In South Africa, malls have become popular social spaces and, importantly, new spaces for racial mixing in a country where few such places exist.

Malls for all

TEXT BY ANNIKA TEPPO

SHOULDN’T A PLACE of commerce make its patrons feel welcome, allow them to mix convivially with others, and visit without fear? This is not as self-evident as one might think. In South Africa, where the middle class had doubled since the end of apartheid in 1994, the income inequality has also grown – it is now the highest in the world. This partly explains the sky-high crime figures, which engenders a demand for safe shopping places far from insecure city centers.

Small wonder then that South African cities have seen a surge of new malls – often sprouting up in previously unthinkable places. Malls have sprung up in former townships such as Soweto, providing services to areas which had none before and proving very popular. But neither they, nor the older malls, are now only directed at the four and half million wealthy white population. They eagerly welcome the rapidly increasing black and coloured middle class, who currently number between three and four million. This u-turn is reflected in the advertisement, the products sold, as well as in the staffing policies as South African business-owners race to please the tastes of the rising middle classes.

The impact of these spaces of consumption reaches far beyond their commercial use, as they are also places of sociability and leisurely enjoyment. The artificial environment and the lack of sunshine or fresh air in these malls is more than compensated for by their privately guarded safety in cities rife with violent crime, considered to be among the most dangerous in the world. Importantly, they are also the new spaces for racial mixing and urban sociability in a country with very few such spaces. Some malls have become exceedingly popular social spaces and new public spaces for all South Africans.

ONE OF THE MOST legendary malls in South Africa is the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront mall in Cape Town. The Waterfront – built in a working harbor and providing free music performances as well as, for example, traditional gumboot dancing in its large outside spaces – is particularly attractive. A combination of luxury shops, grocery stores, cheap fastfood places, preppy upmarket restaurants and expensive tourist souvenirs draw in a strikingly diverse assortment of people. Capetonians of all ethnic backgrounds mix with tourists and one another. This might not seem much to an outsider, but in the South African context this sharing of urban spaces is new as well as remarkable. As public spaces, malls can be criticized as consumerist and commercial spaces, and with good reason. However, in cities where there are very few options to share urban spaces with all your fellow countrymen regardless of their color, they serve an important purpose.