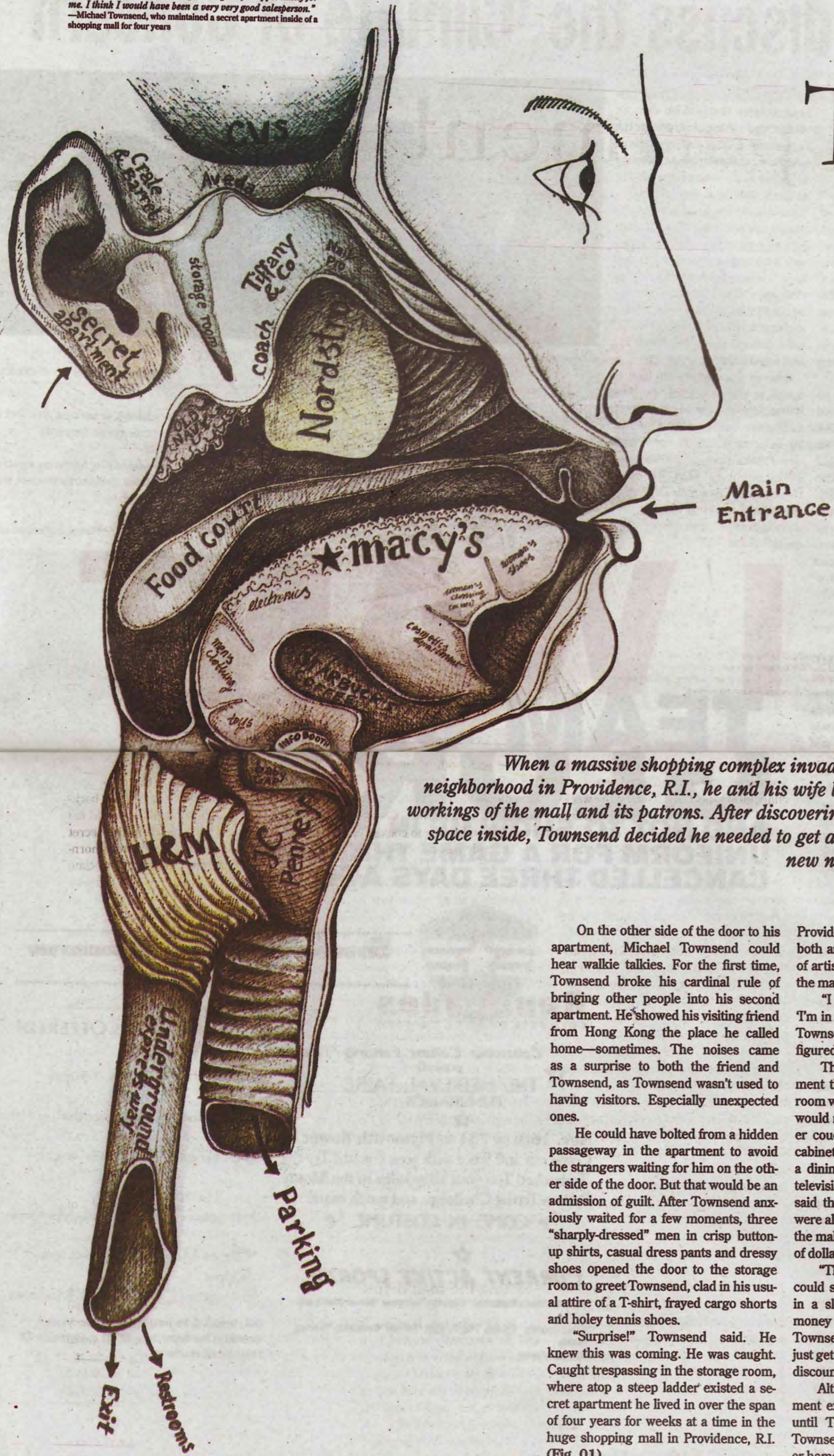


fig. 02

"Part of my own personal journey was to sort of internalize being defined by the mall during my stay there," Townsend said. "Nordstrom was really looking like a good job opportunity for me. I think I would have been a very very good salesperson."
—Michael Townsend, who maintained a secret apartment inside of a shopping mall for four years



The Mall Experiment

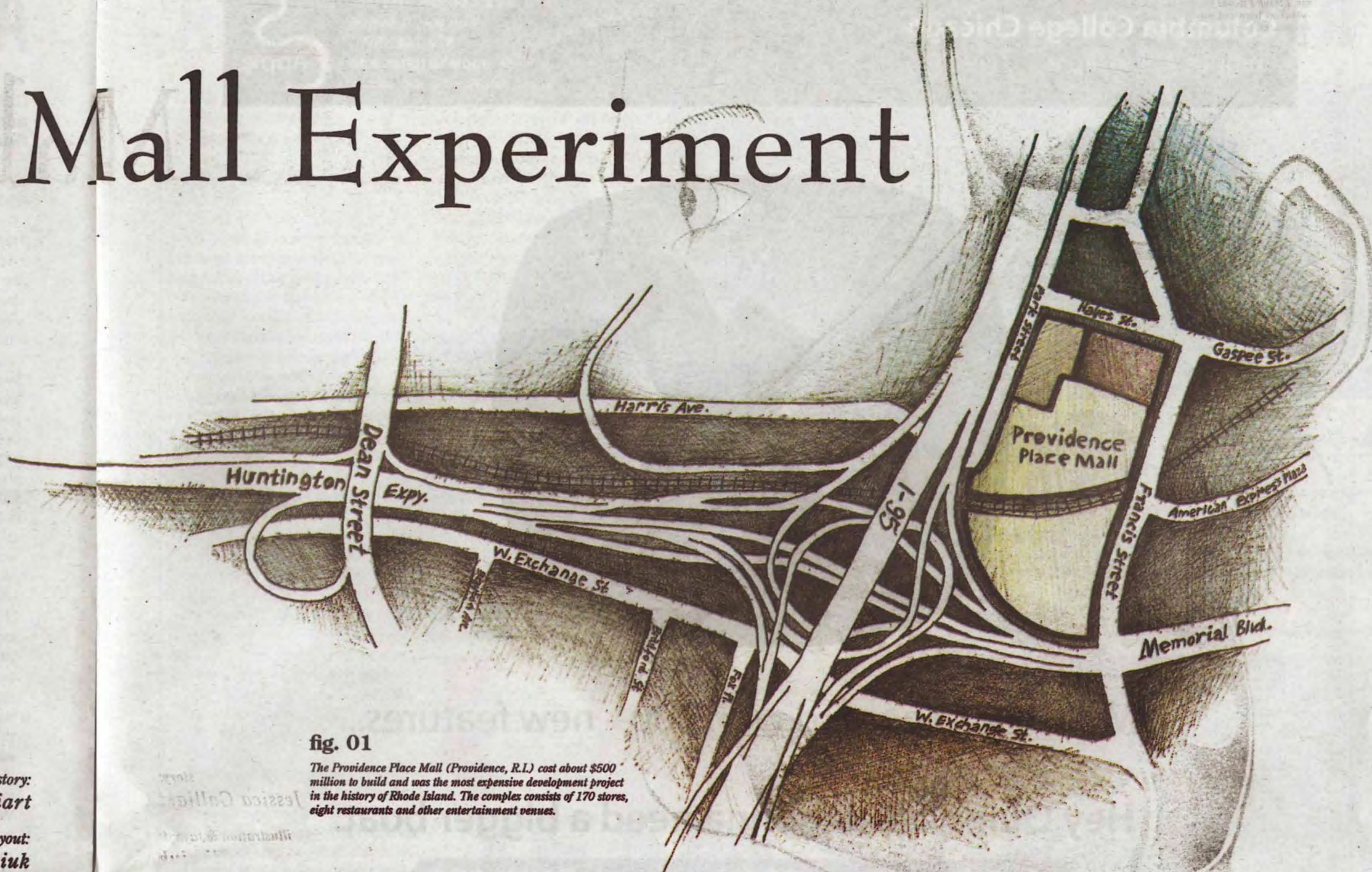


fig. 01

The Providence Place Mall (Providence, R.I.) cost about \$500 million to build and was the most expensive development project in the history of Rhode Island. The complex consists of 170 stores, eight restaurants and other entertainment venues.

When a massive shopping complex invaded Michael Townsend's neighborhood in Providence, R.I., he and his wife 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.

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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 showed his visiting friend from Hong Kong the place he called home—sometimes. The noises came as a surprise to both the friend and Townsend, as Townsend wasn't used to having visitors. Especially unexpected ones.

He could have bolted from a hidden passageway in the apartment to avoid the strangers waiting for him on the other side of the door. But that would be an admission of guilt. After Townsend anxiously waited for a few moments, three "sharply-dressed" men in crisp button-up shirts, casual dress pants and dressy shoes opened the door to the storage room to greet Townsend, clad in his usual attire of a T-shirt, frayed cargo shorts and holey tennis shoes.

"Surprise!" Townsend said. He knew this was coming. He was caught. Caught trespassing in the storage room, where atop a steep ladder existed a secret apartment he lived in over the span of four years for weeks at a time in the huge shopping mall in Providence, R.I. (Fig. 01)

Townsend and seven other artists secretly kept an apartment above a storage room in the parking garage of the

Providence Place Mall since 2003 as both an escape and a way for the group of artists to study the inner workings of the massive shopping complex.

"I realized at that very moment, 'I'm in trouble.' I knew that it was over," Townsend said. "The bottom line is, they figured it out."

The 750-square-foot unheated apartment that sat above an unused storage room was furnished with everything that would make a home a home: a four-seater couch, a loveseat, benches, a china cabinet filled with stemware and dishes, a dining room table with four seats, a television and a Playstation 2. Townsend said the furnishings for the apartment were all purchased at the mall or close to the mall and collectively cost thousands of dollars.

"The idea was that as soon as we could stabilize the space that we could, in a slow orderly fashion, earn more money to get more things in the mall," Townsend said. "Or more notably we'd just get jobs in the mall—so we could get discounts."

Although the fully-furnished apartment existed in the mall for four years until Townsend's arrest on Sept. 26, Townsend and the other artists were never homeless, never vandalized and didn't make their second home as a means to trespass or cause chaos in the mall.

Townsend, who lived close to the

structure was built.

The mall moves in

The Providence Place Mall, built in the late 1990s, became a strong fixture in the lives of Townsend and his wife, Adriana Yoto. Townsend literally had to drive through a "canyon" in the middle of the mall to reach downtown Providence.

"Its arrival had ramifications that rippled through my 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."

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

"In the architecture and design itself of the mall, it is seducing. It's like opening its arms to the East Side but turning its back onto our neighborhood," Yoto said. "So since the mall has never been looking at us, we've always been looking at the mall."

In 2003, Townsend and Yoto decided they needed to get to know their neighbor—the mall. The couple and two other artists agreed to spend an entire week, from one Friday morning until the next, inside of the Providence Place Mall as an adventure of sorts. Each of them brought \$20 in cash and voted on one item that each person could bring on the week-long adventure. The crew voted on flashlights, a sketchbook, a foil car blanket and a wash cloth for the all-nighters in the mall.

Though four years had gone by

Townsend still remembered every architectural aspect of it. During the week-long journey inside the mall, the artists explored the unused—or "undefined"—as Yoto and Townsend describe them—spaces inside of the mall.

"Undefined has more to do with serving the defined spaces, and you never see any decoration or care for how it looks; it's just there to be there," Townsend said. "Then there's the forgotten spaces. And that means just being completely off everyone's radar, just abandoned. They may have been undefined at one point, but they have slipped into the realm of forgotten."

It was during their exploration of the mall that Townsend was looking for a spot he remembered from the construction of the mall. In the middle of the mall, above a storage room, was a "launchpad" area for I-beams, or beams used as support for construction. Townsend said the space couldn't have served any purpose after the I-beams were gone, and he set out to look for it.

The four-year journey

The first night of their week-long adventure, Townsend found an "anomaly" in the architecture: two cinderblock walls separated by a gap almost 2-feet wide. The dark, narrow passageway Townsend found was a path that led directly from the outside of the mall to the space he remembered from years earlier.

Yoto said the intrusion of the mall into their everyday lives led them to want to get as close as they could to the mall—living in it.

"It was just about us and the mall. There was a somewhat personal relation-

had taken over our city," Yoto 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 steep ladder that led up to the apartment. Townsend accessed the room from an exit stairwell, where he said he always found the door ajar. Every piece of furniture was moved up to the apartment from the ladder. They also built a wall from cinderblocks they carried through the small passageway with a stationary door to section off the lofted 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. And so if we have a key to a door, does that make it a home?" Townsend said.

Until this spring, the artists lived in and out of the apartment—using extension cords from the storage room for electricity 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 shopped in the mall and those who worked in the mall to understand the phenomenon behind it all.

"Part of my own personal journey was to sort of internalize being defined by the mall during my stay there," Townsend said. "Nordstrom was really looking like a good job opportunity for

very good salesperson." (Fig. 02)

When Townsend would spend back-to-back nights in the mall, he would fall asleep on the large couch in the secret apartment, then wake up the next morning and walk to the office of his full-time job with TapeArt, a community art project, while he lived in the mall. He and other artists visit schools and communities to show the different ways art can be created to reflect on the community, including using tape to create murals.

Adam Brooks, faculty member in the Art and Design Department at Columbia, is half of the performance art duo Industry of the Ordinary. Brooks said he has heard of secret installations in Chicago before, but he said he's not sure how art like this can engage an audience.

"I think essentially the real question becomes what the idea of engaging an audience is integrated into the work and whether this is an activity for the artist alone, in which case the audience is secondary," Brooks said.

After the media got wind of Townsend's experience, he said he received hundreds of e-mails in response to the apartment in the mall—every single one positive.

"One of the recurring themes in these e-mails is this tone [of] 'thank you.' It's said over and over," Townsend said. "Every time I see this I'm always caught off guard by it. I think they're thanking me for my take on it that the secret mall apartment manages to encapsulate the love/hate that everyone has with the mall."

To read more about the secret apartment in the mall and see more of Townsend's work, visit trummerknd.com. To learn more about Yoto's "Mallife" project, visit ColinCantRead.com/Mallife.html.