

Primark's (Not So) High Streets



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WASHINGTON STREET in Boston has gone seedy. What used to be the epicenter of New England shopping anchored by Jordan Marsh and Filene's Basement is a shadow of its former self. The late 19th- and 20th-century buildings seem tired and gray—and the retail tenants mostly reflect it. The Macy's in the old Jordan Marsh building looks as if it has more rodents than customers. Yet on one corner is a bright new light. Over the Christmas holiday, I dragged my two jaded teenage girls from Newbury Street, where they felt right at home, to visit the recently opened Primark store, which happens to be the new anchor of Washington Street.

It took many minutes after walking in the door for my 14-year-olds to stop hyperventilating. Anglo-Irish fast-fashion has its beachhead in the new world. H&M, Forever 21, T.J.Maxx and Marshalls need to pay attention. Primark is a lovely store. And three days after Christmas, it was packed. How easy it is to forget that the atmosphere of the marketplace is not just about fixtures and visual merchandising, but also about the presence of other people. There is that magical point before the space starts feeling crowded and claustrophobic that the common enjoyment of a communal experience adds to the predilection to purchase. It was teenage girl heaven. Bright, edgy lifestyle graphics, clever signage, cheerful staff and well-designed checkouts. But what knocked my girls out were the prices. In contrast to the \$800 Canada goose coats they'd been lusting after on Newbury Street, everything was in their budget. That purple faux-fur coat was



just \$49. There were leggings, fuzzy tops, animal print pajamas and cheeky workout wear, not to mention a great girls underwear department with infographics explaining push-ups and balcony bras in ways mom never would, and all cotton briefs at a dollar a piece. While fashion industry types might look at the seams and quality of the cotton, the girls didn't care. It wasn't meant to last forever, just long enough so it was just beyond being disposable.

Unlike UNIQLO, which has paid through the nose for A-list locations, the team at Primark seems

to be playing a different game. It isn't about looking luxe and being affordable; it is about looking good enough and being dirt-cheap. It also is about knowing where your core market is, starting with my teenage girls.

In the United States, Primark is feeding off of distressed real estate. It is headed to B malls desperate for traffic generators. The first New York location is not in SoHo or even hip Brooklyn; it's at the Staten Island Mall in the old Sears location. In New Jersey, it is opening at Willowbrook, not at Short Hills or Garden State Plaza. The Boston store is a good start. In 2016, proven traffic generators can write their own leases. Shopping mall executives and retail pundits have been making the pilgrimage to Washington Street to see this new world.

For the global merchant community, the United States has always been a scary market. Tesco, Galeries Lafayette, Asprey and others have come and gone. Others have come and stayed—like Sephora and Pret A Manger, but only after losing huge sums of money on poor real estate decisions. The trade-off between malls and urban locations and

the tendency to treat New York like it was London, Paris or Tokyo has been problematic.

Yet it appears Primark has done its homework. You have to think Zara is watching closely and wondering when it can bring its teen and pre-teen brands, Bershka and Stradivarius, to the American party. **dr**

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