

Design and Sense Construction: The Shopping Experience

Valeria Iannilli, Politecnico di Milano, Italy
Federica Vacca, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

Prof. Valeria Iannilli: Assistant Professor, Design Department, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy

Dr. Federica Vacca: Research Fellow, Design Department, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy

Retail Space: A State of Art

The theme of “sense construction”, in the design-driven innovation perspective, captures important aspects in relation to the *continued innovation* which design faces today, particularly in respect to the *discursive* practices in which the designer engages with final consumers. An important research area - to investigate the role of narrative as a design tool to create “sense for the shopping experience” - is the retail space, the place of relation between the Company and the final consumer. Through these places, narrative forms can underline the identity of the brand and find expression in the processes of value creation and consumption experiences. The retail space becomes a suitable place to capture the diversity and complexity of the *discursive* practices that the company is able to activate through advanced-design driven actions. The design is presented as the *relational connector* with the plurality of *communicative surfaces* with which the company faces the market, defining the identity and the *forms* of strategy (Iannilli, 2010). Consumer choices are increasingly dependent on understanding and *sharing values* not necessarily as material products, but as *sign-products* (Hesmondhalgh, 2008).

Over the past few years, Retail spaces have become the most tangible consequences of the strong trends of change caused by the new policies of economic exchange (Rullani, 2004). Retailers are now forced to operate in global markets where competition no longer signifies the mere loss of a market section due to price policies; competition has evolved to incorporate the competitive value of the product-system (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981; Krippendorff, 1989). This is evidenced by the development in the design of retail spaces, which have undergone such a radical change to require completely new skills. However, while aesthetic enhancement is a powerful tool for creating a visual experience, superficial aesthetics alone do not satisfy consumer expectations; information and service richness is crucial. The design practice is understood as the promoter of reconfiguration planning processes, always looking for new

languages able to enhance identities, productive and cultural specificities and build new project landscapes where the space is experienced as a symbolic and relational place.

The *narrative process* becomes the tool able to define experiences, perception and sense levels; it can be read as an expression of a new project approach, focused not only on the end product but especially on the process and generative path behind it. The shift of attention towards the qualitative aspects of design, which are difficult to estimate, forces the designer to examine in depth the various possible outcomes. Above all, a new definition of complexity is established, i.e. a parameter within which a more fluid and complex form of design functions. The interpretation of contemporary retail spaces coincides with the image of a place that tries to integrate partial and/or functional aspects in a complex process.

The object in isolation does not have a meaning; it gains meaning when put within a context and thus becomes the fruit of the “intentional act” (imagining, perceiving, desiring). The perception is formed in a holistic contest where it is considered an active creative process, overtaking the simple data captured by sight and hearing.

A Frame of Meaning between Company and Consumers

In the current competitive environment in which companies develop innovation in the functional phases of design, while creativity and knowledge management are presented as characteristic features, the role of design within the process of transforming retail spaces ought to be analysed. Design-driven innovation leads to a level of meanings, as perceived by the public, which is comparable to or greater than the level of functionality/performance. Design therefore shows an interesting development in the interpretation that considers knowledge and practice within a context, thus turning the technical-design solution into a problem of industrial production (Celaschi & Deserti, 2007) and is part of a broader cultural project.

Re-conceived in this way, the value chain implies that the final product is no longer the result of a technical assignment or exclusively of a mere aesthetic/formal choice, but of a multidimensional mental process that - through managerial, technological, physical, information, scientific, social, cultural, and artistic relations - simultaneously determines the character and use of the space. The inevitable tensions created while approaching problems or setting goals are solved by the convergence of thought and action, not as in their literal translation into their integration system, but as in factors leading to the adoption of a new organization with a higher level of complexity. Amongst all design disciplines, retail design is the discipline which has mostly reinterpreted the boundaries of its practice, transforming the lines of separation in specifications of the interaction platforms. Within these areas, we can define the design of coordination and integration of different disciplinary outcomes as a “space-zip”, which identifies a cultural field of culture conducive to innovation. In these scenarios, designers have indeed always tried to learn and understand using mainly the technical language of their disciplines and probably, by virtue of their cultural and historical preparation based on doing projects, have taken on the role of interpreters of the uneven contributions of the different expert knowledge by peers in their working group. In this sense, the designer can be considered as a kind of synthesizer of the design group.

This definition especially suits the products from the so-called “Made in Italy” label, not only characterized by technological innovation (technology push) - which required strong and continued investments in basic research, together with cultural mediation (transfer) - and most eminently by meaningful innovation (facing downstream), aiming to define areas of contamination and cross-fertilization (Bertola *et al.*, 2007) through new uses of technologies already available and developed for a different context.

Under this light, we can also read the strong shift of the value chain towards the processes that implement the relationships with consumers. To link the two entities (consumers and company) as part of the goal of the shopping experience means to design installations able to

create a fertile ground for the exchange of languages and meanings; it therefore implies the creation of a frame of meaning within which both entities can find a shared value system.

The sought-after change, presented in this paper, is to develop the installation concepts that stem from the research of the linguistic codes which are closer to the user's perceptual contexts. This not only recognizes the user as the main agent of the experience, but also focuses the design of the retail space on the user's own perceptual and interpretive abilities. It is therefore fundamental to understand which themes may be of interest to the public, with regards to a given supply system, and to know how to extrapolate them from the semantic and linguistic complexity and then turn them into a project by making them visible to and traversable by the whole body. In addition, it is worth noting how the projectual research of the designer evolves for what concerns disciplinary boundaries, clearly referencing highly-developed tools of sociology and anthropology, such as participatory research and action research. The designer, in this context, is defined as he who shows prowess at drawing and giving shape to cognitive thinking in relation to specific managerial aims.

The Shopping Experience in the Design Practice

Nowadays, retail spaces are places in respect of which any attempt to denomination leads, right from the start, to a strong interpretative limit. They are a *species of spaces* (Iannilli, 2010; Perce, 1997) where different functions are integrated and correlated, including the underlying function mainly aimed at economic exchange, which does not necessarily represent the primary goal to achieve in that specific place. Their configuration is indeed closely related to the recognition of a production that draws its competitive value from the shift of interest from *product to product-system*; from the interaction between material and immaterial values of its supply system (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981; Kapferer, 1992; Krippendorff, 1989).

The gradual emergence of the design of the *atmosphere* of the *retail* space, as a factor capable of generating *emotional* and *relational* responses preponderantly contributes to the realisation of the *shopping experience*. The recent guidelines tend to exceed the logic of mere spectacle of the consumption space in favour of the construction of a *sense* scenario in which the construction of public *relations* results fundamental. The retail space becomes a *narrative context* of the brand, designed as a structure capable of linking the main agents of this exchange. The fragmentation of the spheres in which the sense is experienced is typical of a complex society and is manifested by the participation of each individual in a plurality of associations and, therefore, of subcultures or sub-identities, highlighting the complexity of primary relationships. Furthermore, the enhancement of the same experiences and the spreading of opportunities and the communicative openness define a complex relationship network, different from what was until recently represented with the static, simplifying and hierarchical structure, typical of pre-modern communities.

The composition of different relationship systems, which interact in the same *place*, produces an interspecific redundancy, representing a distinctive contribution to retail space design, understood as an *integrated and integrating activity* compared to the mere addition of the different possible actions. The recognition of the consumer's active role in living his experience leads companies to determine an experiential platform that consists of widespread elements (Carù & Cova, 2003) so as to allow the active interaction of the consumer in creating his own preference system. In this sense, the *intentional* act of retail space design must tend to the construction of a scenario that allows exchanges with the consumer's knowledge, also helpful to develop new skills.

In this way, the experience becomes a rite of passage that inevitably leads to a change. From the operational point of view, this leads to the systemic organization of contents, of technical-installation, compositional and ergonomic solutions, of functions and semantic processes of meaning in a way in which the peculiarities of the consumer (cultural, social, economic,

emotional, aspirational) become the main constraint and directly influence the choices put to action. If the product-system is the set of tangible and intangible attributes of the company production (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981; Foucault, 1970; Krippendorff, 1989), its visualisation and representation refer to the systems through which it can be understood and represented. The *metadesign* (Celaschi & Deserti, 2007) is the main tool of the design-driven innovation process; it is the space of *design of the design practice* where an interaction system is built to represent different scenarios for the design process itself. The *visualisation* of the fundamental variables thus allows to transform cognitive thinking in visual images, in scenarios, in designable spaces, in *comprehension* places. The display, however, is much more than a *shifting* process, from cognitive to visual thinking; it is a new way to understand data, to communicate our knowledge both to us and others; it is therefore a process of sharing knowledge and the codes essential for its comprehension.

An important issue for design, in interaction with the company, is the identification of the experiences relevant to the triggering of relational processes and the evaluation of their results, through different paths:

- Establishing *potential links*, among consumer and supply system, in order to justify knowledge implementation which can be acquired precisely through “a certain experience”;
- Identifying “network” relationships, for example by investigating the relationships and behaviours established between the consumer and his daily life situations, always in relation to clusters of needs that are not yet expressed or formulated;
- Acting so as to stimulate interest, curiosity, personal reflections and elaborations in the consumer, which help him develop the wish to seek opportunities to learn something new about knowledge that he already owns or believes to own;
- Encouraging his participation in the processes of co-creation of meaning.

The attempt to formulate plausible hypotheses for the definition of spaces within which trigger an authentic *shopping experience* is driven by the recognition that, through each design practice, one can find ideas, beliefs and ways of representing and facing reality. This is the area of ideas, propositions, beliefs, values and visions which are not visible but can be found in reality. These “theories” are often not scientifically and rigorously formulated, yet they are – in any case – the landscape of meanings that the subject assigns to what he sees.

Between the sphere of theories, visions, values and beliefs and that of practices there exist a relationship, which is not hierarchical nor linear. This does not lead to the simplistic explanation for which ideas and certainties descend from acts and behaviours. For sure, ideas and values inspire actions just like the tangible situations and design actions change the way we understand and represent reality. Between the two spheres a relationship of circular and mutual influence is established; theory and practice become contaminated and often indistinguishable. The understanding of these aspects, as well as their design, is the peculiarity of the complex attitude embedded in *cognitive processes*. The result of this understanding is expressed in the design of a space, a *retail* space in our case, in which the memory of existence is fully manifested through the complex system of synergies that takes place between the specific spheres of different spatial relationships (tangible and intangible). Emphasising the complexity of the relevant interrelationships between spheres - spatial socio-cultural (symbolic) and physical-biological (tangible and intangible) - leads to resize some interpretative models of design trends for the definition of the shopping experience.

Construction of Meaning: An Integrated and Integrating Action

The spatial and display configurations influence the behaviour of the visitor both in terms of visual messages and, possibly, of constructive and functional messages, i.e. of the whole environment. There are spaces in which fashion products are matched by food, art, design, but also to service and entertainment products; the different design interpretation lies precisely in the way in which the designer defines the installed scenario.

This means bringing together more complex metaphors with deeper meanings that bind the user to his everyday reality. There arises the need to research criteria and fields of *metalinguistic connection* between different code-carrying spheres, through the enhancement of subjective and specific relationships with the research subject. A *sign* becomes significant when socially shared, when the meaning is well-known by those who use it both by the perceiver, also, it goes beyond the concept of a sign as a vehicle of communication, but tends to that interpretation which frames it as an experience of processing, transmission and assimilation of meanings. Individuals show their ideals and thoughts through material symbols, as a vehicle of their own success and social position. Act on the meaning of value that the supply system can generate means; therefore they operate at a level of building a scenario of sense, in which the products are exclusively linked to a broader discussion of the aesthetic-formal, that is highly cultural and social.

In the light of the above-presented considerations presented, what clearly emerges is the predominant role played by design. Design acts as mediator and interpreter of language codes shared in design spaces capable of embodying in their nature that sets of perceptual and cognitive attributes which see the end user as the main actor not only of consumption but also of the experience that can be enjoyed in the space so designed. It is a design of *sense*. Compared to the vision of Pine and Gilmore (2000), who identified the need to stage experiences as a theatricalization of the space in which the object is inserted, we can refer to design processes as a "construction of meaning" in which all elements of the project take on a specific meaning and connotation that brings the consumer experience understood as learning quality and of value of space.

The problem of Experience Design is not to design, but to represent the actual content of the project, the object of its speech: representing the experience, something totally subjective and qualitative, by definition can not be reproduced from the moment in which it happens. (Ceppi, 2004:171-172)

The design is then able to act not only on the scale of a single product or service, bringing in some significant typological revisions, but also through the provision of knowledge, methods, tools and procedures of *metadesign* (Celaschi & Deserti, 2007; Colombi, 2010) nature. This mode of operation is strongly oriented to innovation and provides a competitive advantage by implementing processes of objectification and context and connecting the product towards a reference market that can understand and appreciate the values and meanings. The design enables a process of *in-training* (Flusser, 2003) of spaces connoting it in their value not only as *form-function* but also as *form-meaning*, giving a set of tangible and intangible assets that allow it to manifest and materialize. The space becomes a "container" that expects an "idea / meaning" to complete it.

If the form of the material is the "how" and the material of the form is the "what", the design is one way to give form to material and make it appear as it is and not otherwise. The design, as all cultural expressions, shows that the material does not appear (not showy), except to the extent that they inform, and that, once informed begins to appear (becomes a phenomenon). Thus the material in design, as in any field of culture, is the

“way” the shapes appear. Nevertheless, to say that the design is placed between the material and the immaterial is not entirely out of place. (Flusser, 2003:12,15)

Speaking of the *Construction of Meaning* therefore means designing a place or a relationship in which all the elements take on a meaning and connotation in the definition of the atmosphere or rather of the life-style offered to consumers. We speak thus of an integrated and integral design capable of handling complex element and different operating modes.

Starting from these assumptions, we have therefore sought to find an alternative approach to design in the Retail field that could provide interesting results not only in research in respect to the design but especially in respect to training and education of the design practices. It was then decided to experiment through a Design Workshop a different approach to the project, focusing on the methodological sphere of the action-research, by putting to system the theoretical/conceptual phase together with the application/project phase. In action-research, in fact, the goal is not the study of previous theoretical knowledge but the ability to validate such knowledge through practice and experience. This application method, firmly established in the research field and training design, allows the actors to become an active part of the process.

In this specific case, the Workshop “Design and construction of meaning for the shopping experience” took place within the course of Retail Design at the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano with 52 students in the 1st year of the Masters’ Degree in fashion design followed by three professors of the Retail Design Studio, allowing to verify and validate on the field the possible design operating implication that the theoretical reflection placed in evidence. From the operational point of view, the project experience was divided into three distinctive phases:

1. The revealing of things: between experience and language;
2. The morphemes of living;
3. The sense revealed.

The goal was to investigate real domestic spaces to understand, from the sensitive perspective point of view, relationships in space and intercept all the elements or objects in it, that feature it as a lived space, unique and recognizable. The project thus understood moves between an emotional/evocative level and a structural level capable of constructing a consumption scenario that tells the identity of a space through the same experience.

The Revealing of Things: Between Experience and Language

In recent times, our relationship with objects has greatly changed due to the mass society in which we live, which is increasingly more interested in the intangible meaning of the system of objects and spaces, in their symbolic and communicative value. As explained by Floch (1992; 1997), in the relationship between subject and object, there exists a set of values that does not belong uniquely to the object but arises from the projections the subject seeks in it: his own realisation or the recognition of his identity.

Design depends on a semiosis, that is on the establishment of a relation of reciprocal presupposition between the shape of the expression and the shape of the content in a system of objects. It is therefore possible to derive a logic of sectorial design by employing commutation, i.e. by systematically looking at the correlations that already exist between the elements or dimensions of the expression on the one hand and those of axiological content of the products on the other. (Floch, 1992:197)

Knowing how to identify specific units of meaning leads the designer towards a design language which is not only more *experimental*, but also a place of understanding (of the other). This is the place where the *author-consumer* (Fabris, 2009) moves with curiosity. The author-consumer lives consumption not as a novelty, but as innovative design and as integrated system of different realities, experiences and services.

According to that, the first phase of the Design Workshop (Fig. 1) is based on knowledge and analysis. A new way of approaching the surrounding spaces that sees through the sensitive exploration and therefore through the senses, the means by which we recognize in it the units of meaning that characterize and distinguish it. The units of meaning are then material, cognitive and sensory fragments, visual, tactile and auditory portions. Narrative contexts are so open and dynamic that not only they characterize the space but also suggest new possible correlations. This experimental approach led to the understanding of the place by collecting tangible and intangible fragments in meaning scenarios that expressed the lifestyle and offered a new perspective of observation and interpretation. Therefore, the need to materially represent feelings and the balance of the investigation site (the house as a living space) was able to experience a new way of telling the units of meaning, thus inventing and creating meta-systems, representational of a space that as such took back its very essence. Not a collection of objects and images but the search for ways of expression which would tell the space and its dynamics that define its true essence.



Figure 1: The revealing of things between experience and language

Source: "Interlaccio project" by Clara Garavaglia, Martina Minotti, Martina Motta, Livia Tenuta. Retail Design Studio at the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano, 2012

The Morphemes of Living

In modern linguistics the *morpheme* represents the limit unit of meaning. In fact, as Bloomfield states (1933), each sentence is composed of a set of immediate constituents or morphemes which represent the smallest units in which the sentence can be segmented and still retain its meaning. It follows that a *morpheme* cannot be divided or fragmented without risking a loss of meaning of the word or sentence to which the morpheme itself contributes. From a design point of view, the morpheme can be defined as the element or system of elements of boundary that characterizes a specific design. It is the *unit of meaning* that cannot be fragmented without incurring in the denaturalization of the design. This aspect is precisely what defines the *morpheme* as the set of units of meaning that do not tell the space solely through its primary functions but through those elements that can characterise it as unique and different from the others. The connotative level of

the *units of meaning* becomes therefore essential to understand the concept of *morpheme* which is part of the aspirational needs of the end consumer. Hence, *the morpheme* is the result of a strategy implemented by design that is able to interpret the objects in its surroundings through a systemic view able to capture the needs, the references and the expectations that the space suggests and that the consumer requires.

So that, the second phase of the Design Workshop (Fig. 2) is characterized by a moment of conceptual synthesis. The space is objectified and reduced to the set of symbols, signs and minimum meanings beyond which we would lose the recognition of the same place. If the goal of the design workshop is to define a language as a tool to innovate the act of design, to investigate the morpheme as a minimal unit of meaning, means to lead back and tell a place, not through its features, but through those elements able to connote it as a unique and different than the others. This route of synthesis and fragmentation of space is strongly characterized by a moment of *anchorage*, which means to associate something we know with what we observe and by an objectification process that identify a tangible feeling or atmosphere in searching narrative metaphors. The tables are thus becoming the mood of matter within which it is possible to find and rediscover the soul of the place.



Figure 2: The morphemes of living

Source: "Interlaccio project" by Clara Garavaglia, Martina Minotti, Martina Motta, Livia Tenuta. Retail Design Studio at the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano, 2012

The Sense Revealed

The ability to successfully summarise the soul of a place through its most representative objects - through the units of meaning that take part to the definition of the space itself - makes the designer able to interpret, systematise this level of information through a set of design actions aimed at the complete satisfaction of consumer.

This is done through a language that can be understood by the identified consumer target, through a mix of social and cultural references that enhance the consumption profile and make the consumer a primary agent of the design itself. The retail space is not conceived as a *place of purchase*, but as a *place of residence*; it becomes the territory where the morphemes become the codes and meanings with which the designer can create the consumption experience. A construction of meaning that rejects the traditional design and display process in favour of innovative languages that rely on the consumer's lifestyle. The storytelling of the product is no

longer for its own sake, but aims at the momentum of connections with the surrounding world, consisting of complex components that, when integrated, generate a sphere of sense and new meanings. This type of experience is based on *synaesthetic actions* which refer to different sensory spheres and determine an experience of totalising consumption. The lighting, colour, temperature and touch are only few of the environmental stimuli or *sensorial morphemes* that a designer must control for their power to project the consumer into a frame of meaning and sense that instantly and permanently connects them to the offered lifestyle. This combination of more-or less-explicit messages is able to generate a unique experience where the consumer becomes the actor and the main character. The ability to communicate directly with the public through a design methodology and a narrative journey leads to the description of places and concepts through the authentic representation of the meanings which they witness.

The third phase of the Design Workshop (Fig. 3) consists in building design scenarios generated by the classification and interpretation of morphemes and units of tangible and intangible meaning that have an impact on the space as it perceived and experienced. It is time for design and generation of a concept project in which all the elements investigated in earlier stages find their spatial dimension. This does not lead to a design solution of taste but it is sifted and verified by the previous stages of analysis and interpretation that convey the telling of space. This mode of operation makes the designer able to interpret and systematize the level of significations through project actions aimed at satisfying the final consumer. The construction of meaning moves away from the common and innovative design methodology towards languages that rely on the lifestyle of the consumer. The design will no longer recount the product in itself, but try to focus on the connections with the surrounding world, consisting of complex integrated components, that generate a field of sense and new meanings.



Figure 3: the sense revealed

Source: "Interlaccio project" by Clara Garavaglia, Martina Minotti, Martina Motta, Livia Tenuta. Retail Design Studio at the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano, 2012

Sense Construction as a Design Approach for the Shopping Experience

The proposed operational model identifies design as a promoter of continuous innovation processes capable of generating a relational system between objects and spaces that unfolds the embedded narratives and peculiarities. Design is understood as a promoter of processes of design reconfiguration, constantly searching for new languages to enhance the production and cultural identities and specificities and to build new design scenarios where space is experienced as a symbolic and relational place. The narrative process becomes a tool to characterise experiences and levels of perceptions and meanings as expressions of a new way of designing, focused not only on the finished product but eminently on the process and generative path that underlies it.

In the light of the observations made so far, we can say that the interest of the design has shifted from the functional/formal aspect going to investigate intangible areas that see spaces as a communication interface. This new way of approaching the project from the point of view of cognitive and material, radically changes the role of design that should be read as an actor and mediator of knowledge and needs (Celaschi, 2000). The narrative becomes, therefore, one of the main instruments through which the designer is able to give meaning and significance to the project, reworking the stimuli and inspirations related to their own experience and organizing them according to models and repertoires socio-culturally shared and therefore usable by the society (Striano, 2005).

The design is read as a promoter of reconfiguration planning processes. The constant search for new languages is able to enhance the identity and cultural production specificity and to build new design scenarios in which space is seen as a symbolic and relational place. The narrative process becomes a tool that can identify the experiences, levels of perceptions and meaning, as an expression of a new way of designing focused not so much on the finished product as well as on procedural and generative path that underlies it.

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