The Mall Experiment

When a massive shopping complex invaded Michael Townsend's neighborhood in Providence, R.I., he and his brother began to study the inner workings of the mall and its patrons. After discovering a seemingly forgotten space inside, Townsend decided he needed to get as close as possible to his new neighbor—by moving in.

On the other side of the door to his apartment, Michael Townsend could hear walkie-talkies. For the first time, Townsend broke his cardinal rule of bringing other people into his second apartment. He feared discussing Townsend with his wife, Adrienne, Townsend barely had time to drive through a "canyon" in the middle of the mall to reach downtown Providence.

It was a sort of squalid encounter that rippled through his entire neighborhood. Townsend said, "Even if I never saw the mall being built, I would have known from its creation that something big was happening. Even if I never physically saw the mall, it would have radically affected me."

Yet, who began studying the mall for his project "Malls," said the structure separated the wealthier side of the city, the East Side, from the poorer neighborhoods on the West Side, where Yost and Townsend live.

"I've been studying the mall's architecture and design, not the mall's history. It's like opening a door to the East Side but turning its back onto our neighborhood," Yost said.

"I never thought of the mall as a place to live, never even thought of it as being a place to live."

The four-year journey

The first sight of their weekly adventure, Townsend found that "an eerie" in the architecture: two cinder-block walls separated by a gap almost 30 feet wide. The dark, narrow passageway Townsend found was a place that led directly from the outside of the mall to the space he had been curious about for years.

Yost said the intrusion of the mall into their everyday lives led them to "get as close as we could to the mall—living in it."

"I was just about us and the mall. There was a somewhat personal relation—but taken over by our city," Yost said. "So we wanted to have a dialogue with it. The closest we could think of was actually moving in and trying to coexist."

The only passageways to the apartment were through the narrow gap from the outside, or through the storage room with a stop ladder that led up to the apartment. Townsend accented the room from an exit stairwell, where he said he always found the door to the storage room was a piece of furniture was moved up to the apartment from the hoist. They then built a wall from cinderblocks they carried through the small passageway with a stationary door to section off the tidal apartment from the storage room below.

"We had a very strange place to actually define, because we built our own cinderblock wall and we had our own door with a key. So if we have a key to a door, that makes it a home," Townsend said.

Until this spring, the artists lived in our out of the apartment—using extension cords from the storage room for electric and bathrooms in the mall to clean up—without any intrusions.

"Letting the mall define you"

In the process, though, Townsend said he eventually wanted to get a job at the mall to become a reflection of the mall itself. He wanted to dress like those who had worked in the mall and those who worked in the mall to understand the phenomena behind it all.

"Part of my personal journey was to sort of internalize being defined by the mall during my stay there," Townsend said. "I don't feel like it's any more subtle or grand or profound. I think the thing that's new for me is taking the same role as those who have worked in the mall.

To read more about the secret apartment in the mall and see more of Townsend's work, visit Townsend.com. To learn more about Yost's "Malls" project, visit ColeyCorriveau.com/Malls.html.