Seductive Experience of Contemporary Shopping Environments: A Multi-sensory Perspective

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Abstract

Through theoretical discourses of power and multi-sensory experience, this paper traces manifestations and implications of seductive design strategies employed in contemporary shopping spaces. The premise is that seduction should not be understood as necessarily negative strategy, but rather a mode of power manifested in pleasant sensual dialogue with space ambience. On-site experiments were conducted in 4 shopping malls in Singapore and Belgrade, Serbia, comprising purposeful photo-journeys, interviews and questionnaires, sensory mapping, photo and narrative analyses. Key findings indicate that, besides consumption, shopping spaces are also perceived as pleasant settings for recreation and social interaction. Seductive experience considerably depends on quantity, intensity and arrangement of overall sensory information in space.

Keywords: seduction; multi-sensory experience; contemporary shopping spaces; healing environment

1. Introduction – Objectives, Background and Methods

Our understanding of the built environment is primarily shaped through emotional and multi-sensory dialogue with space (e.g., Holl et al., 2006; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). However, contemporary design practices often either neglect or manipulate this fact. Theming and ‘Disneyfication’, ‘total landscaping’ and ‘pleasure principle’, manipulation and seduction - are some of the terms used to criticise formulas and power strategies employed in the design of public spaces today, and particularly consumption spaces, with primary aim to fulfil higher consumption goals. According to such critiques, these strategies create either monotonous or over-stimulating, aesthetically unpleasant or over-beautified spaces that manipulate users’ sensory and emotional experiences in such a way that their behaviour and subjective well-being are threatened (e.g., Crawford, 1992; Dovey, 1999). Through theoretical discourses of power, phenomenology and multi-sensory experience, this paper seeks to trace the manifestations and design implications of the power of seduction inscribed in the design of contemporary shopping environments. The premise is that seduction should not be understood as necessarily negative phenomenon. Instead, a phenomenological understanding of seduction as softer, dynamic and two-directional mode of power exchange is adopted. In such a way, this paper also

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considers the positive facets of seduction manifested in pleasant sensual, emotional and symbolic interactions with overall space ambience, rather than solely looking at its negative ‘manipulative twin.’

Research methods employed in this study involve two main phases: (1) discourse analysis - based on comprehensive critical review of theories related to public and consumption spaces, power of seduction and multi-sensory experience; and (2) case study analysis - involving on-site experiments in 4 shopping malls in Singapore and Belgrade, Serbia. Comparative case study analysis combines purposeful photo-journeys (seductive and sensory), interviews and questionnaires, sensory mapping, photo and narrative analysis.

2. Contemporary Consumption Spaces and Senses

Predominant in academia is that the character and quality of public space have been lost primarily due to privatisation, commodification and control mechanisms, which led to undermining of the democratic values of traditional public space and creation of homogeneous, inauthentic and inaccessible quasi-public spaces. Consumption spaces are typically defined as sites where commodities are appropriated, utilised and exchanged. However, contemporary consumption spaces seem to break the traditional distinctions between private and public, indoor and outdoor, leisure and consumption, culture and economy. Consumption can no longer be described as a ‘parasitic activity’, but rather a force according to which our cities are being colonised, designed and re-shaped, resulting in a new form of public-ness. In this paper, contemporary consumption spaces are understood as hybrid settings that have slowly abandoned the unified schemes of common shopping environments, such as the manipulative ‘dumb-bell’ plans introduced by Victor Gruen in 1950s, and transformed at both programmatic and spatial levels. This is particularly apparent in dense Asian cities, such as Tokyo, Hong Kong or Singapore, where consumption spaces are tightly knitted into everyday life and urban fabric, particularly at large transportation hubs. However, the abandonment of a traditional shopping mall actually demonstrates its overwhelming success, as the entire cities have become ‘mallified’ (Chung et al., 2001). The success of shopping malls may also result from their ability to constantly reinvent themselves. Due to increased competition, these spaces are forced to explore creative ways of attraction through design, going beyond manipulative spatial layouts and aggressive deployment of advertisements. As such, they may be seen as perpetual labs that experiment with positive distractions, showing the capacity of overcoming the mere consumption motifs, while enriching the overall urban experience and contributing to the amount and quality of the public space network.

It is argued that our perceptual sphere is under continuous erosion due to monotonous designs that favour aesthetic values and vision over other senses (e.g., Pallasmaa, 1996; Zardini, 2005). The process of aestheticisation has become source of intoxication and anaestheticisation, standardisation and sanitisation, erasing unpleasant associations and inducing numbness in spatial experience (Leach, 1999). However, while the negative effects of the built environment on people’s behaviour, perception and well-being are easy to perceive, much less is known about its positive impacts. Although the empirical evidence of such positive effects is somewhat scarce, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to the pleasure and happiness that better design may bring. According to Morris (1999), shopping malls are overwhelmingly and constitutively paradoxical. On the one hand, they appear incredibly monolithic, monumental and rigid. On the other hand, from the experiential point of view, when one tries to dispute with them, shopping malls immediately dissolve into fluidity and indeterminacy. This dual quality, the tension between rigidness and looseness, stability and constant change, is in the root of ‘seductive’ strategy.

4. Power of Seduction

In the context of political and social sciences and ethics (and in everyday speech), seduction typically refers to unidirectional and hypocritical power strategy that ‘leads astray,’ usually by persuasion or false promises,
offering only temporary pleasures to the seduced (e.g., Dovey, 1999; Hoch, 2002). It is also often falsely equated with the power of (erotic) manipulation. Work by Rorty (1992), Baudrillard (1990) and Kierkegaard (1997), defines seduction more cautiously, as having rather ambivalent character, bordering between weakening and empowering, ethics and aesthetics. According to Rorty (1992), there are two primal modes of power - ‘power to’, which refers to an ‘innocent’ ability or capacity to act, and ‘power over’ that is more aggressive. Yet, the notion of ‘power over’ remains predominant in the general negative understanding of power, and includes force, coercion, persuasion, domination, manipulation, authority, and seduction. In architectural discourse, power is most frequently seen as a set of mechanisms that imposes control and discipline over people (society) through new ideologies, political agendas and institutionalisation inscribed in physical space. However, the power is not necessarily rough and explicit in its appearance. Its success rather depends on the ability to hide its own mechanisms, to naturalise and camouflage itself. According to Mitrasinovic (2006) and Pimlott (2008-9), the growing public-private continuum today results in a homogenous and totalising realm, similar to what Foucault’s (1995) ‘panopticon’, a disciplinary society of surveillance.

Instead of being unidirectional power that stems from an intention to a prescribed outcome, this study proposes that seduction is a dynamic and two-directional phenomenon, whose occurrence primarily depends on response of the seduced. The outcome is always an exchange process between the space and the user, acting as a medium for their interaction. In this process, both the seducer and the seduced get mutually attracted, simultaneously weakened and empowered and, finally, transformed. It is hypothesised that the seductive qualities in contemporary shopping malls considerably depend on the richness of the multi-sensory stimuli carefully embedded in their designs and users’ conscious and subconscious interaction with them.

5. Case Study Analysis

Four shopping malls in Singapore and Belgrade, Serbia were investigated, namely: VivoCity and CityLink in Singapore, and DeltaCity and New Millennium in Belgrade, Serbia. They defer in terms of spatial configuration (‘centralised’, ‘linear’, ‘ring’ and ‘infinite’) and level of complexity, as well as specific relationship with their surrounding context (Fig.1).

Purposeful photo-journeys. In each shopping space, 2 purposeful photo-journeys were conducted, followed by in-depth interviews and a short questionnaire. 10 participants per space joined these experiments. The first ‘affective/seductive’ journey gathered information about users’ affective reading of space. During this walk, participants were asked to take 10 photographs of whatever they wanted, without being informed of
the purpose of the study. The walking route was not controlled. After the walk, the participants were asked to describe each photograph they took using 5 keywords, and to elaborate on what exactly attracted their attention, without any interference of the investigator. The researcher then explained the purpose of his study, after which the participants pursued the second ‘sensory’ journey and took another 10 photos, focusing on positive and negative multi-sensory stimuli available in space while following similar route. They were allowed to take the same photos again. After this walk, the participants explained dominant sensory stimulations and moods in each photograph, and evaluated how pleasant or comfortable the detected stimulations were.

Sensory mapping and questionnaires. All the photographs taken by the participants were carefully mapped out, providing important information on spatial allocation and rhythm of sensory clues identified. Finally, the participants completed a short questionnaire, based on environmental psychologists’ research on atmospherics and the approach-avoidance behaviour method (e.g., Donovan & Rossiter, 1982).

6. Key Findings and Discussion

Key findings indicate that the levels of seduction and pleasure grow with increment of complexity of spatial layout and movement patterns, as well as the number, intensity and diversity of positive sensory stimuli in space (Fig.2). Moreover, people resonate better to more ‘organic-like’ places with greater physical and visual connection with the outdoor space. Positive sensory stimulation in space seem to trigger better bodily and mental interaction with space, contributing to good mood and overall sense of well-being. Findings from photo-motifs analysis also indicate that investigated shopping spaces are not perceived solely as places for consumption, but also as attractive, sensory rich and pleasant settings for recreation and social interaction, especially in the context of Singapore (Fig.3).

Fig.2. Levels of seduction and sensorial richness (left) and pleasure and happiness (right)

Fig.3. Photo-motifs from the first seductive journey
Keyword analysis further reveals that users tend to seek positive stimulations in space. They also tend to describe spaces more favourably after the second walk. A considerable number of photographs repeated in two journeys (Fig.4), indicating significant relationship between the initial reaction to space and the multi-sensory qualities. Multi-sensory maps (Fig.5) also reveal that complexity of space does not refer solely to its layout and interior-exterior relationship, but also to the arrangement and diversity of sensory clues, including also less sensory rich spots, which are here termed as ‘attention breaks’. These sensory and mental breaks seem to acknowledge and further enhance sensory and ambiental pleasures coming from the experience of space.

Fig.4. Photo-comparison: repeated photos in seductive [top] and sensory [bottom] walk, DeltaCity, Belgrade

Fig.5. An example of multi-sensory map of DeltaCity, Belgrade: seductive (red) and sensory (green) walk


In respect to key findings, the concept of seduction recognises three modes of exchange: ‘space-space’, ‘space-body/self’ and ‘body/self-body/self’ exchange (Fig.6).

Fig.6. Conceptual Framework of Seduction: modes of seductive exchange
‘Space-space’ exchange refers to spatial transformations in the design of consumption spaces and their influence on the manifestation of power, and vice versa. Two distinct yet interdependent and parallel exchange processes are apparent, namely the ‘exteriorisation’ of indoor space and the ‘interiorisation’ of outdoor space. While this spatial blur and fragmentation point towards the dilution of the manifestation of power, they do not necessarily indicate its weakening. ‘Space-body/self’ exchange addresses the ways seduction and perceived spatial transformations are experienced, interpreted and, finally, influenced by the users (bodily, emotionally and symbolically). This process is two-directional involving projecting one’s body/self onto space, discovering its resonance and reflection in space. One of the crucial prerequisites for seduction to occur is the readiness to change and to be changed. One needs to be willing to be penetrated by power of space, to adopt space’s characteristics despite the risk of temporarily losing his/her personal identity for the sake of creating a new one, temporarily shared with space. This temporary identity allows one to see and question his/her self-image and actions in reference to others. Without directly imposing any force, but rather by providing alternatives, such merging of space and users into temporary, fluid and dynamic continuum is in its essence phenomenological. Finally, ‘body/self-body/self’ exchange reflects the ways seductive experience is internalised by the user, affecting profoundly one’s sense of ego and self-esteem.

The phenomenon of seduction reflects the strategic arrangements of multi-sensory stimuli in space and helps in directing attention to positive stimuli. Such a process may result in triggering positive sensory, mental and emotional reactions in users, as well as boosting their self-esteem, and, thus, arguably can positively affect their sense of subjective well-being. While these positive qualities may be the by-products of consumption experience, they also indicate the potentials of contemporary shopping spaces to overcome the mere consumption motifs, to enrich overall urban experience, to contribute to the amount and quality of the public space network in highly dense and intense, hybrid, dynamic and contested urban environments (such as Singapore), and, finally, to even acquire an active role of “healing” and “stress fighting”. Designing healing environments goes beyond the bounds of healthcare and eldercare facilities as well as beyond hygiene, universal design, curing and prevention. Meaningful and active dialogue with all environmental stimuli, i.e. processing of multi-sensory information, plays critical role in mediating and structuring urban experience and, ultimately, shaping the overall sense of well-being of all age groups.

References