

# A Tale of Two Cities: Dissimilarity and the North American Gallerias of Houston and Toronto

On the surface, the North American cities of Houston and Toronto share very little in common. Their climates, geographies, cultures, and urban forms are radically different. Their political sensibilities and civic aspirations reveal remarkably divergent philosophies in regard to the public realm. However, both cities represent dynamic, global, cosmopolitan places that are important at national and international scales. Both cities act as primary gateways for immigrants to their respective nations. Each witnessed rapid expansion and transformative development in the 1970s that shifted their economic and cultural significance on a global scale.

It was during this time that both cities received several key architectural landmarks, and more particularly, a destination-type, regional shopping complex modelled on the Galleria Emanuele II in Milan. These new buildings—the Houston Galleria and the Toronto Eaton Centre—reflected a shift toward alternative approaches to retail, urbanism, and the public realm in their respective cities. Through the lens of consumption, this essay examines the divergent histories of the Houston Galleria and Toronto Eaton Centre in regard to their design, planning, and development agendas. It discusses larger urban issues that emerged at a critical moment in history when Houston and Toronto would embark upon vastly different paths of urban growth. Developmental practices evidenced in the design and construction of these gallerias would come to define contrasting urban cultures which evolved incrementally over the next thirty years.

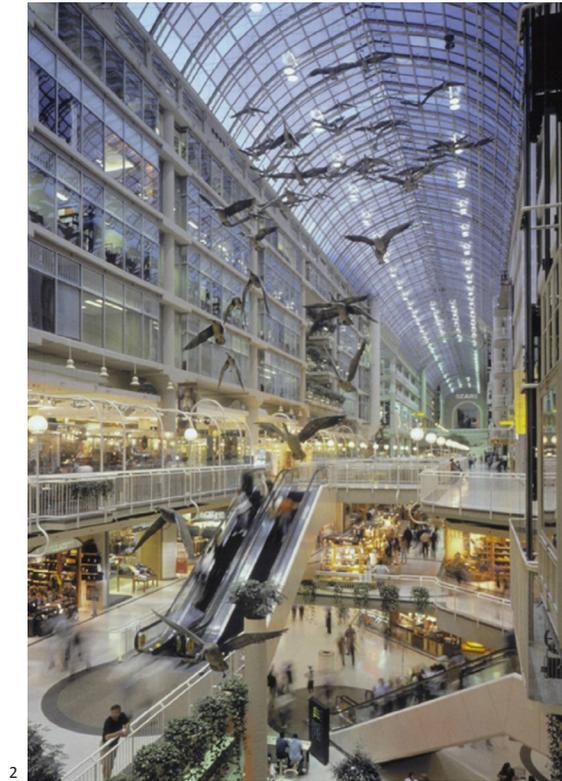
## PLACELESSNESS AND UTOPIA

Shopping malls represent contemporary North American and increasingly global cultural sensibilities and desires. In this sense, malls are indeed heterotopias—fixed places that are equal parts fictional stage-set and physical reality—spaces of *otherness* as well as curated experiences. The proliferation of climate-controlled shopping malls in the post-war years exacerbated the effect of *placelessness*; their utilitarian and consumption-oriented architectures sought little more than to provide neutral realms for commercial exchange. Malls were effectively utopias as well since they existed seemingly beyond the reach of time and place as encapsulated spaces of fundamentally generic and universal intentions.

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Figure 1: Houston Galleria, *ice skating rink*  
source: VCC

Figure 2: Toronto Eaton Centre, *central spine*  
source: Toronto Malls

Two *gallerias*—one at the heart of its downtown and the other at a peripheral edge—aspired to far more. They were built as architectural manifestations of the complementary powers of mid-century consumerism and popular culture in North America, as well as attempts to authentically resolve issues of urban growth. The Houston Galleria and Eaton Centre urban-interior ‘stage-sets’ supported the financial aspirations of national retailers, addressed changing retail needs, and responded to climate-control desires. These hyper-spaces blended lessons learned from late nineteenth century, internally-focused European urbanisms and filtered them late twentieth century largesse. Employing a Post-modernist aesthetic, they pioneered the expansion of North American cities at the hyper-*interior* scale with radically redefined expectations for the conventional shopping mall.

As urbane and sophisticated shopping venues, each stood apart from reigning paradigms to assert longer term design influences merging consumption with increasing commercialization. Furthermore, each of these twentieth century ‘gallerias’ advanced a very different case for extending the city. In Houston, the Galleria would ultimately influence the design of master planned projects for tabula rasa greenfield locations in the metropolitan area and beyond. In Toronto, the Eaton Centre set into play a greater awareness for historic preservation and the urban fabric—key aspects in redefining and ultimately reshaping the project itself and the larger city. Both gallerias offered significantly different responses to the architecture of ‘urban-interior’ retail, however, each has endured the test of time to remain desirable and profitable within an ever-changing retail landscape.

Foundational research for this paper began with a survey of interior urbanism and the history of arcade typologies. This research unpacks the historical development of arcades, shopping malls, and gallerias—and how such lessons have contributed to substantially different architectural and urban development cultures in Houston and Toronto.

#### THE GALLERIA: HOUSTON

In the 1960s and 70s, the growth of the suburbs catalyzed the need for cities to respond to seemingly endless desires for retail convenience and novelty. In Houston, the concept of an indoor shopping mall with an attached hotel tower was proposed in the 1940s by Texas oilman Glenn H. McCarthy. Envisioned for the Shamrock Hotel, the plan was abandoned once the property was purchased by the Hilton Corporation. Houston-based developer Gerald D. Hines sought to resurrect the Shamrock Hotel concept and to capitalize upon the limited prospects of a diminished downtown. Designed by American architect Gyo Obata, this master plan for a ‘new’ downtown on the I-610 West Loop offered a spatially autonomous district focused on the Galleria shopping mall. Obata, the son of a painter and floral designer, co-founded the global architecture firm Hellmuth, Obata, and Kassabaum (HOK) in 1955 (Coleman, 2006).

As an edge city and formalized interior world that turned its back on the unregulated chaos of Houston, the Galleria offered an alternative, upscale, and highly curated view of the suburban future. The first phase of this master planned realm consciously reframed the sprawling randomness of Houston’s strip-mall commercial corridors and modest malls by reinvesting people into an ‘urban’ space composed of interior spaces. In November 1970, the first phase of the project opened with 600,000 square feet of retail space across three levels including the Neiman Marcus department store and an ice skating

rink. The Houston Oaks Hotel opened in 1971. followed by the first office towers. Additional phases added 650,000 square feet in 1977, 360,000 square feet in 1986, and 100,000 square feet in 2006. With each advancing expansion, the phases catered less and less to middle-class shoppers. Today, the Galleria offers 2.4 million square feet of space and is the fourth largest shopping mall in the United States.

Much like the nineteenth century passages of Paris, Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan, or historic Old Arcade in Cleveland, the Houston Galleria rejected conventional urban notions of streets and building frontages to create a secondary order based on interior connectivity. This interior world fostered an entirely new way to engage the agency of the mall in the privatized development of edge cities. A largely *interior* order co-opted the shopping mall, bathed it in European iconography, and increased its scale as an urban experience that promised similar comforts, conveniences, and indulgences that middle-class Americans had become accustomed to in the suburbs. As an autonomous environment, it also supported a separate social order by offering Houston something that it needed—a symbolic heart or celebratory core—a place of communal occupancy.

Hines requested a design amenity that would increase ground-floor rents to match those on the upper levels. Obata suggested placing an ice skating rink at the center of the mall under the barrel vaulted skylight. The rink was a qualitative and financial success (Coleman, 2006). Retail rents on the ground level matched the upper ‘fashion’ level, while the event of ice skating offered a memorable place to mingle and people-watch. While the ice skating rink was a mall novelty at the time, its success is similar to the historic Rockefeller Center. Today, the Galleria’s ice skating rink remains one of the most memorable places in a city that profoundly lacks spaces for social engagement. In this sense, the Galleria serves as a placeholder for urbanity. And although the symbolic heart of Houston has shifted back downtown to Discovery Green, the central atrium of the Galleria is among the most vibrant gathering spaces in the city.

One of the primary criticisms of the Galleria’s architecture is its interior focus. Like suburban shopping malls, it turns its back on street life to provide a secondary interior urban experience in its place. It offers an appropriate metaphor for the *Space City*—an hermetic and floating urban utopia—reflecting a moment in time when the United States was at the pinnacle of its cultural, political, and economic power. Mega-structural interventions of the 1950s and 60s promoted the notion of extended interior promenades based upon terrarium-like, highly-controlled conditions. The concept of a domed city stepped out of the science fiction films and into reality in 1960 when Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao proposed a two-mile geodesic dome spanning Midtown Manhattan that would regulate weather and reduce air pollution. Although executed on a fundamentally much smaller scale, Hines implemented a phased strategy at the Galleria, blending the monumental qualities of the European urban covered arcade with North American mall culture. Unlike the obvious vastness of Fuller’s midtown Manhattan dome concept, the phased development of the Galleria established an aggregated system—a lateral network of tubes and atria which achieved similar environmental effect sprawling across several city blocks.

Hines’ business sensibility and entrepreneurial nature enabled him to develop many architecturally significant and economically viable projects throughout Houston and the United States. His hometown provided a lucrative testing and



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Figure 3: Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Milan  
source: Creative Commons

Figure 4: Old Arcade, Cleveland  
source: Cleveland Growth Association



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Figure 5: Houston Galleria, *interior*  
source: VCC

proving ground for a novel yet financially profitable approach to both buildings and edge city urbanism. With the Galleria, Hines and his partner Robert Kaim sought to claim the high-end retail market in the West Loop—the wealthiest and densest area of Houston—which was surrounded by medium and lower-end shopping centers (Rodrigue, 1981). Paired with Western International Hotels, Hines needed a department store to get the project moving; without a department store the banks would not proceed with the project. Hines lured Nieman Marcus away from their commitment on another site and offered a wide range of ‘good, better, and best’ shops with an emphasis on the ‘better and best’ in each category (Rodrigue, 1981).

Obata’s design for the Galleria is based on the premise of a platform city where people can live, shop, and work in a pedestrian-specific zone which is as large as possible—an entirely privatized interior-connective system. This city-within-a-city subsequently included several landmark buildings designed by notable architects including HOK, Phillip Johnson, and others. The master plan was conceived as a world apart—linked by atria and bridges which intended to foster safe, weatherproof, and convenient pedestrian movement. Viewed from the standpoint of urban utopianism, the multi-block Galleria complex creates a viable alternative to the downtown central business district which, in several ways, stood in stark contrast with the unsightly sprawl beyond the 610 Loop.

**(un)Urbanity: The Hermetic City**

Hines envisioned the Houston Galleria as an edge city where everything would be accessed within a walkable zone apart from the street—entirely autonomous, self-sufficient, and automobile-centric. Best known for developing mixed-use complexes which reflect an understanding of commercial leasing, retail density, people, and their response to notable architecture, Hines tested his philosophy in the Houston Galleria—a place of notable social importance in a placeless city. The project offered Hines a model for his upmarket regional mall strategy which was further refined in the Dallas Galleria. Thus, the Houston Galleria represents a late-1960s social, public, and aesthetic icon which framed a new approach to enclosed shopping malls—particularly for sprawling and formless cities—a new order which has subsequently given rise to various imitators. Viewed through the lens of shopping mall culture, the project is a phenomenal financial success.

For the Hines organization, adopting an hermetically-sealed ‘secondary downtown’ strategy for this parallel universe laid the possibility of an eventual break between the hermetic boundary of the interior and amorphous exterior, allowing the project’s master planning rules to inform adjacent parcels. In the early years, this would have been inconceivable in unregulated Houston, however today, the greater Galleria area has grown into one of the better planned areas of the metropolitan area. The Galleria learned from several iconic projects by adopting the ice skating rink from Rockefeller Center and monumental barrel vault from the Milan Galleria. Yet its impact on creating a true urban extension of the city is negligible. To this day, the Galleria’s primary elevation on Westheimer Road fronts a surface parking lot. Most shoppers choose to drive across the street, rather than walk between adjacent shopping venues. There is virtually no pedestrian street life in the Galleria area, nor is there any real urbanity.

With Houston’s continual rise as a hub of the petroleum industry, space program, and health care, the Galleria and its larger environs became a focal point for middle-to-high end consumption. It is important to note that the Galleria has experienced enduring public appeal since its inception. Its success may be linked to

qualitative aspects of monumental interior architecture, spatial characteristics, and design particularities which have remained relevant over time. The recent rise of outdoor lifestyle centers at Town & Country and a renovated River Oaks Plaza offer a counterpoint, however they cannot compete with the sheer scale of the Galleria. Likewise, as a massive infrastructural project, the Galleria mega-project is virtually too large to fail. It has been rigorously and continually adapted in response to retail shifts and longterm financial challenges.

### EATON CENTRE: TORONTO

The Toronto Eaton Centre is an urban galleria-style shopping mall and office complex in the heart of downtown Toronto which serves as the city's top tourist attraction. Named for the now defunct Eaton's department store and designed by Eberhard Zeidler and Bregman & Hamann Architects, the Toronto Eaton Centre includes two department stores, three office towers, hotels, and the Ryerson University Ted Rogers School of Management. Much more than a mall, the Toronto Eaton Centre is a national icon, hyper-space, and modern-day arcade, a multi-levelled urban space that serves as a primary node within the central business district, civic center, and main shopping district. In short, the Eaton Center is a building-scale, privatized public-space mixer for downtown Toronto.

The origins of the Eaton Centre may be traced to Timothy Eaton's nineteenth century dry goods store. Over several decades, the Eaton family purchased adjacent parcels to facilitate expansion of their department store, warehouse, and support operations. By the early 1960s, many non-department store related activities were transferred to the suburbs and Eaton's began to explore opportunities to enhance its vast land holdings in the city center. In the mid-1960s, Eaton's announced plans to develop an extensive, multi-block shopping and office complex that would include a new department store (Coleman, 2006). Initial plans called for historic structures such as the Old City Hall, City Hall clock tower, and Church of the Holy Trinity to be demolished. Fierce public opposition ensued, and Eaton's placed their plan on hold in 1967 (Coleman, 2006).

Plans for the Eaton Centre were revealed in 1971 after consideration revisions. The new proposal preserved the Old City Hall, but controversy remained since the Church of the Holy Trinity was to be demolished. The design was revised to preserve the church and to ensure that the new complex would not block sunlight onto this pre-existing structure. These amendments resulted in substantial changes to the original concept. The new Eaton's store was shifted north to Dundas Street since it would be too large to maintain its original Queen Street location with the preservation of the Old City Hall. This change created a mall anchored by two department stores at either end—Eaton's on Dundas, and Simpson's on Queen. The shopping spine was shifted eastward to Yonge Street and designed with no frontage along Bay Street, allowing the Church of the Holy Trinity and Old City Hall to be preserved.

Cadillac Fairview Corp., the largest real estate development company in North America at the time, opened phase one of the Eaton Centre in 1977. Its unveiling revealed a new type of enclosed, urban shopping mall that reflected characteristics of the nineteenth century arcades.

Despite monumental proportions, the Eaton Centre has been very well integrated into its urban site. The subdivided plan accommodates a finely grained



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Figure 6: Toronto Eaton Centre, main entrance  
source: Toronto Malls



series of masses and spaces that key into the surrounding urban fabric. Rather than a simple, linear layout, the existing street pattern generated by the Old City Hall and Church of the Holy Trinity breaks down the large mass of the Eaton Centre into five separate blocks.

Connectivity is layered and complex, allowing for a porous and highly activated enclosed space that feels more like an outdoor public piazza. The design has incorporated various flows including pedestrians from the streets, underground network, subway stations, and streetcars, as well as vehicular access with integrated parking garages. In the original design, the Yonge Street façade was set-back and monolithic. Corresponding to the conventional shopping mall and its encapsulated program—the façade did not provide street shops or visual porosity. In the early 2000s, the Yonge Street façade was adapted to bring it closer to the street with more conventional storefronts (Gibbs, 2012).

From a spatial perspective, the Eaton Centre is quite unlike historic galleries in that each floor plate is considerably different and not simply a stacked replication. Beneath its monumental glass vaulted roof, fragments of urbanity are co-opted to blur the boundaries between interior and exterior. Frozen in mid-flight, a sculptural flock of Canada geese entitled *Flight Stop* (1979) by Canadian artist Michael Snow navigates the central spine, while a geyser-like fountain dramatically claims the lowest level. Large floor openings connect the lowest floor with the subway, allowing daylight to infiltrate the deepest spaces of the complex. Enhancing orientation and circulation, three escalator bays distribute circulation and create understandable sequences. Zones have been carefully scaled, yet the drama of a multi-levelled space carries an urban gravitas and enduring appeal.

The Eaton Centre shares common ground with the Milan Galleria as a covered, urban street rather than merely a downtown shopping mall. Both systems are monumentally vertical as well as linear. Both spaces engage articulated facades and windows on the street that activate the main space with movement and activity as the main event. In the Eaton Centre, pedestrians circulate on three levels using stairways, escalators, elevators, bridges, and balconies. Fountains, sculptures, and trees add civic character to an otherwise privatized space of consumption. The complex blends the aesthetic and spatial organization of the Milan Galleria and Centre Pompidou, while simultaneously engaging with social and urban aspirations of Victor Gruen's Southdale Center. It is designed for spectacle and spectatorship.

#### THE DIALECTICAL IMAGE AND CONSUMPTION

In the *Arcades Project*, an unfinished survey of the Parisian arcades and galleries in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin engaged the term 'dialectical image' to describe the phantasmagoria of consumer experience in the arcades. He examined the mass consumer spectacle of enclosed retail passages that gave rise to new retail practices as well as the consumptive impulses and alternative social configurations which arose in response:

*"It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present is light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the 'now' to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, continuous, the relation of what has been to the 'now' is dialectical; it is not progression, but*

Figure 7: Toronto Eaton Centre, central spine  
source: Creative Commons

*an image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language."*

Walter Benjamin, 'Awakening' (Arcades, 462; n2a, 3)

The dialectical image is the main methodology of the *Arcades Project*, a concept mobilized through the collection of images and their collective montage. Yet, Benjamin was not entirely clear in regard to the theoretical intent of the dialectical image. The statement above captures Benjamin's ambiguity and offers an example of his tightly-packed, yet vague and disconnected, doctrinal statements that fell short of establishing a true theory of the dialectical image.

Susan Buck-Morss offers the most substantial interpretation of the dialectical image to date, asserting that the term is 'overdetermined' in Benjamin's work since he tends to equally engage and describe it. Furthermore, Buck-Morss states that Benjamin never established terminological precision nor consistency in his claim. Benjamin invoked the term to document and analyze time and historical experience through the lens of a critical materialist historiography. For him, the dialectical image captured the temporal actions and agencies operating within a dynamic and continually changing, yet lightly documented environment.

These dialectical images captured the simultaneity of changing technology, social conditions, economies, and other conditions existing within the encapsulated world of the Parisian arcades. *Dialectical* typically refers to the concepts to one another; *images* are most conventionally defined by their uniqueness and objectification. Benjamin engaged the term to critique the customary modes of critical historical interpretation, and to frame it through phenomenology and time in the face of emerging social norms and consumerism. By comparison, Hegel established the inverse relationship of phenomenology to place in that physical conditions and visual characteristics addressed the concept. Based on logic, he considered the phenomenological realities of history, asserting that complexities give rise to convergent temporalities evidenced through shape and form.

An inherent immediacy of the image is central to Benjamin's work. Pairing the *dialectical*, or comparative, with the *image*, or immediate, provides an opportunity to create tension in both perception and cognition. The unfinished *Arcades Project* was meant to propose an entirely new way to consider materialist critical-historiography. The work proposed to construct a series of images establishing the philosophical rise of capitalism and capitalist culture over the course of the nineteenth century. Benjamin found that the photo-montage technique through the lens of the dialectical image, one may assess the shifting conditions and accretions of the Eaton Centre, or any dynamic retail environment for that matter, as well as its changing relationship with a highly variant range of users. Dialectical images embody temporality in the most immediate and obvious sense. When compared and analyzed, their overall effect initiates the beginning of a collective assessment of social, technological, and historical layers.

From a contemporary perspective, Frederic Jameson famously stated that the Eaton Centre was an example of "...this new total space..." and he went on to describe its agency on a social scale, "...it corresponds to a new collective practice, a new mode in which individuals move and congregate, like the practice of a new and historically original kind of hyper-crowd." While the development of interior commercial hyper-spaces in North America has considerably waned, the typology has gained traction and been amplified across the developing world.



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Figure 8: Galleria District, Houston

source: Creative Commons

Figure 9: Toronto Eaton Centre, Yonge Street view

source: Creative Commons

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Dubai, Shanghai, and Manila offer an entirely new breed of interior urbanisms based on rules developed in nineteenth century arcade culture and extended by the Eaton Centre. In this sense, its agency has extended far beyond Toronto to inform successive generations of interior-urban hyper-spaces worldwide.

### DIALECTIC IMAGERY AND THE RE-ASSESSMENT OF PLACE-MAKING

Two cities, two structures, and two vastly different agendas for urban development, Houston and Toronto offered contextual differences that resulted in divergent futures for the Houston Galleria and Eaton Centre. A comparative analysis of 'dialectical images' of the Houston Galleria and Eaton Centre over time establishes a way to confront the highly variant outcomes within each context.

The Eaton Centre extends the urbanity of downtown Toronto by incrementally engaging its existing orders and inherent urban conditions. It learned from the desires of the citizens of Toronto how to engender a more timeless urbanity. In doing so, it has grown more organically into an integral part of the downtown urban fabric. As Toronto grew, the Eaton Centre grew with it, and its complexities were further enhanced by demographic and commercial changes which have shifted the mix in the Eaton Centre. Accretions to the original design have allowed the complex to blend more into its context, while the addition of the Yonge-Dundas Square park-plaza by Brown & Storey Architects (2002) extends the connective qualities of Eaton Centre to create a Times Square-like gathering space in the heart of the city. Blurrier edges connect with adjacent outdoor spaces and a larger 'exterior' urban ecosystem. In this sense, the porosity of Eaton Centre continues to influence its urban context in a highly positive manner.

Conversely, the Houston Galleria aspired to a similar 'Milan Galleria' aesthetic, but did not respond to contextual forces, nor did it address urban design issues beyond its site boundaries. The Houston Galleria remains economically viable, continually upgraded, and provides a communal gathering space for Houston. However, apart from these internal conditions, its effect on the greater good of the city is negligible. Toronto Eaton Centre became part of the fabric by bowing to the fabric. It has since contributed to establishing a more coherent and blended presence within its neighborhood. Instead of an hermetic and highly defined space, the Eaton Centre has become more visually fragmented over time. The Houston Galleria, however, remains undeniably hermetic and car-bound, a place which fosters market-rate developmental activity, but no real urbanity. So, while it is a remarkable financial success, it suffers from a political, regulatory, and social context that places no expectations on urban design.

As with most market-driven, master planned developments in Houston, the Galleria area provides a controlled district within its jurisdiction, yet most of its offerings, apart from the more recent 'water wall' fountain, are entirely transactional. In short, Houston's 'urbanity' remains deeply fractured and dispersed along social, economic, and demographic lines, while its consumer base continues to transfer in successive rings beyond the core—and far beyond the Galleria—to populate green pastures in emerging edge cities including Sugar Land, Katy, and The Woodlands. In these tabula rasa contexts, the Galleria is no longer a reigning paradigm. Rather, lifestyle centers and 'faux-town-squares' act as placeholders for real places—places not entirely different than the Galleria.