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Mallitecture & Memories: Docomomo US launches crowdsourcing campaign to document midcentury shopping malls

As the population shift stretched out into the suburbs, it transformed the idea of commerce. Shopping malls became a staple of American society after the Second World War, providing convenient access to domestic needs while offering social and cultural components. Early malls were small, open-air groupings of commercial enterprises with a small parking lot out front. But the idea rapidly expanded with the creation of fully enclosed malls in Edina, Minnesota (Southdale Center, 1956), and Southfield, Michigan (Northland Center, opened in 1954 and enclosed in 1975), among many others. This new take on suburban commercial structures began the trend for these sprawling structures that became ubiquitous within our built fabric and only continued to morph and change over the course of the 20th century.

Today, shopping malls are at a critical point of flux. Over the years, most malls have been altered to some extent, and yet many more are gone completely. “Dead malls” has become a common phrase to describe formerly bustling sites now vacant and abandoned.

Malls are more than just boxes with parking lots around them. In many cases they were carefully planned complexes with prominent architecture firms designing them. Malls distinguished themselves with unique characteristics such as art, sculpture, atriums, fountains, seating areas, and more. They served as the backdrop for notable events such as presidential visits, protests, and movie locations.

“It's difficult to imagine the American suburbs without the mall -- and who would want to?” questioned Alexandra Lange, author of *Meet Me by the Fountain: An Inside History of the Mall* (Bloomsbury, June 2022). “Since Southdale opened in 1956, malls have been babysitters, malls have been museums, malls have been gourmet restaurants, and malls have been

theme parks, their architecture evolving as their audience has aged and diversified. Before more of them disappear, it's important to document the high points, including, but not limited to, the fountains that served as central meeting spots for generations of mallrats.”

As part of its 2022 advocacy theme, Docomomo US is launching “Mallitecture & Memories,” a crowdsourcing campaign to gather data and collect stories of midcentury shopping malls across the country. Although current trends are pivoting away from the traditional use of shopping malls, these massive structures and the landscapes they occupy deserve a closer look. “It is critical that we begin to analyze what is left, what is historic, what we should save, for whom malls were built, and their role in promoting both segregation and assimilation in American society,” explained Docomomo US Executive Director Liz Waytkus.

Docomomo US is asking individuals to participate in this crowdsourcing campaign by submitting basic historical information as well as personal memories of malls they are familiar with. This data will be mapped and made available to the public on the Docomomo US website.

The Mallitecture & Memories submission form and map can be found here:
www.docomomo-us.org/news/mallitecture-and-memories

Submissions will be accepted from February through December of 2022. Docomomo US and its chapters and partners will use the collected data to inform future mall advocacy efforts.

About Docomomo US

Docomomo US is dedicated to the preservation of modern architecture, landscape and design. Through advocacy, education and documentation, we provide leadership and knowledge by demonstrating the importance of modern design principles including the social context, technical merits, aesthetics and settings of these important pieces of American history. Docomomo US (documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighborhoods of the modern movement) was founded in 1995 and is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

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