

ATINER CONFERENCE PRESENTATION SERIES No: ARC2021-0227

ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series

ARC2021-0227

Athens, 12 November 2021

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How Can Malls Become Valuable Public Spaces?**

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Athens, 12 November 2021

ISSN: 2529-167X

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ABSTRACT

This article talks about the design of the most crowded areas of cities such as shopping and entertainment centres. Even though the centres are widely recognised as public spaces, in fact their design is directed toward commercial success of their owners. Nowadays shopping malls snakes into public city squares, bus and train stations. Since malls became society's "new town squares" it is our responsibility to make their public spaces more valuable in terms of social life and education. I would like to look into the ways those public spaces can support the role of science and technology centres in popularisation of science and the role of museums in sensitising the visitors to modern art. Since continuously changing information flow is the characteristic of the shopping areas, there is a big potential of information-delivering multimedia and visual art to change the ways of presenting the information to the public.

Keywords: public space, architecture, art, mall design, multimedia installation, science popularisation, science culture, art&science

Introduction - Designing for Consumers

A few years ago I was working as an architect and product designer in Singapore. I discovered how the practice of the retail design process looks like from design to manufacturing. To be recognised in this particular design market, many companies need to provide not only design services, but also manufacturing products for retail display and furniture. Designers work under a huge time pressure. Time consumed by their work is sometimes even seen by investors as a loss of potential income from the space rental and merchandise trade while project duration. Therefore the time devoted to the conceptual stage of the project becomes a very small part of the whole design process and mainly aims at meeting the investor's expectations. The needs of prospective tenants become the priority in deciding about directions of the design. The shopping malls we are visiting are built as a result of this process. Passing by Singapore malls and observing how crowded they are and how much time we spend there I started to consider how we can make these public spaces better by changing the design approach. The aim of this article is to draw attention to progressive process of public spaces commercialisation and to emphasise the need for research in this area.

Seduced by Publicity and Advertising

Public spaces such as science and technology centres, museums and art galleries are nowadays the only places where people living in the consumer culture of big agglomerations have the opportunity to develop their interest in science and modern art. According to recent surveys those places are gaining on popularity but only among specific social groups. In contradistinction to the galleries and science parks, entertainment and shopping centres enjoy enormous numbers of visitors. This number has been growing for more than 30 years.

“Consumers of all ages spend more time in shopping malls than anywhere else except home, work, and school (Kowinski 1985; Stoffel 1988), leading some to suggest that malls have become modern day community centres and society's new town squares...” (Lutz and Guiry, 2000)

What is the Reason behind their Choice?

Few answers immediately come to mind: consumerism, entrance ticket barrier, but maybe most importantly lack of education that makes science centres and galleries incomprehensible. Majority of people in society spend their life being just consumers of knowledge and technology created by others. Without education, they do not have a chance to understand science. The language of popular science articles is too difficult to engage them. Similarly, the lack of education and attendance to art events defy their abilities of distinguishing artistic values and decay the need for interactions with art. Therefore the majority of people choose

visiting shopping centres as a way of spending leisure time which gives them more satisfaction than other activities.

“The mall attracts and offers consumer society everything it wants and needs, and consumers are seduced by the mall. Seduction by publicity and advertising constitutes a kind of invisible violence, which forces us to desire and then buy and gather things that we do not even need. This lifestyle, according to (Petrusek, 2006), is accompanied by an ethical and economic irresponsibility that enables the individual to ‘enjoy today and pay tomorrow’. Media and publicity have the leading role in this process, telling the consumers what to do, buy, consume, and how to behave. Media and publicity exercise an influence on people’s minds, which, albeit invisible, is strong and dangerous. People are manipulated by fashion; fashion controls the lifestyle and also ascribes certain types of goods and activities greater prestige than others. This pressure may be especially strong among teenagers, where membership in a particular peer group may be defined by the possession of certain goods and following a particular fashion or lifestyle.” (Spilkowa and Radova, 2011)

Despite social campaigns promoting science centres, museums and cultural events people still spend more and more time in malls. Therefore we have to think over how to design those places to make them better in terms of social life and education. The main question I would like to address here is: in what way can shopping and entertainment areas support the role of science and technology centres in popularisation of science and the role of museums in sensitising the visitors to modern art?

Need for a Change in Design Approach - A Valuable Public Space

Design influences our quality of life and it is its role to make it not only more comfortable but also more valuable. Since people spend a lot of time in shopping centres, it is their designers responsibility to make these public spaces more valuable. Typically the design approach to shopping areas aims at commercial success of its investors. Private purpose ignores the fact that common areas of the centres should also be treated as public spaces valuable in terms of social life and education. Therefore a change is required in the design approach which additionally to economic values will lead to better quality of life of the visitors.

In terms of social life, shopping centres gather people that have something in common, yet nothing is done to break the isolation of individual customers as noted in (Putnam, 2001) on the example of American malls:

“Although malls constitute Americas the most distinctive contemporary public space they are carefully designed for one primary, private purpose – to direct consumers to buy. Despite the aspirations of some developers, mall culture is not about overcoming isolation and connecting with others, but about privately surfing from store to store in the presence of others but not in their company. The shopping experience does not consist of interaction with people embedded in a common social network.”

In terms of education, shopping and entertainment centres should at least provide access to science novelties in everyday life presented in a way that engages the visitors without any higher education. One of the motivations why this should be done is that in modern societies technological literacy essentially becomes a human right as written in (Eduardo Martinez):

“The technical possibilities of gaining access to information are changing our vision of the world and transforming the relationship between human beings and the appropriation and dissemination of knowledge. Today, access to knowledge is synonymous with development, well-being and quality of life; in this context, scientific and technological literacy is a social and ethical right of all human beings (...) It is also essential to make scientific and technological knowledge available to the ordinary citizen, in order to allow him or her to form opinions on such matters that can form part of daily conversations in the same way as politics and sport.”

In a longer perspective these changes will also bring benefits to the whole society. For example, the more young visitors become interested in science the better chance of scientific progress that translates to better country development and independence.

Art in Public Space

The aim of the educational role of art is to make people interested in the subject, to start conversation. Art is presenting problems in an emotional way. Art in public space has the potential to provide access to essential information about science presented in a way that engages visitors without any higher education. A campaign which makes people aware of the problem can be easily made by art. The language of art can transform complex problems showing the essential issue to individuals in a simple way. This can be a language of popularisation of science.

Creative approach of humans to nature is closely connected with the ability to observe the forms and phenomena of the environment that we live in. This ability has a large impact on the perception of the world and development of culture. Culture reflects our level of knowledge of the world. The ways in which we interpret our surroundings do not depend only on the nature that we see, but also on what we know about it and how we interpret this knowledge. Developing knowledge in the field of physics, biology or astronomy, regardless of the level of knowledge, everyone reaches the stage which requires abstract thinking. Many issues are still unresolved and the way scientists present them to the public is too schematic to understand problems without appropriate preparation and knowledge. Based on photographs, visualizations and patterns, our imagination builds the image of the world around us, which is a combination of what we see and what we know that exists but we can't see it. According to my own observations and interviews, I may say that the majority of society, looking at the environment, restrict their attention to the objects they already know, being able to observe only what they are focused on in everyday life. The language and the way of presenting news related to science is too difficult to engage them. Therefore a

huge potential of instilling the need to broaden knowledge about science is in art. Proximity to the visual arts inspired by science helps in developing abstract thinking.

Public art can be also seen as one of the methods of public campaigns.

“Historically artists and artistic practices have played a role in influencing if not shaping institutional innovation and societal transformations (Sommer 2013; Mesch 2013). Artworks are facilitators of experience as they invite audiences and participants to take part into the life of the work. This has been particularly used within environmental change. Since many of the 24 environmental problems often do not belong to (or at least are hidden from) ordinary everyday life, they might be difficult for people to engage with. Artworks, as ways of giving form to human feelings, can be an embodied way of meaning-making around social-ecological change (Knebusch 2008; Mazur et al. 2013; Curtis 2009).” (D. Galafassi, 2018)

As an example of an experiment of building environmental awareness among different social groups in the city, I would like to mention my artistic installation “A New Planet” presented in Old Town City Hall in Gdańsk in Poland. The artwork is related to the growing problem of pollution caused by plastic waste, which is changing our environment for ever before our eyes. The message here is: *What will remain after us for future generations?*

Figure 1. *Artistic Installation “A New Planet”, Old Town City Hall in Gdańsk, Poland, 2020*



Source: Karolina Paterek.

Uncountable number of living creatures has already been killed by the wastes of our generation. This direct threat has become tangible enough to affect the lives of people. In my story, affected by temperature increase plastics are taking organic shapes, similar to the forms of living organisms. Remains of plastic containers are almost identical to the remains of animals. Except for four meter high sculptures made of melted plastic and shelves, the installation also contains animal skeletons. The elements of plastic we can find in rocks and at the bottom of the ocean. According to Professor Zalasiewicz, archeologists in the future will be able to explore the sludge of plastic to recognize our time. By checking a layer of plastic they will be able to determine the beginning of the Anthropocene...

Conclusions

In design practice, working on the conceptual stage, a design team is cooperating with marketing experts who develop trade success strategies by focusing solely on the economic parameters. In order to increase social value, the approach to shopping and entertainment design should be the same as designing a city's public squares. A huge flow of information, typical to the trade areas, is an important factor which designers need to take into consideration. The way information is presented to visitors should be controlled and should be a part of the design. Arranged space containing more information with educational character is more valuable than commercial. A challenge for designers and artists is to design a space where information is transformed into a form of modern art, presented to the public in a non stereotypical and engaging way. A visitor could leave such a place full of positive vibrations, excited, relaxed, detached from everyday duties... just like after an excellent exhibition of modern art. The designers of such spaces are also challenged by the need for their dynamic transformations, need for a space which can be easily changed. The design should be flexible and easy to adapt to the changing information while preserving its coherence.

Many successfully designed public spaces which are popular among all groups of citizens were not planned from A to Z by designers. The mood and character of such places appear with time and are very often created by people and artists. Therefore the challenge for designers while planning the public area is to answer the question to what extent we should plan such a space. It is very important to take into consideration an interaction between the space and its users. The main role of the planner here is to frame, to give direction, to create a mood and let it develop involving the artists and local communities. Many popular places became well known because of the presence of a sculpture or art installation. Squares with commercial functions and common areas of shopping centers may also become places where visitors have the opportunity to interact with art. Art adds an additional value to the place.

“Since the streets give access to the collective, contemporary culture, but in ways that seem ordinary or everyday, then people’s lives are shaped by what is offered by the streets.” (Hochritt et al. 2018)

Besides planning restaurants, which are expensive and not accessible for all and places for commercial advertisement, malls common areas should be the “friendly” spaces which provide visitors a possibility to broaden their horizons, interaction with other people, and where they can feel comfortable and willing to return.

As Richard Maier put it:

“We don’t design only an object but as a result we are making meaningful public space.”

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