

Going Shopping



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We are how we shop. From Mesopotamian merchants and the fairs of medieval Europe to marble palace department stores and now Wal-Mart and the Internet, social, cultural, economic, and moral forces have shaped our shopping. In this engaging and generously illustrated book, Ann Satterthwaite traces the history of shopping and considers its meaning and significance. According to Satterthwaite, shopping has become part of the American dream. To choose and to buy constitute not only a basic economic liberty but also the capacity to improve and transform ourselves. How we shop also reflects our culture, as in the twentieth century disposable incomes have grown, women's roles have changed, and new styles of shopping and advertising have made their impacts on an old adventure. But there is a downside. Shopping used to be a friendly business: shoppers and clerks knew each other, the country crossroads stores and downtown markets were social as much as economic hubs. Shopping was meshed with civic life, epitomised by institutions such as post offices, town halls, courts, and churches. In place of this almost vanished scene have come superstores and the franchises of international companies staffed by pressured clerks in featureless commercial wastelands. Shopping and community have been savagely divorced.

However, shopping as a social plus need not be lost, argues Satterthwaite. Examining trends in the United States and abroad where new approaches to an old activity are strengthening its social and civic role, she states that shopping is more than ever a public concern with profound public impacts.

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