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SALES AREA DESIGN AND FASHION PHENOMENA: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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SUMMARY

In the economic environment which surrounds us, one of the power units of consumption is the creation of "novelty" which attracts the consumer, accelerates the way he perceives the obsolescence of what environs him and orientates his behaviour. To tend to the maximization of the sales process through the store space adjustment is a strategic concern for the managers of tomorrow. We propose them a heuristic tool of sens articulation, which allows them to think and communicate, from the stage of conception on, with interior store designers. This allows the interior store design to play his exact roll: being a constitutive dimension of the global service offer.

Economic forces rule the world we live, but one of the driving forces behind consumption is still the creation of "novelties" which attracts the consumer and makes him realise all the more quickly that his own possessions are becoming outdated.

One of the strategies of shop managers of the future will be to use the arrangement of space to help maximise sales activity. Indeed, if environment design is generally considered important for the company image in manufacturing industries, it is much more than that in the tertiary sector, where it constitutes part of the offer itself.

In all market economies, the offer is subject to the judgement of the consumer. If we accept the current common idea according to which the consumer is confronted with different social mechanisms such as fashion phenomena which in turn make the previous offer seem increasingly obsolescent, it is easy to see that spatial arrangements will not be unaffected by these same phenomena.

Public sales area design is a medium-term question for managers to consider. The proof is that changes take place on average every 5 to 10 years. On the other hand, the consumer expects more and more appeal from the sales areas he frequents. Here, therefore, is our problem : how is it possible to reconcile sales area design and the fashion phenomena present in our consumer society? In other words, how can one bring together a permanent concept for the image and the brand, thereby, assuring brand loyalty in the consumer, and at the same time satisfy the consumer's need for novelty and modernity? If we adopt this approach, we shall best be able to understand the logic behind these conflicting demands.

1. THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Many managers believe that it is not their job to reflect on the subject of spatial arrangement in their enterprise ; this is more generally thought to be up to the engineer, or the architect responsible. This point of view is eminently understandable but it is nevertheless certain that it is in the manager's interest to involve himself in environment design. Indeed, there are many different problems involved, and wanting to hand all expenses over to an architect is something of a gamble. Far be it from us to cast doubts on the competence of designers and architects, but the manager ought to decide upon his goal only after analysis of a certain quantity of information concerning the market. The manager is not a specialist in techniques of architectural expression, but he does have the skills to note consumer needs and expectations, and above all to give verbal definition to a certain content, and to a concept which responds to this content. Our goal is therefore to give both the architect and the manager a heuristic device for defining meaning. This is to allow them to engage in useful dialogue with a common objective: communicative and operative efficacy in their sales area.

1.1. Environment design

Environment design concerns the conception and arrangement of sales areas and has two goals:

- it is distinguishing principle which allows a business to establish a certain visual identity and which gives it an image different from the others. This is the discipline of communication;
- its expression concerns economic viability and operative efficacy, making sales activity easier by its functional characteristics. This is the discipline of organisation.

The goal in an environment design programme is to transform the "objective arrangement of space" into a "meaningful arrangement of space". There are two ends to this: communicative and organisational ends. As we shall see, a design strategy involves four successive levels of reflexion in its conception phase. (Figure 1).

1.2. Fashion

Fashion is one of the strategic linch-pins of businesses in the post-industrial age. In social activity, fashion represents the visible and noticeable part of human inconsistency; the need for novelty and change that individuals in modern-day western society feel. In this way, all businesses today offering products or services sooner or later make use of and are influenced by fashion phenomena. Fashion phenomena change people's perception of utility and accelerate the obsolescence of the offer by modifying the consumer's perceptual evaluation of the sign function. We end up with the double vicious circle shown in Figure 2.

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The business environment should refer to social changes, in order especially to anticipate how they will influence consumer behaviour (Lipovetsky, 1989). Social and consumer changes provide business opportunities but when it comes to individual case studies, some businesses respond better than others. In this way, the mechanism of adaptation to change helps generate differences between businesses: some are more competitive and successful than others. If we take the example of consumer infatuation with the Swatch "don't be too late" campaign of 1985-86, we observe how the brand thereby strongly differentiated itself from others and dominated the market. This success has given the brand a considerable competitive advantage that has been retained as the brand has experimented with successive market phenomena (the appearance of fluorescent watches on the market etc.). This was not the case with Kelton watches, which created a fashion phenomenon ten years earlier, but did not realise that it would be an ephemeral phenomenon and that they would have progressively to modify their offer. In reality things are a little more complicated than this, as there exists a retroactive relay and a veritable mini-system exists between the fashion/consumer change sub-system on one hand, and business competitiveness on the other. This is because businesses do not merely adapt to change, but are also the founders of change. Julien Charlier, for example, the managing director of the D.M.C. group showed us this phenomenon when he started the Brazilian bracelets fashion some years ago to ensure consumer sales of this thread production. Here again is the paradox of fashion as the founder of consumer behaviour and as the result of social changes, a paradox that companies like CHEVIGNON have amply exploited. [The CHEVIGNON brand was such a success in the french youth market at the end of the 1980s both because the concept concerns the judicious reenacting of the "American Style of Life" and of the connotative universe of the U.S. Air Force (this trend was revived and brought up to date) and because young people have a greater influence on buying their own clothes (reflecting recent changes in social behaviour).]

[FIGURE 1 \(/volumes/e01/01523f01.gif\)](#)

[\(/volumes/e01/01523f01.gif\)](#)

[THE TWO AXES OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN \(/volumes/e01/01523f01.gif\)](#)

[FIGURE 2 \(/volumes/e01/01523f02.gif\)](#)

1.3. Distribution

Environment design in the tertiary sector is seen as a constitutive part of the offer. To illustrate this we have chosen to examine a place where offer and demand come together: distribution. Distribution, the sales area par excellence faces a particularly intense strategic field of action in which the role of visual identity becomes a major differentiating device. This is why sales area design is important in this ever-developing sector. Changes in consumer behaviour demand a permanent need for creativity in the arrangement of space. All the environment's elements play key roles. Sales area design is a communicative and organisational device which helps businesses to attract consumers who are in search of all sorts of novelty. Moreover, the consumer's behaviour towards this environment generate certain purchasing behaviour patterns (Markin, 1976).

We shall be illustrating our conceptual developments by examples from the distribution sector, but our method of analysis may be seen to be applicable in all public sales area design projects.

2. MANAGING A SALES AREA DESIGN PROJECT

Our research concerns decision-taking. Managing an environment design project implies several steps, each involving specific questions. As Christian Navarre (1989) indicates, there are three stages in project management: conception, realisation and evaluation. Here we shall be dealing only with the first stage.

[FIGURE 3 \(/volumes/e01/01524f03.gif\)](#)

By "conception", we mean the stage of "verbal and textual" definition of a shop concept. This is the "ideological" part of the project, in which the question is to reflect on the bases of the whole service offer for a given business. We shall therefore be dealing with the various elements which make up the discourse and connotation of the sales area.

2.1. Semiotics as a device for analysing meaning

Semiotics is the study of meaning, integrating a system of potential signifying elements in a system of manifestation (Greimas, 1966). As a device for analysing meaning, semiotics is of considerable interest. The method offers a conceptual framework indicated below: on the one hand a system of logical, dynamic reflexions which serve to investigate the system of relations allowing signs to be meaningful (the generative process involved in meaning), and on the other hand, a successful device for analysis: the semiotic square.

In plastic semiotics the shop corresponds therefore to a world which exists by virtue of its own manifestations. The sales area creates meaning, the substance of which is inherent and the form of which finds expression through the spatial utterance (i.e. sales area design and arrangement). (Figure 3)

A shop we shall be studying functions like a sign, with a signifier and a signified. To describe this, it is necessary to analyse the phenomenon represented in Figure 4.

[FIGURE \(/volumes/e01/01524f99.gif\)](#)

There is no direct link between the expression and the contents. However, the consumer who enters a shop observes the universe of manifestation and relates expression and contents (the surface signs).

Important work has already been carried out, analysing elements of form for environment and fashion design [In environment design the collection of articles in "Semiotique et architecture" ("Semiotics and Architecture") and the more recent work by Jean-Marie FLOCH at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and at the Ecole Nationale d'Architecture de Versailles may be mentioned. These articles have inspired numerous other publications. In fashion, the work of Eric FOUQUIER and McCracken/Roth should be mentioned (cf. Bibliography)].

We shall, in this article, be speaking about an unchanging universal system: the semi-symbolic system (Cf. Floch, 1990, p. 88). The distinction between the levels of expression and content is invaluable since they cannot correspond exactly (each element of the expression may correspond to several elements of content and vice versa). We are then confronted with a dual articulation as shown in Figure 5.

The expression level is on the one hand the spatial structuration, the general structure and plastic qualities of the shop and on the other hand techniques, materials, colours, graphics, geometry.

The manifestation level is the furniture, floor covering, walls, paintwork, lighting, decor, product presentation and acoustics.

The content level is on the one hand the ideology, commercial image philosophy and its implications for consumer conceptions, and on the other the symbolic universes of the commercial image and the themes developed.

2.2. Aesthetics or alternance of opposites in environment design?

Questions concerning environment design generally revolve unproductively around the issue of beauty vs appeal. We would like to go beyond this purely subjective approach and examine how semiotics analyses aesthetics. It seems more relevant to us to put the beauty/ugliness dichotomy to one side and to tend towards a logic of overall consistency between the formulation of a concept and its practice.

Initial work by Wölfflin on art history provides a basis for the fundamental opposition between two aesthetics or vision : classical vs baroque. Jean-Marie Floch (1986) uses a frontal synthetic approach to represent the interdefinition of these two visions in the following manner (shown in Figure 6).

Later on, semiotic forms of the classical / baroque opposition are analysed with works on the two levels of expression and content. This may be represented syntagmatically as shown in Figure 7.

[FIGURE 4 \(/volumes/e01/01525f04.gif\)](#)

[\(/volumes/e01/01525f04.gif\)](#)

[THE SEMIOTIC SYSTEM OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN \(/volumes/e01/01525f04.gif\)](#)

[FIGURE 5 \(/volumes/e01/01525f05.gif\)](#)

[FIGURE 6 \(/volumes/e01/01525f06.gif\)](#)

2.3. Managerial implications of environment design

There exist three principal types of business expectation with regard to environment design: [Brigitte BORJA DE MOZOTA (1990) presents several different attitudes in her book and it is from these that we have elaborated the above divisions.]

- environment design is a media device to assert the identity of the business and its market orientation,
- it is a device for economic viability and personnel management
- it is a device for influencing consumer behaviour.

Each of these concerns will be present in varying degrees in a given organisation and they are all interrelated, so that the expectations of a given business may be represented according to its positioning on the following triangle:

[FIGURE \(/volumes/e01/01526f99.gif\)](#)

The barycentre (G) indicates a maximal point for all three types of expectation.

This stage, which serves to clarify the role of environment design in a given organisation precedes the stage involving the verbal and textual definition of a shop concept and is vital in determining the position of environment design in an coherent general strategy.

3. THE INTEGRATING APPROACH

Fashion carries with an important paradox: it is permanent but ephemeral . . . This conflictual relation between permanence and ephemerality can equally be defined by a negative operation, giving us the semiotic square below:

[FIGURE \(/volumes/e01/01526f98.gif\)](#)

This insertion of space into time obviously reminds us of the universal system continuous/discontinuous already described above. As elsewhere, fashion acts both on the expression level and on the content level. Our reflexion may therefore be based on the following table:

| | CLASSIC | | ALBAROQUE |
|------------|-----------|----|-----------|
| Expression | Ephemeral | vs | Permanent |
| Content | Permanent | vs | Ephemeral |

We therefore have not only to work on the concept but also on the expression. The manager should, then, together with the designer or the architect, define what, as regards the form, will be unchanging and what interchangeable. He should not stick stubbornly to the content. He ought to reflect with the designer on the expression (an example might be a manager who requires the same counter, but with interchangeable coloured panels according to the season . . .). The advantage of semiotics is not that it works only on existential values (Cf. 2.3) but that it renders reflexion on the expression level rather more sophisticated. The key questions are :

- what is to be retained ?
- what is to be changed ?, with, on this level, two categories: things which return periodically and things which will disappear definitively.

By way of illustration, we shall be using two examples of sales areas, specialised in clothing: PIMKIE and AGNES B. [The analyses of sales areas in PIMKIE and AGNES B. have been made possible thanks to our study trips in these shops and thanks to interviews with those concerned and with consumers.] and we shall be dealing more particularly with the influence design has on the consumer.

We have chosen these two very different businesses, firstly because we think that they are conceptually rather opposed and secondly they both display exemplary coherence. So their use of spatial arrangement seems particularly important to us to demonstrate the sort of work that can be achieved when management becomes involved in environment design.

Following our triangular approach, our two shops are situated as shown in Figure 7.

Once we have clarified the problem of environment design, the conception phase involves, in our analysis, four levels:

- analysis of image identity so as best to forward the market strategy
- link between the strategy and content
- link between the content level and the expression level
- manifestation level.

3.1. Market strategies

As we said in our conceptual framework, the manager must decide upon his goals for spatial arrangement and design with respect to the business' identity and to its strategic standpoint. We shall use the identity prism developed by Jean-Nodl Kapferer [We have chosen KAPFERER's analysis grid (1988) as it has often been used with regard to sales images, other grid methods would not, however, alter our argument.] as an analysis grid. (Figure 8)

This first level of analysis ought to allow an image to remain consistent.

3.2. Link between strategy and content

This second level aims at demonstrating the relations between a business' strategy and the spatial arrangement signified. It is a question of discovering on the one hand the content form, i.e. the consumer ideology put across, and on the other, the content substance, i.e. the themes developed. (Table 1).

[FIGURE 7 \(/volumes/e01/01527f07.gif\)](#)

3.3. Link between the content level and the expression level

Here we notice a dual logic well known in the creative world: the creator works with the form and the creative deals with substance (Kandinsky, 1910). (Tables 2 and 3)

These two tables show the link between the content level and the expression level, the third level of conception for a sales area design.

3.4. Manifestation level

This is the visibility apparent level, mistakenly assimilated to the definition of environment design. We have just seen that it is in fact a fourth level, the logical continuation of the first three levels. Here again we can see our heuristic device for analysing meaning in action. To round off our argument, the grid below shows the different elements of the manifestation level resulting on the one hand from the spatial structuring of the shop and on the other from the techniques involved. This relation between expression and manifestation cannot be expressed as a causal relation because it depends on the creative field, and therefore on a well-known irrationality. In other words, various elements in the manifestation may correspond to one single element of expression. But the validity and the coherence of an element of manifestation with the whole can only be brought out in relation with the themes developed. This can be represented as shown in Figure 9.

We are therefore witness to three relations of consecutive implications:

- the first between the business' identity and consumer ideology
- the second between the ideology and the themes developed
- the last between the themes and the expression level.

But there are also two simultaneous coherence relations:

- on one hand between the expression and the manifestation
- on the other between the manifestation and the themes developed.

So our work consists of analysing the manifestation and the themes. At this point in our analysis, we judge that a study of the PIMKIE image amply illustrates our argument. In this section, we have shown that it is necessary to work not only on the concept but also on the expression. (Table 4).

3.5. Operational synthesis

We have defined our heuristic device using these four successive levels which combine together in relations of implication and coherence. For memotechnical and didactic reasons, we shall call this the 4S method : Strategy, Signified, Signifier, Sign. Each of these terms thereby represents a level of analysis. In this piece of research, we have put the semiotic method of analysis into operation, allowing the manager and the interior designer to use interface methods. With this device, those concerned can reconcile sales area design and fashion phenomena.

We have seen that there are permanent and ephemeral aspects on the expression and content levels. As the manifestation level combines with the other two levels, it too contains permanent and ephemeral aspects. Integrating fashion phenomena into the conception process for a sales area therefore consists of reflecting on the ephemeral elements in the manifestation. Of course, for the manager, this reflexion will have to bear in mind financial considerations.

[FIGURE 8 \(/volumes/e01/01528f08.gif\)](#)

In order to satisfy the consumer's need for novelty, it will be better to work on low-cost ephemeral aspects. In order to remain consistent with the image identity and to keep a position which is clear and understandable for the consumer, it will be best to find what in fact is ephemeral in the expression and manifestation. This boils down to saying that the ideology and themes are to be defined by signs which are, to varying degrees, in fashion. In this way are brought out the low-cost ephemeral elements which are without consequence for the concepts and are consistent with the image identity. [A concept change comes from reflection on strategy and cannot take place with regard to fashion

phenomena in which the lack of rational motivation is legendary.]

[TABLE 1 \(/volumes/e01/01529t01.gif\)](#)

In conclusion, the themes will be expressed and manifested differently from year to year, as there exist perceptual changes in the consumer according to the fashion trends of the period. [Further evidence is supplied by Wollflin's work which shows how perceptions of what counts as "baroque" and what as "classical" have changed over the years.] If we return to our empirical example, in combination with the theme "intoxication" in PIMKIE's products, we find the expression of "aggressive colours" which may be manifested, according to the present fashion ("fluorescent aggressive colours") or otherwise ("shiny aggressive colours"). Similarly, in AGNES B's products, "sobriety" may be expressed by "basic colours" according to the present fashion (black) or not (yellow). [This remark is made with regard to the French consumer 1991-1992.] The "sobriety" theme in AGNES B's products finds expression in "basic" colours which are in fashion, while the same theme could be stated in a now out-of-fashion manner with "mystical" colours (violet).

CONCLUSION

The success of sales area arrangement, the goal of which is to respond as well as possible to the various influences the image must reckon with, requires the synthesis and control of numerous different parameters. In this piece of research on the conception of sales area design, our concern has been to study the impression the shop aims to leave the consumer with. However, the level of practical constraints cannot be eliminated from the conception phase (the number of products the shop has to hold per square metre, peak-time management, safety rules, etc. . .).

This study allows us to reduce the differences of vision between managers and designers, as their systems of representation and consumer building are too often not the same. Use of the device described above will help them to communicate and to understand each other by using the same language. Our implicit wish is that this will help make the work of those concerned more effective and more successful.

[TABLE 2 \(/volumes/e01/01530t02.gif\)](#)

[TABLE 3 \(/volumes/e01/01531t03.gif\)](#)

[FIGURE 9 \(/volumes/e01/01531f09.gif\)](#)

[TABLE 4 \(/volumes/e01/01532t04.gif\)](#)

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