

Al Taubman

Highlight Video Transcript



What makes a shopping mall successful?

Alfred Taubman will tell you that architecture is only the beginning. Ultimately, the success of a shopping mall is grounded in a profound level of insight into the shopper's experience and into removing every barrier between the customer and the merchandise — a philosophy he named "threshold resistance." First applying this thinking to a 26-store center in Flint, Michigan, Taubman went on to develop some of the most successful malls in the United States and to influence succeeding generations of architects, developers, retailers and planners.

Late nineteenth century. The rise of the mail order catalogue brought a world of goods to a consumer's doorstep.

Years later, shopping and buying would undergo another metamorphosis.

It became known simply as "the mall."

The mall as we know it – refined and choreographed – came about through a career's worth of unrelenting analysis by... Al Taubman.



Top: Horse-drawn mail wagon used for rural delivery in Missouri, around 1901. From the collections of **The Henry Ford**
Bottom left: The Arcade, one of America's first indoor shopping centers, opened in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1890. Bottom right: A contemporary shopping mall.

Al Taubman, Builder, Real Estate Developer, Retail and Marketing Impresario

01:01:06

... My model was always the department store.

1:01:09

A department store is an efficient way of selling goods. Historically, if you put three stores together, people would shop at one store and look at what the other stores have. It was my theory if you put 50 stores together, which I started out doing, it would be even that much better. And what I was really doing – I was trying to be a department store under one roof and offer all the goods department stores offer.

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Breaking threshold resistance.

If you set the entry back – historically what they – what merchants did – they would go along the street and they would build like a trap, with the idea they'd put all the goods in the windows that they had to sell, which was sort of ridiculous. 'Cause it was very expensive and they would ruin the goods very often with sunlight.

02:02:13

... and it was space that they gave up they could be selling in. They were paying for this aisle into the store.

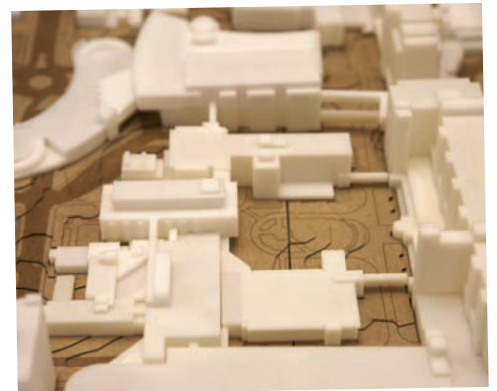
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They were paying when the store itself should be the window. And that's what I meant by threshold resistance. It was the resistance to the customer to go over the threshold. And by moving the threshold out to the mall line, you got the merchandise close to the customer, so the customer had the opportunity of buying it.



Al Taubman

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Al Taubman has been a major benefactor of the University of Michigan Medical Center. A scale model of the complex is displayed in his office.

02:02:45

When we first started out, they had window backs. I said, "Get rid of the backs. I mean, you don't need any window backs." If you use mannequins, let the mannequins sit free . . . Give the customer an opportunity to see what's in that store. Then you're selling . . . you're showcasing the whole store, not just part of the store. But they had this theory – merchants had this theory – years ago, if you could get the customer in looking, they could grab 'em and drag 'em into the store. That's real threshold resistance. (Laughter)

02:03:17

Experimenting. Architecting. Orchestrating.

. . . I tried to get the malls narrow. It was always my theory that if I could make 'em three feet wide, I'd make 'em three wide, because the narrower, the more people feel better to be near people.

People really don't want to shop in an empty shopping center. People don't want to sit home alone . . . watching TV when they can go to the theater and see the same movie and pay for it. But they want to laugh with other people; they want to be with other people.

. . . We wanted the person to come in on one level, go all the way to the other level, up the escalators, across the back, across the other level and down to where their car was. So that every customer had a chance to see every store in the center; that was what was important, and it worked. It's always worked; it was logical.

Everything adds to the experience.

03:04:15

. . . I walked the centers . . . I used to walk the centers almost daily. And I've learned a lot from that. You have to make sure that they're comfortable. One of my first centers in California – I did terrazzo. It was smooth; it was easy to clean; it was easy to walk on.

We even had light that increased and decreased to create different shadows and different light. As the customers looked out, they saw this light; the person would be in light and then dark. Light and dark created interest.



Rolls of architectural drawings in the Taubman offices.

"I used to walk the centers almost daily. And I've learned a lot from that. You have to make sure that they're comfortable. " — Al Taubman



Al Taubman points out features of the University of Michigan Medical Center to a visitor.

Giving back.

04:04:55

... I've given generously. I've given to things I thought were good. And I've been fascinated with what good people do when you finance them – you give them an opportunity.



Magazine covers and illustrations from Al Taubman's long and successful career line the walls of his office.

Al Taubman has a lot more to say.
Visit OnInnovation.com

to see his full, unedited interview, read the complete transcript
and connect with other visionaries thinking out loud.



Al Taubman at his desk.