

## **The Ladies Kingdom and Its Many Uses**

### **A shopping mall in Riyadh for women only**

**Amélie Le Renard**

*The frenetic development of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia is unveiling new and unexpected urban realms, including a shopping mall for women only: the following is a look at a public space liberated from the constraints of social control – and consecrated to consumption.*

Inside the shopping mall of the Kingdom Centre (*Al Mamlaka*), a modern tower built in 2001 and overlooking the new “urban glamor zone” (Saskia Sassen 1996) of downtown Riyadh, there is a whole floor reserved for women called the Ladies Kingdom. It can only be reached from the mixed-gender floors by taking one of the special elevators that are off limits to men. With its shops, cafés and restaurants, this enclosed, guarded, consumption-gearred place is emblematic of the conditions in which a certain category of women are gaining access to public areas<sup>1</sup> – in a city that has been a paradigm of gender-based segregation since the 1980s.

### **Marketing and politics**

Among the 20-odd shopping malls that have sprouted up over the past decade along the grid of highways that make up Riyadh, the Ladies Kingdom is the only mixed mall with a special level for women only. While the primary object is to capitalize on the purchasing power of Saudi women, the launch of the Kingdom has been accompanied by discourse about the role of women in Saudi Arabia. The mall is owned by the multi-billionaire prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, who has built up an image of himself in the media as the “patron of Saudi women” by making such statements as “I will spend whatever God has given me to promote the cause of ladies here in Saudi Arabia. Money is not an issue at all.”<sup>2</sup> In line with that policy, the Ladies Kingdom has been run since its inception by a woman, Nada Al-Ateegi, who became deputy manager of the whole mall in 2007, then manager of the Ladies Kingdom in 2009. Al-Ateegi describes the women’s floor as a “place of freedom and privacy (*khusûsiyya*)” for Saudi women that duly observes the “customs and traditions” of society. The women’s floor corresponds, she says, to “Prince Al-Waleed’s vision of change in a reasonable manner.”<sup>3</sup> This position (“change with due respect for customs, for Islam, for the particularities of Saudi society...”) harmonizes with the “reform” of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia undertaken by King Abdullah in the wake of the events of 9/11.

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1 Saudi shopping malls are privately owned. Without disregarding that fact, which is key to my analysis, I call them “public spaces” in order to bring out the sociological and interactionist dimensions of the shopping mall construct, taking up the approaches developed by Erving Goffman and Isaac Joseph.

2 2005 Dutch documentary entitled *Saudi Solution*, broadcast by the Dutch television channel VPRO on December 17, 2007. Viewable at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWD4KzSpj\\_g&feature=user](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWD4KzSpj_g&feature=user)

3 From an interview conducted by the author in April 2007.

## Sociabilities and conspicuous consumption

The Ladies Kingdom has become the usual venue for a certain category of Saudi women. Female fellow workers and students can arrange to meet up there to lunch or spend the evening together (the facility is open till midnight on weekends). Because it is off limits to men, it is a safe place to stroll around in without risk of interactions that might mar one's reputation or any remarks from the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and for the Prevention of Vice, a sort of religious vice squad, all of whose members are men. Thanks to the absence of men, moreover, it is one of the only spots in Riyadh where the shops and cafés do not close for the five daily prayers – and where music is piped in.

The place benefits from – and simultaneously reinforces – the development of a form of homosociability between young Saudi women pursuing activities outside the home – studies, professional work, volunteer work in various associations. Meeting in any of the seven cafés on the women's floor enables them to cultivate autonomous elective relationships outside family circles and free themselves from the protocol of entertaining guests at home. It is also a means of maintaining more distance by controlling what one shows to others: "If you're ashamed of your house, you see your friends here," I was told by a 30-year-old primary school religion teacher, who is divorced with one child and lives with her mother. She herself has become a "regular" at one of the cafés, where she goes almost every day to see friends or "take her mind off things".

The presentation of self is indeed a core element of these sociabilities. The facility is crowded on Thursday afternoons (the Saudi equivalent of Saturday afternoons in the West). It is hard to find a free table and one continually runs into people one knows. The ovoid shape of the walkway makes it possible to stroll as well as to promenade ostentatiously: some women saunter around the mall in groups, wearing high heels or sneakers. Those seated on the benches or at tables outside the cafés watch them walk by and comment on their *abayas* (typical Muslim full-body robe), their hairdos and makeup (since the women remove their veils in this realm forbidden to men), their shoes and handbags. Some show off flashy accessories. Strangers may even exchange compliments on coiffures or accessories.

The mall constitutes a stage on which modern and consumeristic feminine lifestyles are displayed. Whether or not they can afford to shop at the fanciest establishments, the women put up a show of affluence, unless they reject this mode of sociability. While a number of women (from all walks of life) arranged to meet me at the Kingdom or talked to me about it, others never set foot in the place as a matter of principle: three lower-middle-class students, for example, explained to me in a casual conversation that the women who promenade there are "no good", being from the wealthy class (*al-tabaqa al – "rich"*), that the place is not for the likes of them (i.e. the students). So these students exclude themselves from one of the only public places accessible to women in Riyadh.

## References

Sassen, Saskia. 1996. Whose city is it? Globalization and the Formation of New Claims. *Public Culture*, 8(2):205-223.

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## **Images**

Floor plan of the Ladies Kingdom: <http://kingdomcentre.com.sa/kc/zoomimg.phtml?img=/kc/shop/map/shop-map-level2-zoom.jpg&alt=Level%202&size=75>

Photographs of the mall: <http://kingdomcentre.com.sa/kc/shop/ladieskc.phtml>

## **Further reading**

Le Renard, Amélie. 2010. Pratiques du shopping mall par les jeunes Saoudiennes. Sociabilité et consumérisme à Riyad. In *Mondes et places du marché en Méditerranée. Formes sociales et spatiales de l'échange*, ed. Michel Peraldi and Franck Mermier, 187-214. Paris: Karthala.

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