

CATHEDRALS OF CONSUMERISM

EXPERIENCING CORPORATE INTERIORS AND BRANDS

by SYLVIA LEYDECKER

A space is exciting as an experience of all the senses: visual, acoustic, haptic and other impressions combine to create a multi-sensory, holistic experience. It is an experience that is perceived consciously, but experienced subconsciously. If spatial experiences are not to be left to chance, as so often happens, they need to be designed purposefully. Today Interior Designers in a wide range of different fields and branches target the senses, filtering the information to be communicated, and turning spaces into communicative elements that build bridges between the sender and the recipient.

The term spatial experience conjures up images of spectacular productions in spaces of the kind created for world expos, in which the visitor is catapulted from one surprise to the next, each space a veritable firework of spatial experiences for entertaining the visitor. The experience of space takes on the character of an event, carefully orchestrated to impress and enthrall the visitor at every step. In addition to the visual impression of the colours and materials, elaborate film, sound and light installations are employed to reinforce a desired effect.

Innovative interactions, for example illuminated surfaces that respond to movement through the use of sensor-controlled walls of OLEDs, create an atmosphere that transports the visitor into another world. Other worlds are also being created using virtual reality, which adds a whole new dimension to spatial experience that enriches the real environment. Users are no longer in the here and now but experience something completely

new in an artificially created parallel world. Despite their technical sophistication, these are as yet no match for the "real" experience. There is a perceptible shift towards interaction using IT-based approaches that capitalise on the fact that people are social beings for whom interaction is a vital part of life. In short, whether primitive or high-tech, the aspect of interaction is an inseparable element of communicative spaces. Interaction therefore forms the basis for experiencing space.

Economic interest

The aspect of spatial experience of most interest to companies from an economic perspective is the potential they offer for branding.¹ They can enrich the design of corporate interiors in such a way that the brand identity is experienced in three dimensions. The more compelling the experience, the stronger the impression of corporate identity. With sensitivity and the necessary know-how it is possible to successfully invest spaces with a character that is appropriate to the company and that matches the company's brand values and corporate identity (CI). The better it appeals to our senses, the more it activates the multi-sensory potential in each of us. The initial impetus for creating such spaces is derived from the profit-oriented motives of the corporate marketing department.

Corporate spatial experiences are usually those that are in the public eye, and it is these spaces that are the focus of corporate design and corporate interiors. They



Experiencing Outdoor - an indoor recreation bistro-area for staff



communicate a desired image and serve as a powerful marketing tool for transporting brand identity. As such they are ideal for showrooms, for reception spaces and conference rooms within offices that serve a hospitality function for visitors to the company.

Whether a simple boutique, an exclusive showroom or a prominent flagship store, the creation of a shopping experience has long been an effective means of increasing sales and of turning casual shoppers into loyal customers. Glamorous flagship stores, such as those of Prada in New York or Hermès in Paris, are designed as centres of attention and in turn become meccas for entire communities of fashion-conscious shoppers. Showrooms, such as those of Apple, are temples of brand culture, embodying the brand values and establishing a sense of brand attachment. Shopping malls likewise go to great lengths to create extraordinary shopping experiences, enticing consumers with all manner of entertainment offerings so that visits to these cathedrals of product consumerism become recreational outings to be undertaken again and again. All these are examples of customer retention at its best.

Lifestyle and branding

The lifestyle associated with a brand likewise plays an ever greater role, which explains the spread of brands

across multiple segments from fashion to products and living accessories to music and modes of movement and transport. The brand environment becomes an overarching identity, and with it the associated spaces which make use of myriad facets and tools to achieve their effect.

While e-commerce is without doubt flourishing, what it lacks, despite the attractions of virtual reality, are spatial experiences: e-shops are therefore used in tandem with real shops that bring the shopping experience to the real world and onto an authentic level.

Trade fair stands are a further showplace of extroverted spatial experiences. In some branches, not only the stands of individual companies but also the spaces of the trade fair center are transformed into spatial experiences to heighten the attraction of the trade fair.

Companies have also begun to recognize the value of communicating the history and/or innovative character of their brand as an educational experience, as Coca Cola and Ferrari have demonstrated to great effect with their exclusive company museums. They serve not only the job of communicating the history of a company and of cementing the tradition of its brand, but also turn it into an enjoyable first-hand experience for visitors. Ever more companies are following in the footsteps of these early trendsetters, eager to relate their own company

history and not least to anchor their brand in the minds of the consumers. They take visitors on an imaginary journey through time, accompanying the brand as it evolved, all the time establishing a rapport between brand and visitor.

Workplaces as experiences

Very often corporate identity and brand are directed predominantly outwards, in stark contrast to how it is experienced from within the company. Great attention is devoted to getting the all-important first impression right – usually the reception space – while the rest of the premises is often neglected. As a strategy, this is flawed: brand values are equally important for staff, and their needs are in turn vitally important for the company's success. A company's "human resources" are one of its most valuable assets, and staff motivation increases when they identify with their company. As a shortage of skilled workers begins to set in, it will become ever more important to first attract and then retain skilled staff. The spatial experience of the workplace is a strategic factor in this objective that should not be neglected, particularly in those locations with large numbers of offices and admin centres.

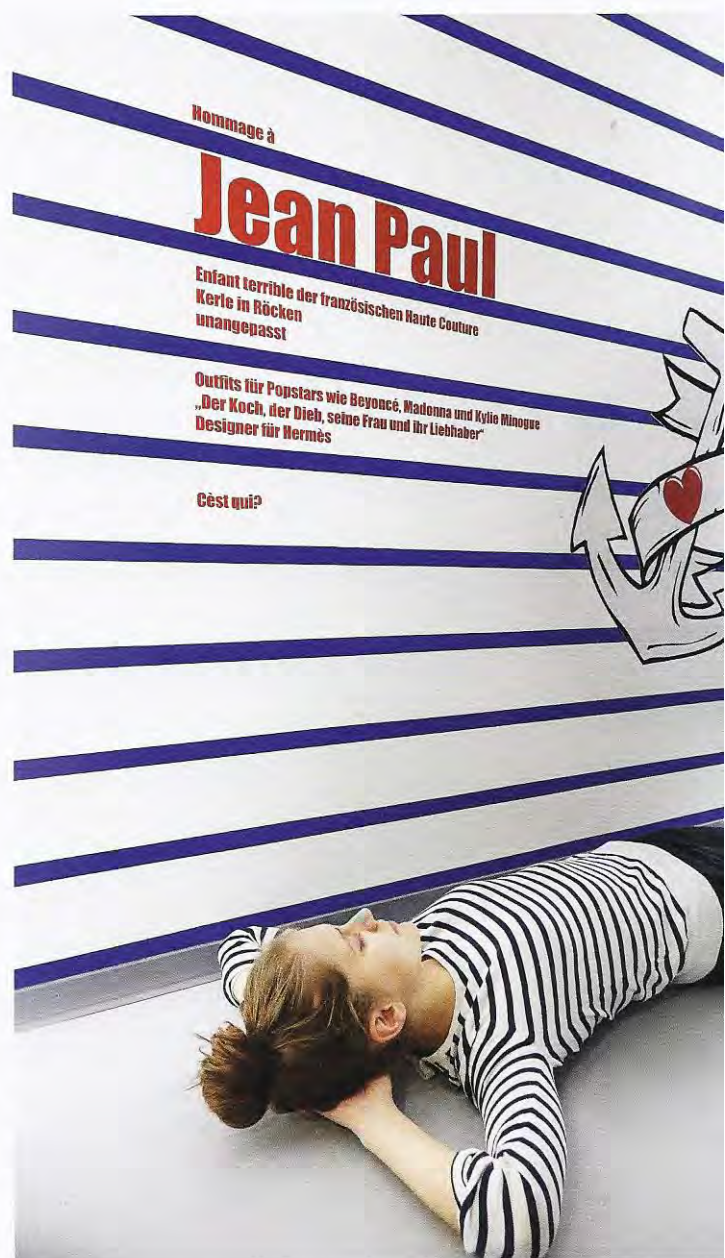
People experience their employers through the spaces they are given to work in, because they reflect the attitude of the company toward them. What is important is how valued they feel, and how they experience the work they do. The space in which work is undertaken determines if it is perceived of as pleasant, process-oriented and efficient or laborious and uninspiring. Modern companies recognise the value of creating pleasant office environments that also incorporate spaces for relaxation and interaction. This ranges from the ubiquitous table-football table, comfortable lounge areas, and trendy staff canteen with outdoor terrace to conference areas with different degrees of formality and informality for varying moods and occasions.

Calm and focused spaces, often in the form of office cells, may be most appropriate for concentrated work but calm and focused does not necessarily equate to dull and uninspiring. To maximise the potential of their staff, companies should be willing to invest in pleasant work environments coupled with corresponding spatial experiences.

Remarkably, it is the tech firms on America's West Coast – Google, Facebook – that are at the forefront of a new interior trend that highlights the office environments of its workers. These large open spaces seem, at first glance, more like adventure playgrounds for leisure and recreation than workplaces, with as much focus on the fun factor as on work. But they are also expressions of the value the companies place in their staff, who were consulted for their ideas, all of which help to increase staff loyalty and work motivation. While at the end of the day this alone probably justifies the decision, the as-

sociated publicity also reinforces the reputation of the company as a responsible and concerned employer.

As the images of these office interiors circulate around the world, they contribute as part of a marketing mix to the image of the company as a forward-looking employer. This is aimed not just at the company's own staff but also at potential future employees as well as other users who value this kind of social commitment. The potential effect of this image transfer is not to be underestimated. It is less surprising, however, that the spatial environments within the tech-community are similar in design. One reason could be that the needs voiced by the staff in the various companies are essen-





tially of a similar nature, leading to a similar end result. In terms of creating a unique brand identity, however, this is far from ideal. The spatial experience of such corporate interiors should also reflect the specific brand identity of the company, rather than that of a generic tech company, where one cannot tell if it is an industry giant or small start-up.

Whether it is the “hey, we’re cool and creative” interior of “Google’s playground” or another atmospheric variant that is perhaps more conservative, more elegant, more discreet or more homely, what they all share is the wish to create spaces in which the people who use them can feel comfortable. The “playground”, for example, conjures up images of children who need little more than their fertile fantasy to turn more or less anything into an incredible adventure. The elderly have a similar capacity for fantasy: in geriatric care, biographic therapy has been used successfully to help people with dementia recall their own personal history and biography. Images of famous people – Elvis Presley, Elizabeth Taylor and others – or objects, smells and activities are used to evoke particular memories. They help recall past experiences, which help people to live happily in the present with the help of the past.

Motivating brain scripts

Spaces can be used to motivate particular brain scripts, by using a certain sound, smell or a combination thereof, to awaken associations with roots in subjective human experience. Sometimes a particular sound or smell sets off a film in the mind’s eye. Neuropsychological marketing is aimed specifically at this aspect. The effectiveness of this method has been proven by conducting MRT (magnetic resonance tomography) scans on test subjects, in place of the conventional user survey. By measuring brain activity with the help of MRTs, scientists can ascertain the precise reactions of these subjects. Brain research into the reasons why these reactions occur is already underway but at present is still in the early stages of what promises to be an exciting investigation.

Through the collection, analysis and linking of ever increasing amounts of data, we are gaining an ever better picture of how we respond and behave. One’s personal behaviour is analysed and predicted, sometimes even before one knows what one will do next. Manipulative and controlling mechanisms hook into our behaviour patterns and attempt to steer them. The more we commit our lives and experiences to the digital realm, the more we contribute to this mechanism, benefitting companies by helping them place their advertising with ever greater accuracy. The over analysis of every aspect of everyday life allows reason and rationale to dominate how we live our lives, reducing the room for fun, chaos, and simply fooling around. Authentic feelings and normality run the risk of falling by the wayside in an ever-present pressure to achieve perfection in which normal,



authentic situations are perceived of as being imperfect or somehow sub-standard.

Stimulation and enjoyment

In the context of a gradual shift away from the need for ownership to a willingness for collective sharing, experience begins to acquire a different quality and meaning. Instead of purchasing products, society purchases experiences. This has implications for spaces, which perse are inseparably intertwined with living and quality of life. An experience is coupled with time, and which of those is more valuable? In a world of faster-higher-better-further, do things always have to be spectacular? Can they not be measured and discrete? And can that not make an impression for precisely that reason? Can they stimulate our senses gently, can they emanate, leave room for thought, for emotional connection with

the place? Balance is needed, not only in the right places but also at the right time.

For branding and corporate interiors, companies wishing to make a lasting consumer impression are beginning to turn to experience marketing, in which the right experience is provided at the right time. Brands and their worlds, brand environments and their lifestyle just need to match. So, by all means let us dive into a world of spatial experiences, but let us also withdraw from time to time into the contemplative atmosphere of a pleasantly designed, peaceful environment. A place where we can simply enjoy.

ENDNOTES

1 Leydecker, Sylvia. *Corporate Interiors*, Avedition, Stuttgart, 2014, p.272.