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CONSUMED

Merchant Memories

By [ROB WALKER](#)

Mall of America T-Shirt

This summer, the Mall of America will observe its 15th anniversary. It remains the largest mall in the United States by total area, at 4.2 million square feet. (But not the world, by a long shot: several new malls in Asia are considerably larger, with the 9.6-million-square-foot South China Mall in Dongguan, China, being the current king.) The Mall of America's Web site offers various facts about its overwhelming hugeness: it houses more than 500 stores and 20,000 parking spaces, and "258 Statues of Liberty could lie inside."

Located five minutes from the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, the Mall of America bills itself as "one of the most visited tourist destinations in the world" and a "major U.S. brand" unto itself. One bit of evidence to support these contentions is the sale of merchandise that promotes the mall itself, including branded T-shirts, coffee mugs, key chains and plush toys. Daniel Jasper, director of public relations for the mall, says that such items marked with the mall's star logo and red-white-and-blue color scheme sell best, and T-shirts are particularly popular: well over two million have been bought, mostly by tourists looking to take home a gift for someone, or simply to have a "souvenir" of their visit to a really large building filled with retailers. Like visitors to "any other attraction," he says, "people want to take a piece of their vacation home with them."

Of all the visitors to the Mall of America, Rosemary Williams has what must be a unique perspective on the place and, for lack of a better word, its brand. Last year, Williams, an artist and an assistant professor of new media at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, set out to create a sculpture called "The Wall of Mall." Her idea was to build it out of shopping bags from every store in the Mall of America, prodding viewers to (as her artist's statement puts it) "look critically at the ways in which shopping dominates our mental and physical landscapes."

But she ran into a complication: shop employees didn't want to give their bags away to a noncustomer. So she elected to buy something at every store — then return it, keeping the bag. This involved many trips to the mall over a two-month period. Some of her earlier work dealt with consumption, and Williams describes herself as "not much of a shopper"; in fact, the first day of her daunting adventure practically made her nauseated. The intensity of her own reactions led her to begin an audio journal of her retail grand tour, which she has turned into a 27-episode podcast (billed as "the story of one woman's lonely journey around the Mall of America") distributed through her Web site, Rosemarygoestothemall.com.

On different trips, Williams adopted different mental personas — one day picking out only top-quality items, another looking for bargains, another choosing things that exemplified cultural decline. She didn't mind returning most of it, but there were some things she ended up wanting to keep — including the Mall of

America T-shirt she bought at one of the three stores dedicated exclusively to selling mall-specific merch.

At first it struck her as an absurd thing to own. But then she thought, Why not have a souvenir of her curious odyssey? Plus, it turned out that the shirt (preshrunk, ring-spun cotton) was comfortable and fit well. “That’s hands down my favorite T-shirt,” she says. Around the Twin Cities, wearing the shirt is seen as a little strange — at best. She recalls a surprising exchange with a local store employee who demanded to know if she was a tourist and “didn’t understand otherwise why I’d want to advertise that place.” Her art-world friends didn’t quite get it, either. So she tends to wear it around the house.

And after all, the nature of a souvenir is fundamentally personal. While “The Wall of Mall” (which has been exhibited in New York and London in recent months) still makes a statement about an overbranded world, Rosemarygoestothemall.com ends up telling the story of a journey that, Williams says, “kind of helped me get over my fear of shopping.” She’s still not much of a shopper, she adds, but somewhere along the way she learned to overcome the guilt of actually buying something enjoyable. More than most vacations, then, her trips to the mall resulted in a form of personal transformation. And that, of course, is something worth commemorating.

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