



# SPACES FOR CONSUMPTION

**STEVEN MILES**





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PLEASURE AND PLACELESSNESS IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL CITY

STEVEN MILES



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
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‘This is a great book. Powerfully written and lucid, it provides a thorough introduction to concepts of consumption as they relate to the spaces of cities. The spaces themselves the airports, the shopping malls, the museums and cultural quarters – are analysed in marvellous detail, and with a keen sense of historical precedent. And, refreshingly, Miles doesn’t simply dismiss cultures of consumption out of hand, but shows how as consumers we are complicit in, and help define those cultures. His book makes a major contribution to our understanding of contemporary cities, but is accessible enough to appeal to any reader with an interest in this important area.’

**Richard Williams, Edinburgh University**

for Charlie  
for Yanli Sun-Miles

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION: THE CITY OF COMPLICITY

Our cities are what and where we consume. In essence, the city is in fact nothing more than a space for consumption in which we apparently express ourselves as citizens of a consumer society. Consumption lies at the ideological core of the contemporary city and, as such, consumption spaces lie at the very heart of what it means to be a citizen of the society in which we live. The contemporary city appears to be undergoing something of a transformation second only in scale to the onset of industrialisation. All around us are indications and representations of what has been labelled an ‘urban renaissance’, a period that promises good times ahead; times from which the city will emerge as *the* focal point for regenerative social change. Cities throughout Europe are being re-branded as places to be consumed; as tourist destinations, centres of culture and as places worthy of the ‘cultured’ middle classes. But are such changes any more than purely symbolic? Do they represent a substantive shift in how we as human beings relate to the cities around us? Is the soul of the contemporary city being sold to the consumerist paymaster and, if so, what does this mean for the long-term sustainability of our cities?

*Spaces for Consumption* is concerned with the contexts in which the omnipresent power of consumption is most powerfully expressed and, in turn, how the human condition is reflected in these spaces. The apparently revitalised nature of the urban condition may provide us with false promises. The transitory appeal of consumer-based landscapes offer us an instant high, but can such landscapes be maintained or are the dream worlds with which consumerism apparently placates us nothing more than a mirage on the commodified landscape? To paraphrase Horkheimer and Adorno (1973), does the diner



simply have to be satisfied with the city booster's menu? Can our relationship with the city be sustained through the bricks and mortar that consumption bequeaths us? Is it possible to maintain a degree of place specificity in a global consumerist world?

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that in its latest incarnation, the city is less a place for and of the people and more a unit for the efficient maximisation of consumption. Shopping malls, theme parks, art galleries, museums, cinema complexes, designer apartments, casinos, sports stadia and public spaces of consumption provide us with a mirror of ourselves or at least a mirror of a society that has apparently determined what it is we are. Perhaps more worryingly, the effect of consumption on the city is as much symbolic as it is real. Even if some of our cities are struggling to achieve the renaissance that is now considered to be the obligatory norm, they will at least pursue this renaissance at a symbolic level, not least in the hope that if the process of re-branding is believable enough, if you can get people to believe that there is an urban renaissance going on, then real change may follow. In Europe and especially in the UK prior to 2008, this process is no more graphically illustrated than in the example of the ultimate aspirational urban beauty contest, the annual competition to become European Capital of Culture. It is more important to be perceived to be undergoing a renaissance than to be seen not to aspire to the unbridled salvation that consumption can never, in actual fact, deliver. But this process brings with it an inherent danger because the very nature of capitalism and hence of consumption is such that it will always produce more losers than it will winners. In other words, whilst we can accept that consumption is more likely to divide than provide for the majority of individuals, on a macro-level, it is a nonsense to imagine that this inequality will not be reproduced in comparisons between one city and another. Wigan cannot be Liverpool, Liverpool cannot be Manchester and Manchester cannot be London. Or can they? Is the commodification of our cities robbing them of their very identities and turning them into clones that tell us something profound about the nature of 'consumerism as a way of life' (Miles, 1998)? Can cities be excluded along class lines in much the same way that groups of people are excluded within cities? *Spaces for Consumption* is concerned with addressing whether consumption is simply an expression of these processes or a key driver of them.

At one level, the city of consumption is of course a city of the built environment. In his Situationist treatise, Ivan Chhtcheglov (2006) argued that a new architecture should express the very essence of a

new civilisation, but that there was in fact no such thing as a capitalist architecture. In reality, an architecture of capitalism has emerged but it falls far short of what Chtcheglov envisaged a new architecture might achieve.

Architecture is the simplest means of articulating time and space, of modulating reality and engendering dreams. It is a matter not only of plastic articulation and modulation expressing an ephemeral beauty, but of a modulation producing influences in accordance with the eternal spectrum of human desires and the progress in fulfilling them. (Chtcheglov, 2006)

This book will suggest that Chtcheglov's vision of the city of the future that he presented in 1953, a city of discovery and adventure, a sexy, pleasurable and exciting city, has never been realised. What has emerged in its place is a city that consumerism has deemed to be adventurous, exciting and pleasurable but only on its own terms. The city we live in is not a product of human desires, it is monument to the (alleged) failure of human progress but as such it is propped up by an architecture of capitalism. However, it is not argued here that this is a one-way street and that the cities in which we live are somehow foisted upon us by the ideological tentacles of consumer capitalism in which:

The culture-ideology project of global capitalism is to persuade people to consume not simply to satisfy their biological and other modest needs but in response to artificially created desires in order to perpetuate the accumulation of capital for private profit, in other words, to ensure that the capitalist global system goes on forever. (Sklair, 2002: 62)

The ideological tentacles of consumer capitalism continue to exist but they are the product of a world that we brought upon ourselves and continue to pursue. Consumers are not victims of the consumer society, they are complicit in it. It is this complicity that lies at the very heart of the relationship between the individual and society and which defines the nature of the individual's relationship with that city: the contemporary city as a manifestation of the individual's struggle to be unique and yet simultaneously to be part of a group and demonstrate capitalism's predisposition to uphold this quandary.

In what is perhaps his seminal work, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, Georg Simmel (1950) argues that the anonymity of relations in

the metropolis are determined by the need for anonymous market relations. As the metropolis developed in the early twentieth century, it began to satisfy the psychological as well as the sociological needs of its inhabitants. It is in this sense that consumption plays the role of a mediating phenomena in determining the relationship between self and society. In his work on fashion, Simmel also argued that the whole history of society is about a compromise between adherence and absorption in a social group and the need for individuation and distinction at an individual level. Consumption is significant because it provides a bridge between the communal and the individual, and the city represents the most visible and revealing expression of this process.

The cities which we live in are the cities we want, but they are not the cities that we need. From this point of view, consumer spaces actively contribute to the nature of our experience of the social world around us. They help to make us what we are. For many of us, our experience of the city is defined by shopping. We experience shopping as freedom, as Zukin (2005) notes: we feel that it offers an arena within which we can exercise freedom of choice, of self-gratification and escape whilst simultaneously naturalising the market economy. For Zukin, shopping is the new class struggle – on the one hand, it offers freedom; with the other, it takes it away: ‘Shopping is consuming our lives – but bringing us less satisfaction. More goods are for sale – but we can never find exactly what we want. Shopping is a deeply cultural experience and one that at an individual level feels creative. Around every city corner there is another unfulfilled promise of happiness and fulfilment and moreover because it is usually what we do when we “go out”, shopping is how we satisfy our need to socialize – to feel we are part of a public life’. (Zukin, 2005: 7)

In effect then, urban expressions of consumption bind us to a dominant logic that necessarily undermines our creativity by containing it very deliberately within the confines of consumption. This is the premise that underlies the architecture of consumption. And yet, examples of consumption-led regeneration are given an unwarranted reverence because which policy-maker in his or her right mind could possibly stand up and say that their city is not world class? Spaces for consumption feed civic pride, but the degree of substance behind that pride remains a matter for considerable debate. In the past, civic pride was most readily expressed by the political and the private: town halls, parks and libraries (Satterthwaite, 2001). Consumption spaces used to be about as far away from civic pride as you could get. In recent years, urban planners and entrepreneurial urbanists

have lauded the potential of the post-industrial city and the glorious possibilities of a world in which image is all. Richard Florida (2002) is an example of an urban evangelist who has valorised the role of the city as a productive unit but who does so in the context of consumption. It is in this way that urban planners and policy-makers are encouraged to enter a mindset in which consumption is all. But there is always the danger that this onus on consumption may actually take something away from the cities in which we live, so that they become nothing more than slight variations upon each other. Birmingham can be Edinburgh after all.

Our relationship with society is mediated by consumption and therefore consumption spaces provide a primary means of reasserting a particular vision of what our society is all about. But if that vision is ultimately unrealisable, the dangers for our urban environment are considerable and real. As consumers, we thirst after the sorts of escape that spaces of consumption appear to offer. We are seduced by the opportunity to consume and the sense of fulfilment and satisfaction that this implies but we do not do so in ignorance. We actively relish the sense of freedom that consumption implies whilst knowing full well that beneath the surface, it cannot produce on its promises.

At a time when the perceived risk of terror on our cities is at an all time high, the threat from within that consumption represents is more than ever accepted as the normal; as a natural state of affairs. The city of production is a city of the past. The city of consumption is an aspirational city: a city of the present and of the future. But it is within this assumption of triviality that the impact of consumption on our lives is potentially such a threat. Lipovetsky (2005) has described a state of hyperconsumption in which consumption absorbs and integrates more and more spheres of social life which thereby encourages individuals to consume for their own pleasure rather than to enhance their social status. A hypermodern society is a fluid society, but one characterised by tension, anxiety and a lack of tradition and above all one that privileges the pleasure of experience. Similarly, as Rifkin puts it:

The changes taking place in the structuring of economic relationships are part of an even larger transformation occurring in the nature of the capitalist system ... Global travel and tourism, theme cities and parks, destination entertainment centers, wellness, fashion and cuisine, professional sports and games, gambling, music, film, television, the virtual worlds of cyberspace, and electronically

mediated entertainment of every kind are fast becoming the centre of a new hyper-capitalism that trades in access to cultural experiences. (Rifkin, 2000: 44)

Spaces for consumption provide a physical focal point for such transitions; they intensify a lack of tradition, and strip the city of its origins and throw it into the hands of the market so that any kind of recognition of our communal demise is washed away by the immediate gauging of the self; a sort of self-satisfying subjectivisation of space and place to the orthodoxy of consumption. But the very fact that it cannot deliver, and the fact continually returns in the hope that it will do so, is the very reason it is perpetuated. It is the very reason that, as consumers, we want the consumer society to do exactly what it does. We relish the freedoms that consumption appears to give us and we implicate ourselves in the process.

Consumption is ideological insofar as it is presented to us as the only solution to the traumatic consequences of a failed modernity and a failed industrialisation. The collapse of manufacture and distribution resulted in a desperate situation in which the very economic future of our cities was (and still is) utterly undermined. Cities in the UK and the so-called 'developed world' are having to deal with a long-term process of de-industrialisation. The weakening of the mass industrial culture that prevailed for the second half of the twentieth century, precipitated a political orthodoxy of privatisation and deregulation and the fostering of a new 'entrepreneurial' style of local government (Hannigan, 2003). With nowhere to go and without the sense of pride engendered by industrial wealth and productivity, our cities have spiralled into decline; a pale reflection of themselves to the extent that even the grand buildings of great industrial cities such as Manchester and Liverpool appear to taunt their townspeople as to the inferior nature of the times. Throughout the world, cities are looking to iconic means of regeneration, known as the 'Bilbao-effect' (see Chapter 5), to provide the sort of instant chemical high intended to, artificially, bring them out of a slumber which simply cannot go on, or more accurately cannot *appear* to go on.

As cities struggle to construct an identity in a world of de-industrialised decay, the attractions of consumption (often masquerading as culture) have become too irresistible for policy-makers, commercial developers and planners to resist. The city has become a Mecca for the so-called creative individual, but in promoting this vision of creativity, we have



by default created a model of the city that says more about the society in which we live than the people who belong to or more accurately are subjects of that society. From this point of view, the very process of creativity appears to be wed to the ideals of the marketplace so that any efforts to be an individual can only be resolved, albeit partially, through the marketplace.

The city is no longer simply an expression of who or what we are, but no more or less than a venue for consumption experiences; experiences that tie us to the capitalist priorities that underpin our social norms. As Craik (1997: 125) puts it, ‘... the spaces and places in which consumption occurs are as important as the products and services consumed ... Consumption occurs within, and is regulated by, purpose-built spaces for consumption characterised by the provisions of consumption-related services, visual consumption and cultural products. Circuits of cultural capital operate within broader financial parameters’. What we are dealing with here is what Zukin (1998) has referred to as a ‘spatial embeddness’, the way in which cultural capital is not just symbolic in nature but plays a key material role; it creates economic value in its own right. In this way, spaces for consumption constitute a physical manifestation of a lived ideology. As consumers who actively seek pleasure through spaces for consumption, we are effectively complicit in the ideologies by which we are implicated. As a venue for cultural experience, spaces for consumption naturalise the capitalist system so it appears to be the only possible alternative. We live and operate as consumers within the boundaries provided by spaces for consumption.

By focusing on the nature of these experiences and on the spaces that give life to these experiences, a key intention of this book is to highlight the ideological nature of the consumer city and the ways in which who we are and more specifically how we relate to the society in which we live is, at least in one sense, beyond our control. I am not wishing to present the image of an Orwellian society, but a society that is far more subtle in the way in which it imparts aspects of social control: a society that while promoting notions of specificity and diversity obliges us to behave in particular ways and to perceive of our cities in a particular way, for, if we were not to do so, we would undermine our very own conception of what our society is and the very nature of the citizenship it offers us.

Despite and because of the power of consumerism as a way of life, it is important to recognise that spaces for consumption are by definition

paradoxical in nature. They offer the consumer a specific experience depending upon the immediate topography of the environment which they consume. They offer a degree of diversity and uniqueness that seduces the consumer into wholeheartedly embracing the opportunities that such spaces provide. The power of consumerism is indeed founded on this ability to seduce the consumer through specific variations of space and place. At one level, Canal Street in Manchester, for example, offers the novelty of gay culture, whilst NewcastleGateshead Quayside offers a diverse range of music, art and iconic architectural consumption. At another, these spaces operate ideologically: they define the city as a site of consumption. They celebrate difference, but they do so by imposing uniformity. To a citizen of a consumer society, to be part of the post-industrial future, you simply have to consume. This book will explore how far the individual is able to explore his or her own agency in a world in which everything seems possible, but in which satisfaction is never apparently achieved.

*Spaces for Consumption* aims to address what all this means for our actual experience of city life. Is it even possible to conceive of the contemporary as anything more than an adjunct to the world of consumption? It is for this reason that this book is entitled *Spaces for Consumption*, as opposed to *Spaces of Consumption*. The concern here is not with spaces in which consumption takes place, but rather the spaces in which consumption has an ideological cogence and how this creates a tension as the city and its people struggle to define what is genuinely unique about them. Consumption is not simply about the act of purchase but is rather a thoroughly cultural phenomenon that serves to legitimate capitalism on an everyday basis. In this sense, this is a book about consumerism and the ways in which consumerism is manifested and thus ideologically reproduced in the *physical–emotional* environment with which we engage. In effect then, this book is concerned with the ways in which consumption is choreographed in space and place.

Consumerism is generally regarded as being descriptive of a world which is overly preoccupied with consumption. But it would be misleading to suggest that this is necessarily a bad thing. *Spaces for Consumption* aims to highlight the contradictory nature of our relationship with consumer landscapes: the sense of satisfaction consumption can bring us alongside a nagging sense that a consumer's life is not quite as fulfilling as it perhaps purports to be. From this point of

view, the relationship between the consumerist ideologies that underpin our society and the role these ideologies arguably play in constructing our identities are played out in the places which we inhabit and therefore reinvigorate. Places for consumption represent a meeting point between the society or structures that determine us, and the way we interpret them as individual agents.

The ideological impact of consumption is firmly rooted in the soul of the society in which we live. The urban renaissance that continues to go on in our cities and which will apparently ensure that all the cities in which we live can somehow be 'world-class' has created a situation where the impact of consumption on our cities and how we relate to our cities is especially fragile. As cities have become evermore outward-looking, as they have sought to establish their role on the world stage, they have simultaneously been compelled to look within themselves. The topographic identity of the city is in a constant battle with the parameters that consumer society has laid down for it. Consumption represents a primary means by which our cities define themselves, but in doing so, a situation has been created in which uniformity and specificity are constantly in conflict, fighting each other for our attention. *Spaces for Consumption* will seek to describe and account for the nature of these tensions whilst ruminating about the long-term prospects for cities, world-class or otherwise, in a world which appears to be evermore superficial and yet, paradoxically, evermore ideologically profound.

Beyond what the emergence of spaces for consumption means for the contemporary city, this book is concerned with the reinvention of the public realm. Sze Tsung Leong (2001a: 129) has talked about how shopping in particular has emerged as a medium through which 'the market has solidified its grip on our spaces, buildings, cities, activities and lives. It is the material outcome of the degree to which the market economy has shaped our surroundings, and ultimately ourselves'. For Tze Tsung Leong, in the world of global capitalism, shopping is perhaps *the* defining activity of public life. The city is defined by the market. The dominance of the market has significant implications for the nature of selfhood in contemporary society. In *Spaces for Consumption*, I will argue that the changing nature of the self is manifested in the city through the destruction of the public realm. The dominance of consumption creates a situation in which the public realm is no longer viable. What emerges in its wake is a sort of public-private realm in which any communal existence is precluded by an individual one.

We live in a society where opportunities to commune are less visible than they were in the past. In effect, the public realm has become symbolic, virtual in nature. Any pretension towards a public life, as we might imagine it, is therefore illusory or beyond our reach because the exchange values upon which our society is based make it so. Perhaps the most graphic, some might say melodramatic, expression of this process is the recent trend toward mass expressions of public grief and mourning which was perhaps expressed most graphically in the public mourning for Princess Diana. Such a development represents a desperate attempt to regain a sense of the public in an individualistic culture that has arguably been robbed of a communal life. Much of the work that has sought to understand the changing nature of the city has done so without recourse to the changing nature of selfhood. To my mind, the two come hand-in-hand. The physical environment, the cityscapes increasingly dominated by spaces for consumption, constitute a graphic manifestation of the changing nature of selfhood and the changing ways in which the individual relates to society. Authors such as Kozinets et al. (2004) have pointed out that spectacular environments have important effects on consumer agency and that although such environments offer the consumer a degree of liberation, such liberation is instantly commodified. The consumer is certainly not entirely coerced by spaces for consumption, but the experiences that are framed for them *through* consumption inevitably limit the avenues through which individual agency is experienced and expressed.

## The structure of the book

*Spaces for Consumption* is intended to address the impact of consumption upon how we imagine the city in a post-industrial world. The intention here is to critically consider the ways in which consumption is manifested in the lived environment and how the nature of both public space and the public realm is transformed as a result. Each chapter will consider a key dimension or aspect of the city as a space for consumption and in order to bring themes out of this discussion, chapters will conclude with a particular case study or case studies that demonstrate the impact of such processes upon space and place.

In Chapter 2, I will begin to outline the significance of the process of individualisation and its relationship to consumption before moving on to discuss the implications for the city of the present and of the

future. In doing so, I will develop the notion of ‘complicit communality’ in order to begin to sketch out how consumers, experience of social life and the pursuit of pleasure is transformed by the consumer ethic. The impact of this ethic is highlighted through a discussion of the archetypal non-space, namely the airport, which has emerged in recent years as a peculiarly urban space in which travellers are obliged to fulfil their role as consumers.

Chapter 3 considers the phenomenon of place-making as part of a broader process in which cities purport to be ‘world-class’. Particular emphasis here is on how the city has become tied up with notions of creativity. The specific experiences of the city of Glasgow are then discussed as part of the broader discussion of the city as a ‘sign’ and hence whether or not the city belongs to the ‘consumer’ or to consumption itself.

Chapter 4 goes on to look at the role of culture in the reinvention of the city and its role as an arena for consumption. After discussing the nature of cultural tourism, the chapter goes on to consider the museum as a space for consumption before looking at the increasingly high profile of the cultural quarter as a focal point for the reinvention of the city. The chapter critically considers the extent to which culture is used in an instrumental fashion and whether or not the cultural sphere is fatally undermined as a result.

The next chapter focuses on the role of architecture in image-driven conceptions of the post-industrial city. By using Shanghai as a means of demonstrating this process, particular consideration is given to the key statements provided by iconic architecture and its relationship to the experience economy. The broader China experience and the iconic building of iconic buildings, the Guggenheim Bilbao, are also discussed in order to highlight the role of architecture in shaping the city of consumption, and in particular, in shaping an externally generated view of the cities in which we live.

Chapter 6 is concerned with what is probably the most physically graphic guise of a space for consumption, that of shopping. In describing the historical evolution of shopping, the chapter considers the way in which retail engages with the ‘dream world’ of the consumer. Focusing in particular on the shopping mall as a controlled public space, the extent to which such space can be appropriated by the consumer is considered. The emotional appeal of shopping spaces is further debated with discussion of Universal City Walk in Los Angeles.

Chapter 7 concentrates on the notion of the ‘spectacular city’ and in particular on the role of the mega-event in how cities have sought



to portray themselves in a changing global economy. In discussing the role of the EXPO and of the Olympics, the intention of this chapter is to reinforce the contention that our understanding of the city is predicated on the construction of a particular image or rhetoric around that city, and the concern that the individual consumer may at least be constrained as to the degree to which he or she can interpret that environment as he or she sees fit.

Chapter 8 turns its attentions to the specific implications of a city that appears so dependent upon themed space. The powerful influence of the theme park and the broader impact of branded landscapes is thus debated with particular reference to how spatial theming has been appropriated in the urban landscape as a means of inscribing and legitimating a new set of social relationships. The particularly influential impact of Disneyland and, in turn, the Disney town of Celebration are discussed as examples of theming that constitute what Sharon Zukin (1993) has described as 'landscapes of power'. A key consideration of this chapter is how far the city can remain authentic in a situation in which there is so much pressure to package the wares of the city as part of a coherent theme.

In the final chapter, the book seeks to pull together the various threads that contribute to the construction of a city defined through spaces for consumption. The argument here and throughout the book is that consumption has a deeply profound impact on the city, so much so that the individual experience of that city is filtered through the processes implied by consumption. To this end, a key concern of the book is to resist the temptation to dismiss spaces for consumption merely as crass demonstration of the power imbalances that characterise contemporary urban life (although those imbalances are discussed throughout), in order to address the emotional implication of complicit communality and the extent to which the pleasures inherent in the consuming experience are sufficiently incorporated into academic critiques of the consumer society. Of course, it is important to be critical of the way in which spaces for consumption appear to determine our relationship to the city, but it is equally important to do so in a balanced way that takes account of the paradoxical nature of the consuming experience and, above all, the fact that the consumer is him or herself complicit in a process in which consumption appears to have such a profound hold on our everyday lives.

# 2

## THE INDIVIDUALISED CITY?

Perhaps the defining characteristic of contemporary society is the shift towards a more individualistic, privatised society. In this chapter, I will suggest that processes of individualisation have had a key role to play in readjusting the relationship between the individual and society and thus in our relationship with the urban environment. Not only have the apparent freedoms that we like to feel we are able to explore through the opportunities consumption provides us redefined our relationship to the city, but they have fundamentally altered what it means to be a citizen of contemporary society. To belong is to be a consumer. It could therefore be argued that in a privatised world, our ‘citizenship’, so far as it exists, is manifested through our relationship to the public realm – a relationship defined by our interaction with spaces for consumption. In this chapter, I am therefore concerned with the extent to which consumption determines the nature of the individuality we experience, by tying that individuality to a broader process of sociation which is sculpted by the experiential nature of consumption.

### **Complicit communality**

Zygmunt Bauman (2001) defines the historical process of individualisation as being the transformation of identity from a ‘given’ to a ‘task’. In contemporary society, we are blessed with the freedom of experimentation whilst simultaneously being cursed by the fact we have to cope with the consequences of a world characterised by apparently constant experimentation. For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001: xxi), ‘it is not the freedom of choice, but insight into the fundamental

incompleteness of the self, which is at the core of individual and political freedom in the second modernity'. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim identify a series of transformations that characterise the process of individualisation and not least the suggestion that the cultural and political dynamic of the individual's life, as opposed to class categories, is increasingly responsible for putting one's stamp on society. This new 'self-culture' effectively involves the individual making his or her life what he or she wants it to be as part of a broader lifestyle orientation. In addition, any consciousness of freedom is internalised: we become self-authored. We are the products of a society that lauds the ethic of self-fulfilment and achievement: 'The choosing, deciding, shaping, human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time' (p. 23). Living such a life or what we might usefully describe as an 'elective biography' means that questions of slippage and collapse are constant preoccupations of our existence, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) suggest. Every failure is your failure and your failure alone. From this point of view, a more immediate relationship between the individual and society is constituted, insofar as social crises are always interpreted or dealt with as individual crises. An individual's problems with the world well and truly sit upon his or her shoulders and, as such, life is forced to become a never-ending process of self-management. What is crucial about all this, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) argue, is that whereas previously the self was always subordinated to the collectivity, thinking for oneself whilst living for others is no longer a contradiction, but a principle underpinning everyday existence (p. 28). We are dominated by our own lives which become our own personal projects: such an orientation that shapes the nature of our social interaction and thereby encourages a culture of other-directed homogeneity. As Sack puts it:

The tensions in the structure of consumption point to a world that is becoming more homogenous overall, with fewer cultures, religions, languages, etc., but in which most individuals have far more variety at their fingertips. In other words, for the world, variety has diminished. For the individual, variety has increased. (Sack, 1988: 658)

Sack is a useful point of reference here insofar as the above sentiment demonstrates a key contradiction faced by the consumer experiencing

the everyday world of consumption. What I want to suggest throughout this book is that such a situation does not merely promote a process of individualisation, but something a touch more multifarious. It is a process which at one level promotes an insular sort of selfhood which excludes pro-active social interaction (as demonstrated by the arguably individualising tendencies of new technologies such as video games, DVDs, iPods and the like) whilst at another level it promotes an alternative form of communal life, one in which you retain your individuality or at least your sense of that individuality, whilst exploring communal alternatives through the physical opportunities that consumption provides. This is not so much about sensory overload as about a context in which the individual garners control over the consumer images which he or she comes across in commodified space. Such space is not entirely communal but it offers a sense of communality that is deemed by the individual to be communal *enough*. To repeat, this is not merely a process of individualisation but one of **complicit communality**.

The above point brings to light an important issue highlighted by Brill (2001) who distinguishes between public life as sociability with a diverse range of strangers and community life as a sociability with people you know. It is my contention that we live in an age where the former is replacing the latter. In discussing public life, Brill reflects on the role of spectacle, entertainment and pleasure, notably for their high visual impact. What is interesting about the high profile of public life in a consumer society is that it ties the individual, at least at a superficial level, to strangers outside the home and the locale; by doing so, it provides an alternative venue for social learning, thus undermining the social control inherent in tight-knit social groups. This process means that public life becomes increasingly attractive, informative and indeed theatrical. Meanwhile:

If Public life offers a freeing from control by the social structure of kin, neighbours, institutions and the state, it is also a social leveller, an equalizer of power inequities, at least temporarily and locationally, and because access is relatively free it is generally an accessible freedom ... In Public life, we can even become the stranger to others. In public, there is anonymity and freedom to play act, to construct a personal mythos, to test what-if and engage in make-believe, all prerequisites to transformation testing. (Brill, 2001: 54)