitors indicated that they visited the mall at least once a week. For the Mall of Schalkwijk and Leyweg this was the case for 67% of the visitors. This difference can be explained by the fact that the mall at Pendrecht is mostly visited by people from the neighbourhood for their daily shopping. This is less the case for the Mall of Schalkwijk and Leyweg and there are more visitors from outside the neighbourhood who visit the mall for their non-daily shopping as well.

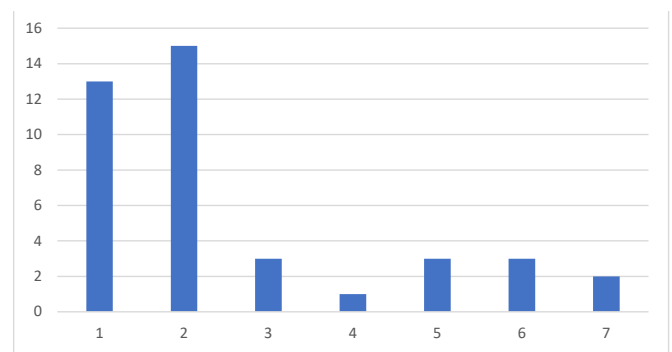
In total, daily shopping is mentioned the most by the interviewees as the reason for their visit (figure 8). A lot of visitors to all three malls indicated that they visit the mall for multiple reasons. At Leyweg and the Mall of Schalkwijk, a lot of people mentioned non-daily shopping for their shopping as well.

The results of the questions are shown in a graphic way. The frequency of specific answers to a question is represented by the size of the text. The bigger the size of the text, the more often the answer is mentioned.

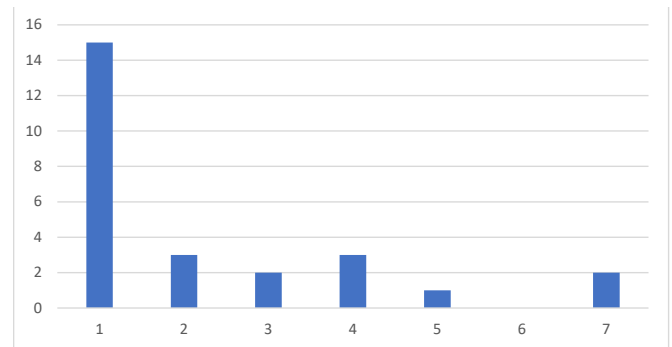
Reasons of visits



Mall of Schalkwijk



Leyweg



Plein 1953

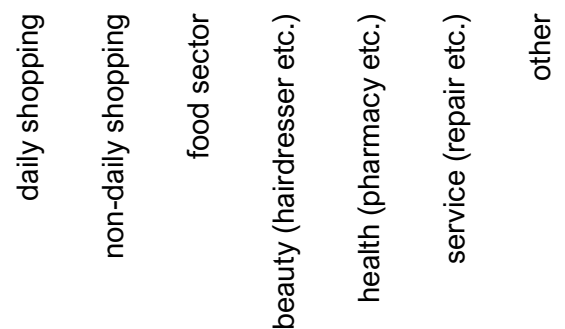
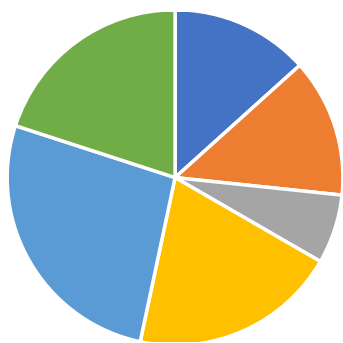
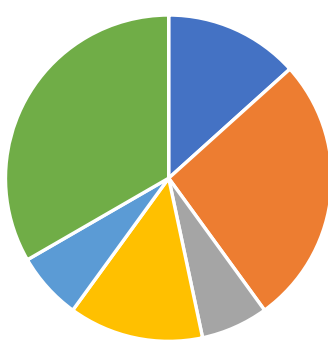


Figure 8: reason of visits (own data)

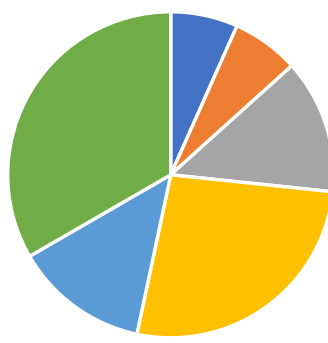
Age of the visitors



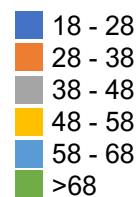
Mall of Schalkwijk



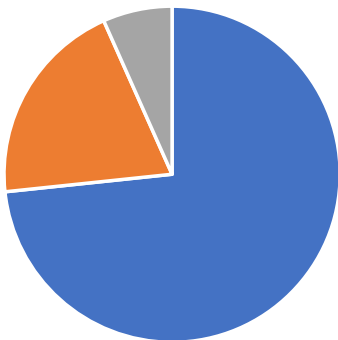
Leyweg



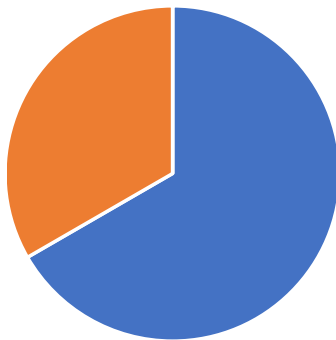
Plein 1953



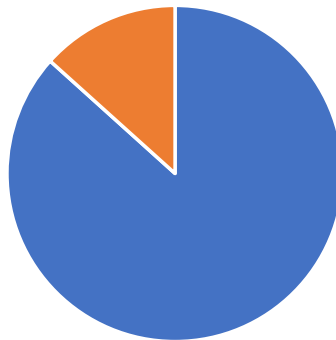
Origin



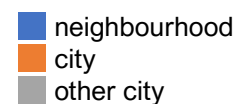
Mall of Schalkwijk



Leyweg



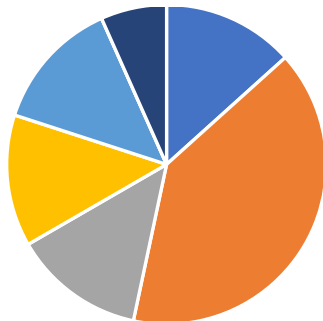
Plein 1953



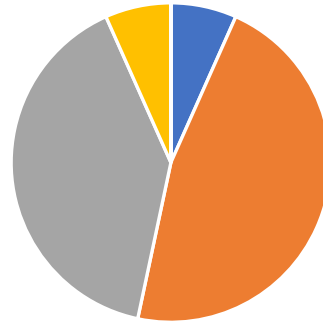
Amount of visits



Mall of Schalkwijk



Leyweg



Plein 1953



Figure 9: personal data interviews (own data)

Results

Looking at the results of the question about what visitors value and disvalue about the different malls, the type of answers to this question can be divided into four types of aspects about the mall (figure 10 to 15):

- Functional aspects
 - Architectural aspects
 - Identifiable aspects
 - Combinations of the three above
- Per type of aspect the results will be discussed.

Functional aspects

At all three malls, a lot of functional aspects are mentioned when assessing the mall on their values (figure 10, 12, 14). In all three cases 'grocery stores' are mentioned the most (appendix 2). Other things that are mentioned vary per mall, but it's mainly aspects such as 'nearby' or 'a lot of shops'. At the Mall of Schalkwijk and Leyweg, the functional character of the answers was most visible, other answers include 'enough parking places' and 'a lot of shops'.

When asked about the aspects visitors disvalue about the malls (figure 11, 13, 15), it can be seen that at the Mall of Schalkwijk in particular, functional aspects are mentioned most often. 'Vacancy' is mentioned most. Furthermore, visitors indicated that they disvalue the offer of the malls because it's a 'mismatch', 'not that much' or 'one-sided'.

Architectural aspects

In all three cases, not that many architectural aspects are mentioned. Only at the Mall of Schalkwijk some aspects are mentioned. A visitor valued the 'new part of the mall'. Some aspects are both architectural and functional. At the Mall of Schalkwijk 'enough parking places' is appointed and at Leyweg 'places to go to the toilet' and 'places to sit and rest' are appointed.

When assessing the disvalues of the malls, not that many architectural aspects are mentioned. Only at the Mall of Schalkwijk, a visitor cited 'the benches that were removed'.

Identifiable aspects

Most noticeable from the identifiable aspects is that at Plein 1953 there are many more identifiable aspects mentioned compared to the Mall of Schalkwijk and Leyweg. A lot of descriptions of Plein 1953 are about the local and familiar character of Plein 1953. At the Mall of Schalkwijk and Leyweg the identifiable aspects are more general descriptions.

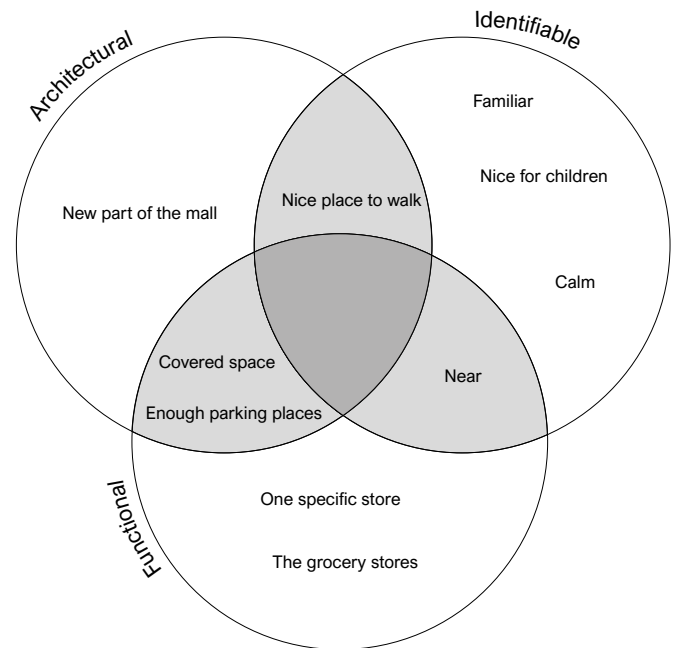


Figure 10: Values of the Mall of Schalkwijk (own image)

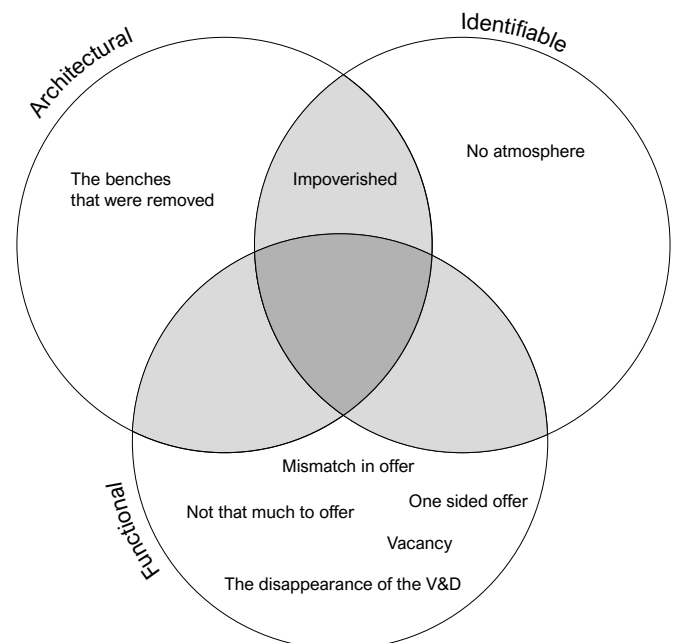


Figure 11: Disvalues of the Mall of Schalkwijk (own image)

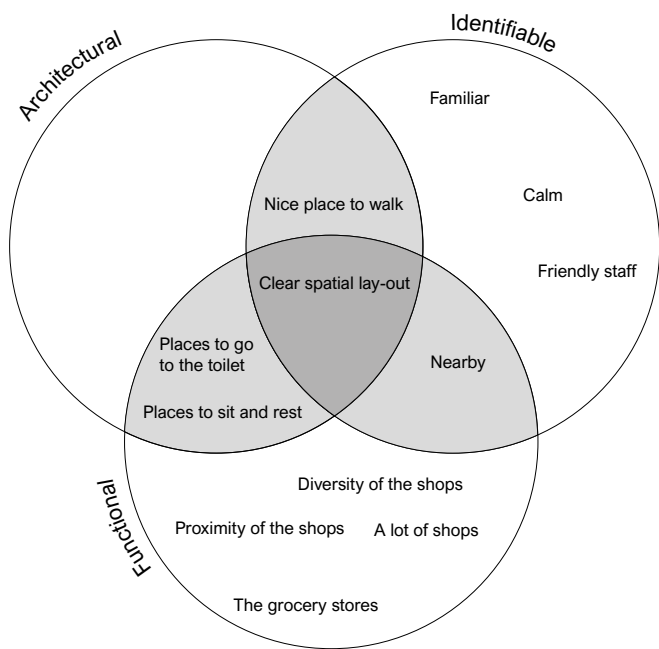


Figure 12: Values of Leyweg (own image)

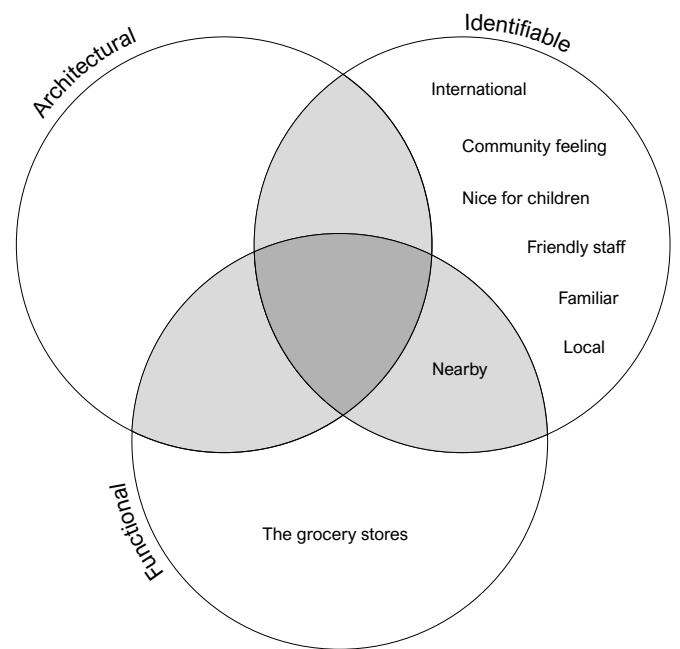


Figure 14: Values of Plein 1953 (own image)

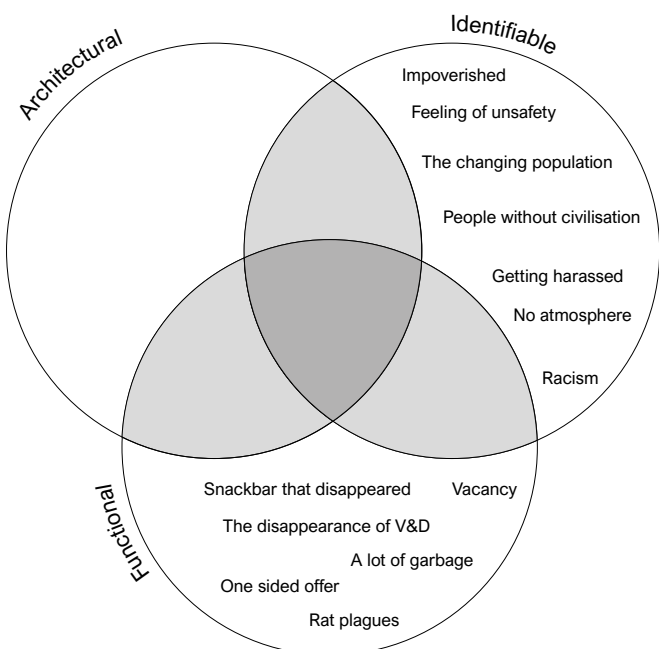


Figure 13: Disvalues of Leyweg (own image)

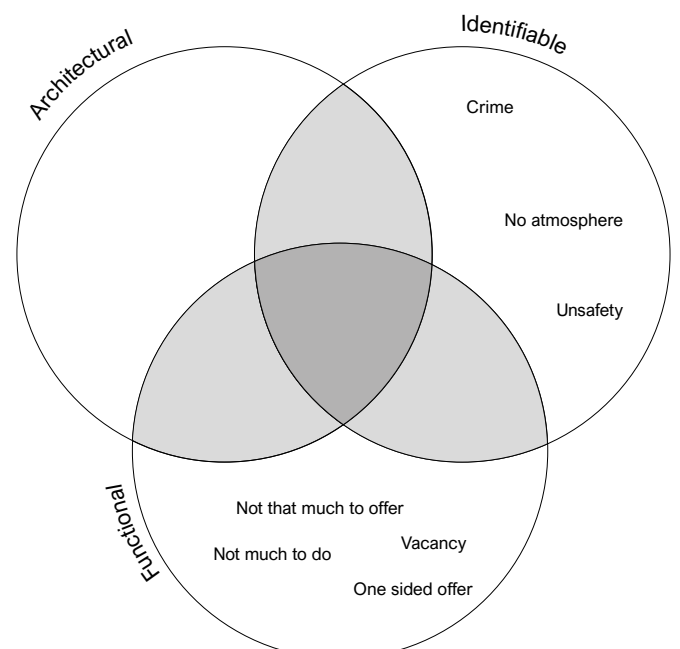


Figure 15: Disvalues of Plein 1953 (own image)

Results

At Leyweg identifiable aspects are most important when assessing the disvalues of the mall. A negative identity is defined by descriptions such as 'feeling of unsafety' and 'impoverished'. At Plein 1953, this negative identity is also valid by the descriptions of the visitors. At the Mall of Schalkwijk a lot less identifiable aspects are mentioned, but a lot of visitors did mention the fact that there is 'no atmosphere'.

Social aspects

The answers to the interviews show that for the Mall of Schalkwijk and Plein 1953 more than 75% never go to the mall to meet other people, for Leyweg this amount is lower with 53% (figure 16). This seems to contradict the fact that people do see the mall as a place of social value for the neighbourhood. When asked why the mall is a place of social value for the neighbourhood visitors often mention that a mall is a place with social value because it is a 'place to walk into each other' and 'be around other people' (figure 17 to 19). In addition, some social activities such as 'talking' and 'having a drink' are mentioned. Responses to the question why the mall is a place of social value for the neighbourhood did not vary much from one mall to another.

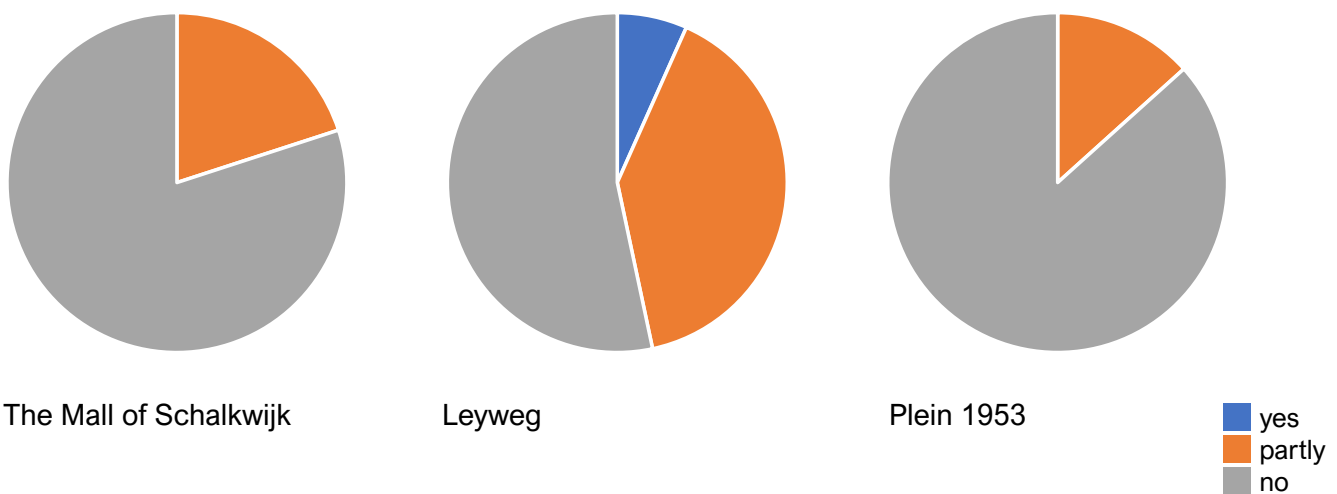


Figure 16: Distribution of visitors that see the mall as a place with social value for the neighbourhood (own image)

Central place in the neighbourhood Nice atmosphere
People of different cultures are coming together
A place to be around other people
A place to walk into each other
A place to have a talk Social events A place to have a drink
Square with other people

Figure 17: Disvalues of the Mall of Schalkwijk (own image)

A place to have a talk
Central place in the neighbourhood
A place to walk into each other
A place to have a drink Events; Sinterklaas
A place to be around other people

Figure 18: Disvalues of Leyweg (own image)

Garage sales
People of different cultures are coming together
Central place in the neighbourhood
A place to be around other people
A place to walk into each other
Events; Sinterklaas A place to have a drink

Figure 19: Disvalues of Plein 1953 (own image)

Discussion

Results

In the result section, a distribution of answers to the question of what visitors value and disvalue about the different malls is made. This distinction is interesting because it gives insight into what people think. The question of what people value about the different malls is a very open question which allows for a broad range of answers. The fact that people mention 'the grocery stores' as something they value about the mall, could say that they don't value that specific mall, doing groceries is something that can be done everywhere. On the other hand, visitors apparently prefer to go to this mall instead of another. Maybe there are qualities within the mall that the interviewees don't put into words. It could have been asked whether that specific mall is adding something to 'doing groceries at the mall'. There are factors mentioned that would make 'doing groceries' easier, like 'enough parking lots', or more pleasant by the 'familiar' atmosphere. Most descriptions, such as familiar, calm or international, characterize an identity or atmosphere, which could say people see an added value to the mall.

It is also interesting to note that some answers to the question of what visitors value and disvalue about the mall could have been answers to a more general question. For example, it might say something about the value of the neighbourhood that a visitor mentioned 'international' as a value of Plein 1953. Another example is that a visitor mentioned 'racism' as something which he/she didn't like about the mall. This could be also the answer to the question of what visitors dislike about the nei-

ghbourhood or even society. At the same time, it also outlines the fact that the mall is part of a neighbourhood and can be a reflection of society.

Link to Literature

The results of this research show that the visitors of the three malls assess the malls mainly in a functional way and they mention what the mall means for them in terms of shopping. Plein 1953 is primarily a neighbourhood mall. Interviewees visit the mall for its daily offer, in most cases one or more times a week. What also stands out is that the visitors of Plein 1953 mention more identifiable aspects as values of the mall than the other two malls. At Plein 1953, the visitors put more emphasis on the identity of the mall and they mentioned things that describe the small-scale community feeling, something Bos (1960) wanted to achieve. The Mall of Schalkwijk and Leyweg are less conceived as the neighbourhood malls of Bos. By the size of the malls, this could already have been assumed. Nevertheless, the way people value the mall mainly based on its functional aspects and, identifiable aspects were left out in their assessments, make that the Mall of Schalkwijk and Leyweg aren't conceived as neighbourhood malls.

According to Gehl (2011) social activities would take place as a consequence of necessary and optional activities. The fact that most visitors indicated that they don't meet others at the mall but still assess it as a place of social value for the neighbourhood is in line with this theory. By doing groceries, a necessary activity, you can run into other people and

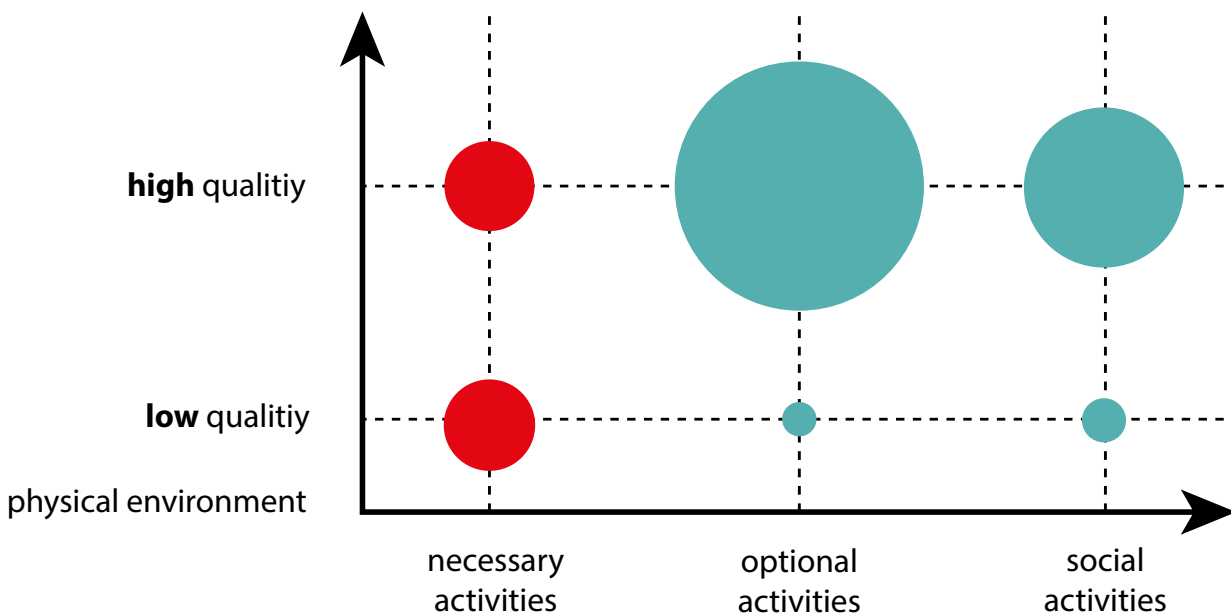


Figure 20: Focus on necessary activities at the mall (Gehl, 2006)

social activities can evolve. Also, passive contacts, something which Gehl (2011) mentioned as the most widespread social activity, are mentioned in the interviews. Visitors value the mall as a social place for the neighbourhood because you can surround yourself with others.

Looking at the most frequently cited value of the mall, 'the grocery stores' (appendix 2), it can be concluded that the visitors of the mall are most focused on the necessary activities at the mall (figure 20).

Process

Initially, the research would consist of multiple parts looking into different spatial and architectural values of the different malls. In order to increase the consistency, it was chosen to focus on the interviews. The interviews would originally be part of a value assessment of the malls and only cover a small part of the research. More extensive interviews would have provided more extensive answers.

There are some factors that could have influenced the results of this research. Due to the number of interviews, it was mainly possible to look at the type of answers given and some answers that occurred at all three malls. Care should be taken in drawing conclusions per mall. Second, the visitors who participated in the research were not busy and had time to answer the questions. As a consequence, it may be that there were only results from a certain public.

Although the results of the research could have been influenced by the age of the interviewees, no analysis could be made on the answers of the interviews in relation to age category. There were not enough results for the different age groups to make a comparison.

Follow-up research

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, optional activities would only take place when there's a good quality of the physical environment. Some optional activities are mentioned to the question of what people value about the mall such as 'sitting and resting' and 'a nice place to walk'. However, it is difficult to evaluate the connection between the physical environment and the number of optional activities. In a follow-up research, this connection could be investigated. The number and variety of optional activities at the mall could be mapped at malls with different levels of environmental quality. By using Gehl's overview of criteria of the quality of the environment these malls can be chosen.

Conclusion

This research reported and discussed the visitors' perspective of three different malls in the Netherlands. The answer to the question: *'How do contemporary visitors assess the mall on its functional, identifiable, architectural and social aspects?'* consists of multiple parts. All aspects are briefly discussed.

When asked what visitors value about the malls, they primarily mentioned functional aspects at the Mall of Schalkwijk and Leyweg. Visitors value the 'grocery stores' and the fact that the mall is 'nearby'. At Plein 1953 a lot of identifiable aspects were mentioned, such as 'local' and 'feeling of community'. Architectural aspects of the malls aren't mentioned a lot by its visitors as something valuable. In terms of social value, visitors of the three malls see the mall as a place of social value for the neighbourhood because it's a place 'to walk into each' other and 'be around others'. Things that visitors mention as deficiencies of the mall are functional aspects such as 'vacancy' and the 'one-sided offer'. Also some identifiable are mentioned. At Leyweg, a negative identity comes forward with descriptions such as 'people without civilisation and the presence of 'racism'.

This research can be taken into account when rethinking the concept of the mall. In response to open-ended questions about their opinion of the malls, respondents' answers were mainly based on functional aspects of the mall involved in shopping. In retrospect to the quote of Norman (1998), *'Far too many items in the world are designed, constructed, and foisted upon us with no understanding—or even care—for how we will use them.'*, it can be concluded that the use of the mall is something which was important in the design.

Although this research doesn't provide practical tools to solve the problem of the decrease in visitors to shopping areas or mall vacancy, it does provide an insight into the way visitors view the mall. When rethinking the concept of the mall, it should be considered that visitors think in a functional way, something which architecture can facilitate.

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Appendix 1

Interview questions

How old are you?

18 - 28

29 - 38

39 - 48

49 - 58

59 - 68

>68

Do you live in the neighbourhood or city?

How often do you visit the mall?

How do you travel to the mall?

What do you value about the mall?

What do you dislike about the mall?

Do you ever go to the mall to meet other people?

How often and for what kind of activities?

Do you see the mall as a place of social value for the neighbourhood?

(social value = social significance for the neighbourhood. A place who connects family, friends, neighbours and others to meet each other and engage in activities)

Can you explain yourself?

Appendix 2

Familiar Calm Nice for children
Covered space One specific store
The grocery stores
New part of the mall **Near**
Enough parking places

Values of the Mall of Schalkwijk

Proximity of the shops Friendly staff
Nice place to walk Places to sit and rest
The grocery stores Familiar
A lot of shops **Nearby** Calm
Clear spatial lay-out
Diversity of the shops Places to go to the toilet

Values of the Leyweg

Local Friendly staff Nice for children
The grocery stores
Familiar **Nearby** International
Community

Values of Plein 1953

Appendix 3

The benches that were removed
Mismatch in offer One sided offer
Nothing **Vacancy** Impoverished
Not that much to offer
No atmosphere
The disappearance of the V&D

Disvalues of the Mall of Schalkwijk

Impoverished One sided offer Getting harassed
Feeling of unsafety Nothing The changing population
A lot of garbage Racism
The disappearance of V&D **Vacancy** No atmosphere
Rat plagues
People without civilisation Snackbar that disappeared

Disvalues of Leyweg

Nothing Crime Vacancy
Not that much to offer
No atmosphere Unsafety
Not much to do One sided offer

Disvalues of Plein 1953