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Thoughts on Oculus, the Westfield World Trade Center mall in New York

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Westfield World Trade Center mall in New York

By [Marty Katz](#)

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An oculus is the opening at the apex of a dome. Since mid-August, it is also the name of a Westfield mall at the World Trade Center site in Downtown New York, a mall with no dome and no opening. Yet the name is oddly apt: interesting, but not quite right.

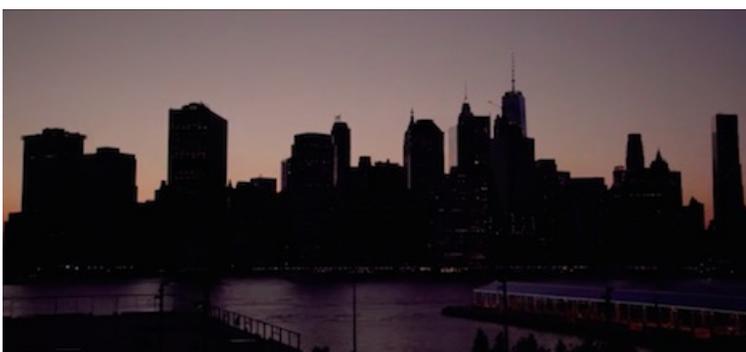
Retail is currently going through a transition. Rather than just a place to buy stuff, the retail experience increasingly emphasizes experience. Retail, especially luxury retail, needs to become a destination that draws people in and strengthens the relationship with consumers.

Whale of a time?

To some extent the **Oculus** is a destination. The \$4 billion structure is different and awe inspiring. Clad in white marble, tile and paint, light pours into the broad open space above the ribs and through the roof to give a light airy feeling.

The center hall is enormous, filled with consumers taking in the architecture and posing for selfies.

The structure brings to mind an airport terminal. In addition to being a mall, the Oculus is a transport hub through which thousands of people pass daily. It is also a tourist destination due to its location and interesting design.



Manhattan skyline. Courtesy of Westfield

The mall, however, has some challenges.

First is the size. "Where is my Segway now that I really need it?" and "I should have brought my rollerblades to the mall today" bemoaned a couple of shoppers.

Getting around the space takes time and effort and there is no amenity in sight.

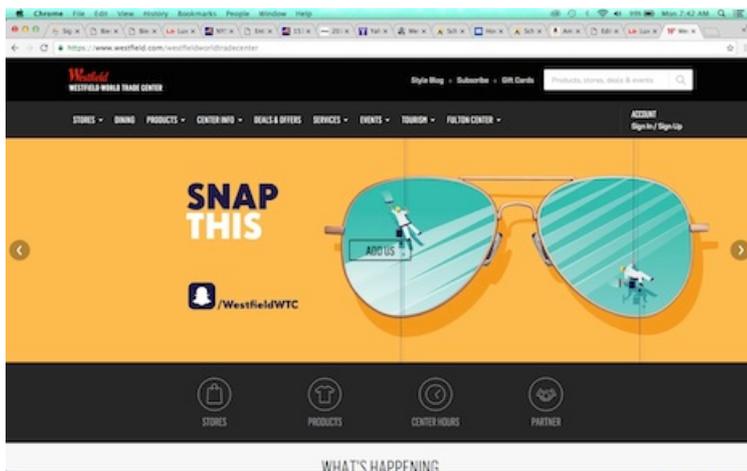
For shoppers seeking a welcoming luxury experience, the complete lack of benches or places to grab a snack or drink is unsatisfying.

Even finding your way can be a challenge.

One has the feeling of having been swallowed by a large whale with no solid frame of reference. Exits are scarce and hard to find and maps do not identify where one is. This left other shoppers and me scratching our heads and wandering around in a state of dazed confusion.

Footing the bill

There is no doubt: the architecture is spectacular and there are a number of high-end interesting stores. But is that enough?



Westfield World Trade Center Web site

The Oculus is a transport terminal and mall, and for the mall to work as a place to spend \$450-plus for a pair of shoes, it will have to draw a consistent flow of buyers, not just tourist shoppers, and commuters/area workers.

Why visit Oculus, once you have seen the architecture, if you can buy everything there online or elsewhere for less or with a more comfortable experience?

Westfield may be counting on tourists and maybe this will work.



Shoppers at the Westfield World Trade Center mall in New York

Tourism is on the rise and the site is definitely on the list of must-see venues. But will these tourists really buy enough \$450 shoes that they then have to carry around the city and then back home, when they could buy these literally anywhere?

In fact, when I got tired of aimlessly wandering around the whale's stomach, I ventured over to the connected Brookfield Place and Mall where I could buy a drink and sit down. That is where I did my shopping before heading

home.

THE OCULUS is interesting.

But as a mall it is not quite right. It does not seem to offer the luxury experience that destination shoppers desire nor the convenience that commuters require.

I suspect there will quickly be changes at the [Oculus Westfield World Trade Center mall](#). Maybe starting with benches.



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