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MUSEUM ATMOSPHERICS: A MARKETING AND AN INTERPRETIVE TOOL

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Abstract

In the competitive leisure marketplace, in which museums play a key role, architecture can add value to their experience and contribute to their ‘differential advantage’. Increasingly museum buildings are being addressed in the marketing literature not only as influencing the positive image of visitors and their intention to revisit, but also as affecting their experience of the museum display. This paper aims to further this idea and explore how the building’s physical and spatial form can add new dimensions to the meaning-making of the museum. Literature from different fields is brought together in the first part of the paper and the key concepts of *museum atmospherics* and the related model of *servicescape* are discussed as the theoretical background for this exploration. The paper takes as case studies two European museums which present aspects of the city’s history and share in common the character of their buildings as landmarks, their innovative spatial design, and the sensory qualities of their architecture. It shows how in both cases the museum’s powerful narrative is not in the discursive dimension of the experience of the exhibits, but in the holistic experience of the spatial setting, which visitors are invited to explore, with affective as well as cognitive outcomes. Through the analysis, the paper brings to the surface common paired themes between consumption and museum settings, such as *atmosphere* and *tangible product*, spatial layout and functioning, physical environment and distinctiveness, rational and embodied.

Keywords: museum architecture; marketing; *atmospherics*; *servicescape*; spatial layout

JEL Classification: M39

Introduction

In the competitive leisure marketplace, in which museums play a key role, architecture can add value to their experience and contribute to their ‘differential advantage’. Increasingly museum buildings are being addressed in the marketing literature not only as influencing the positive image of visitors and their intention to revisit, but also as affecting their experience of the museum display. This paper aims to further this idea and explore how the building’s physical and spatial form can add new dimensions to the meaning-making of the museum. Literature from different fields is brought together in the first part of the paper and the key concepts of *museum atmospherics* and the related model of *servicescape* are discussed as the theoretical background for this exploration. The paper takes as case studies two European museums which show how the museum’s powerful narrative is not in the discursive dimension of the experience of the exhibits, but in the holistic experience of the spatial setting, which visitors are invited to explore, with affective as well as cognitive outcomes. Through the analysis, the paper brings to the surface common paired themes between consumption and museum settings.

***Atmospherics* as a marketing tool**

In the context of the ‘experience economy’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999), and in the globalized environment where ‘museums have to compete for audiences, support, and resources’ (Kotler *et al.* 2008, xxiii), architecture is seen, in

marketing terms, as part of the museum's *tangible product* (Kotler *et al.* 2008: 28–29) and an added value to the experience it offers (Kotler *et al.* 2008: 311). By enhancing the 'offer' in this sense, it can contribute to greater visitor satisfaction and create a competitive advantage, thus leading to increased attendance and so economic benefits. It is commonly argued that buildings designed by major architects have become landmarks of cities, and 'turned museums to destinations' (Kotler *et al.* 2008: 311). But it is also thought that contemporary museum design has contributed to changing positively the perception of the museum by the public and building diverse audiences (Kotler *et al.* 2008: 463–4; Sweet 2011: 228).

Interestingly, from an architectural point of view, it is recognized that these effects derive not only from the exterior form of the building but also from its interior design (Kotler *et al.* 2008: 317; also Bradburne 2001; Sweet 2011). For example, the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan (2004), is discussed as a model in increasing tourism and contributing to the urban renewal by relating its innovative architectural and spatial design with the museum's mission, programmes and community (Kotler *et al.* 2008: 317–21). The building, designed by SANAA (Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, 2004), has a circular form which eliminates the distinction between the main façade and the other sides, allowing approach equally from any direction. In addition, its transparency and its low volume emphasize the accessibility of the museum and its close relation to the city. In the interior, galleries and spaces that serve a variety of programmes, have been designed as if a downtown area, so as to allow for flexibility in their arrangement, actively discourage a predetermined route, and enhance visitors' awareness of each other.

Likewise, the extension of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, has been seen

as a response to declining attendance and reduced funding (Turi and Brunet 2009). The new building (known as ‘Crystal’), designed by Daniel Libeskind (2007), with its ‘iconic architectural design’ and its ‘innovative use of space’, has contributed to physically engaging the audience, and reinventing the museum experience that, as visitor surveys have shown, have been thought to be ‘outdated’ and characterized by ‘an inadequate visitor-orientation system’. As Libeskind notes, ‘the well-tested presentations of Nature and Culture [the museum collections] are not only updated through interactive technology but are visualized within the true magic and power of physically built space’ (2002, cited in Turi and Brunet 2009: 80).

The ‘ability of the physical environment to influence behaviour and create an image’ is also discussed, in marketing literature, in relation to the concepts of *servicescape* (service environments) and *atmospherics* – two terms sometimes used interchangeably (Forrest 2013: 205). The concept of *servicescape*, first used in service settings and then extended to leisure services, describes the totality of the environment in which a transaction takes place, exclusive of the product (Doering 1999: 93). But there are differences in the dimensions of *servicescapes* that are taken into account by various marketing researchers. In Bitner’s fundamental model (1992), ambient conditions (e.g. noise), space and functionality (e.g. layout) and signs, symbols and artifacts (e.g. decor) are the environmental aspects that constitute the *servicescape*. Strokes (1995) emphasizes the ‘setting’, that is the layout and the ability of visitors to find their way around. Turley and Milliman (2000) add to the environmental variables the human variables such as customer’s characteristics.

To draw attention to the role of the *place* in consumption settings, the *atmosphere of the place* and *spatial aesthetics*, which can be in some cases

more influential than the *tangible object* or service itself, Kotler (1973) coined the term *atmospherics*. As he argues, the term describes ‘the conscious planning of atmospheres’ with the intention to produce specific emotional effects, as opposed to the atmosphere ‘developed casually or organically’ (1973: 50, 64). *Atmospherics* can be seen, he notes, as a ‘“silent language” in communication’ (1973: 48) and be described in sensory terms (visual, aural, olfactory and tactile). For Kotler, architecture and interior design contribute to the atmosphere realization – the *atmospherics* of the exterior structure of the building and the *atmospherics* of its interior space respectively.

Atmospherics as an interpretative tool

What is more striking is that in museum marketing literature we also find the idea that the architecture and the atmosphere of the museum can play a role in its key functions of display and interpretation. Kotler *et al.* (2008: 293) argue that the design and architecture of the building are among ‘the presentational forms and media’ of the museum, one of the ways ‘visitors encounter information’. Biehl-Missal and vom Lehn (2015) introduce the idea of ‘challenging atmospheres’ in museums. They argue that, unlike marketing environments, museums can also create ‘different, not positive atmospheres’ so as to achieve an experience of history. For all the above authors, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C., is used as an example to illustrate their arguments. Biehl-Missal and vom Lehn (2015: 247–9) also instance the ‘voids’ that run vertically through the Jewish Museum, Berlin (see below) as a case where architecture is perceived through ‘the synaesthetic character of the museum space’ (e.g. absence of warm light or sound, chilly air, walls of bare concrete).

In this paper we take this argument about the way museum *atmosphere* can affect visitors one step further and show the key role that the spatial layout can play in adapting the *servicescape* to create distinct and meaningful *atmospheres*, so that the powerful narrative for the visitor is at the level of the spatial setting or the museum as a whole. From this perspective we will analyze the Jewish Museum, Berlin, and the Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), Antwerp, two museums that share in common their intention to ‘display’ aspects of the city’s history and relate it to the present (see also Tzortzi 2016).

The Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) is a newly built museum (2011) in the port area of Antwerp, and part of a major urban renewal project. It is characterized by innovation both in terms of its architectural and its museological concept. The building, designed by Neutelings Riedijk Architects, has a tower-form like containers stacked on top of each other. It is thus conceptually integrated into its context (an old warehouse area) while making a symbolic reference to the past, as, according to the architect W.J. Neutelings, the tower-form aims ‘to make the weight of history physically visible’. The museum was created with the intention to show a synthetic account of Antwerp’s history by bringing together collections from three former museums (Ethnographic, Folk, Maritime) and an art collection, and organize them through universal themes such as ‘Metropolis’ and ‘World Port’.

The spatial layout of the museum distinguishes spaces of circulation and display spaces. The former shape a continuous route, known as the MAS boulevard, from the entrance to the top, the tenth floor, of the building, characterized by complete transparency and openness to the city. As each floor is rotated by ‘a quarter turn’, visitors are offered impressive and constantly changing views overlooking the living city, the port and the river. In contrast,

display spaces are designed as ‘black boxes’, as enclosed areas linked to the boulevard on each floor, but disconnected from each other. Each display space offers a different experience of an intense theatricality, based on the scenography of B-Architects. The top floor constitutes the exception: devoid of a display space, it is entirely devoted to a panoramic view of the whole city. The highest point of the route, and the space most remote from the entrance, makes the ‘city’ the exhibit of the museum.

It could then be argued that, through its spatial layout, the MAS complements and alternates the display narrative, the stories of objects about the city, with the powerful visual experience of the living city itself, linking the experience of the past with that of the present. Moreover, visitors’ movement in museum space acquires an additional meaning in relation to the urban context. The museum route designed to represent a vertical ‘exploration’ of the city through movement is found to work in this way: visitors studies suggest that people use the space as a continuation of external public space for events or walks, so that in 2011 ‘40% of visitors go through the boulevard and up to the panoramic rooftop’ (De Caro 2012: 126).

The Jewish Museum, the extension to the Berlin Museum by Daniel Libeskind, is known as being the museum that, as seen by some, better communicated its social meaning when it opened in 1999 without its collection, which was displayed three years later. This argument about the meaning of building rests on its symbolic layers – its location, its exterior form, its relation to the main building, and its ‘voids’ (mentioned above) – but perhaps it is most clearly expressed in the spatial design of its lower, underground level. It is organized around three intersecting axes: the longest, the ‘Axis of Continuity’, which represents the continuation of Berlin’s history, and leads to the two exhibition

upper floors; and the 'Axis of the Holocaust' and the 'Axis of Exile' at the end of which are located two dead-end spaces. To the symbolic meaning of the axes, the 'routes' in the history of the Jewish Berliners, is added the highly distinctive spatial experience created by each of these spaces which becomes the expression of events which took place over years: the enclosed garden, the 'E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden' or 'Garden of Exile', with forty-nine tall concrete columns on uneven ground, creating the sense of instability and lack of orientation in exile; and, the 'Holocaust Tower', a tall empty 'silo', with different acoustical conditions and light coming from a small slit in its roof (a symbol of hope, according to the architect). They both illustrate what has been described as the 'emotional narrative' (Storrie 2006: 171) of the architecture.

As in the MAS, the powerful experience is in these two spaces, which are most remote from the entrance. These two structures externally are physically independent of the main body of the building, and in the interior, though linked spatially through the underground axes, they are accessed through heavy doors. As in MAS as well, bodily movement through space is augmented by an intense local experience: movement is highly localized in the 'Garden of Exile', and the experience is about stillness in the 'Holocaust Tower'. But, more significantly, instead of offering open views to the city like MAS, the Jewish Museum proposes links to the city which are invisible, and symbolic. As Libeskind explains, the underground axes link the upper city of Berlin to 'the hidden, lower city of the museum', while the 'Holocaust Tower' and the 'Garden of Exile' may be seen to belong to both levels (Hansen-Glucklich 2014: 34). So here the architecture of the museum constructs a space which renders visible the 'invisible' and acts as a 'substitute' for the experience of the city. Moreover, by creating immersive experiences in darkened and enclosed spaces, it makes the past felt as now, and invites visitors to sense the silence

and ‘inexistence’ of what has been lost to the present.

Linking marketing concepts and museological ideas about space

What is clear from this discussion is that the spatial analysis of the museums brings to the surface common preoccupations with the marketing literature, and allows the identification of parallels between museum and consumption settings. Underlying both cases is the idea that museum architecture does not simply provide a physical context for the objects, but organizes meaningful experiences that complement the conceptual narrative of the display. This can be paralleled to the idea that consumers in their purchase decision-making do not respond only to the *tangible product*, but to the *total product*, including one of its most significant features, the *atmosphere* of the place where it is consumed (Kotler 1973: 48). In museums bodily experience of the physical setting shapes meaning-making beyond the explicit messages expressed in the formal communication of information, and can create affective engagement that complements cognitive learning. Likewise, from a marketing perspective, the environment is seen as a form of non-verbal communication imparting meaning, influencing cognition, as well as eliciting affective responses (Bitner 1992: 62–3). Common to both settings is, finally, the importance of the layout as a key variable in the museum *serviscape* and of the physical environment in creating *differential advantage* (Kotler 1973: 64).

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