

CONSUMER'S CATHEDRALS

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The development of “The Consumer’s Cities” has transformed the human geography, the consuming habits and the citizens’ way of life. Everywhere on the planet it is possible to find, with the same architecture and space distribution, superstores and malls dedicated to shopping and leisure. This is the most evident representation of the “globalization trading”. Because of this, they are considered as “cathedrals” of the new “consumer’s religion” that is spreading over the world.

Some transformations in the consumer society could pass unnoticed to the same people who have lived them. But there is a matter that anybody may have not left unseen because of its fast and extensive development: the gradual disappearance of the traditional shop and the birth of the new stores. If the self-service was the first step of the shopping and trade delivery evolution, the growing of the “shopping and leisure cities” has been, with the e-commerce generalization, the last step of this process.

The first hypermarket was started out in Spain in 1973 and in 1980 the introduction of the malls that joined in the same place, with common facilities like parking, surveillance, walking area, etc, an extensive offer which includes superstores, all kinds of shops, cinemas, bank offices, restaurants, etc. From then its expansion has been (and it is still so) spectacular and it has spread over the world changing the human geography, the consuming habits and the citizens’ way of life.

Consuming as a leisure activity. A new philosophy of life: buying on its own purpose.

The development of these shopping malls is a result of a deep transformation of the shopping meaning. Classic economists thought that people had necessities to satisfy (food, clothing, health, and so on) and limited economic resources. Because of this they had to find the best buying decisions in order to get the necessary items with the smallest possible cost.

But the commercial and advertising strategies have changed the present consumers’ feelings and values whose behaviours seem now very scarcely rational. They may drive kilometres to the hypermarket in order to save some cents (without bearing in mind the money and the time that they spend on their journey) and they finish up with a full trolley of superfluous products bought to take advantage of “astonishing offers” to get goods that they had never thought of buying and they do not need.

Merchants know that, every time more frequently, necessities do not lead to shopping, but shopping is a purpose itself. Consumers need shopping although they do not need the products that they buy. In a other case, in developed countries where people have their necessities more satisfied every day, there would be a moment in wich their purchases would decrease. But reality shows that, when this is suppose to happen, consumers continuously

search or assume the “new necessities” which consumer society offer them and go on shopping even more every day.

Basis of commercial strategies to incite shopping: Tricks at stores centres.

The traditional trade, in which customers go into a shop knowing what they need and looking for it, is not useful to these “new consumers”. Consumers access in the present-day stores without a clear idea about what they want to buy, even without wanting to buy anything. The wish for buying and the decision of taking it ahead is going to arise inside the shop.

Because of this the store is not now a closed space where someone asks you, behind a counter: what would you like?. This question would move consumers away because they come inside the shop looking for a product that arises their wish for shopping. The stores have turned into a place for walking and spending time that are connected to create artificial but cosy streets and squares, as half-street/shop where you can walk among benches and artificial plants and trees. In these “streets” you will find small and medium shops, big stores, hypermarkets, cinemas, restaurants, discothèques and places for leisure as well. The idea is very simple: the more time people spend in these centres and they go through more space around, the more products they will see, the more temptation they will receive and, therefore, the more they will buy.

It is necessary to note that the feeling of buying with freedom that the present stores provide, hides possibilities of manipulating and managing consumers’ behaviour as never before have existed. By means of careful spaces, elements and product distributions, and also by the preparation of the setting, consumers are led to shopping and these purchases are directed towards definite items. These are the “tricks at stores centres”. We are going to point out some of the most frequent ones at the big stores:

- Traders keep in mind even the smallest details in their shops: colour, lighting and even the background music. In this way they try to attract consumers and make them feel in a pleasant and appropriate to purchase atmosphere. The lack of external space or time references (there are not usually visible clocks or windows) contributes to this purpose too. And besides the simple fact of being surrounded by people who are shopping causes most of consumers an intense effect of imitation and collective spread.
- The essential goods which are more frequently sold (like bread, milk, oil, and so on) are located in places far away each other in order to make consumers go round long distances in the store.
- Merchants try to get consumers to take the flow of attendance as spacious as possible to make them go through the maximum number of departments and receive the biggest shopping temptations. Hence some “baits” or the most requested products are placed at the end of the premises and *the* access and exit in the big stores are situated far away each from the other.

- Products that traders want to sell are placed on intermediate shelves at the height of the eyes to lure consumers' attention. The goods set on the higher or lower shelves are hardly seen.
- Traders also place the product that they prefer to sell near others more expensive so as to make them seem cheaper or on a middle position, between others extremely expensive or cheap.
- The stores are distributed into rather narrow and long aisles without turning where is very difficult to turn round with the trolley – often very big to stimulate shopping-. When a consumer goes along the aisle with the trolley, it is necessary to go up to the end without being able to go back or to divert.
- The endings of the rows are very preferential places, because consumers have to slow down in order to turn the corner and mind the product around. That is why most of the offers are set in these places.
- Attractive posters or notices with information about prices and characteristics of some product are placed in big and flashing fonts. Consumers fall simply attracted by the view of these notices, even though they do not know whether it is a good or a bad purchase.
- Whimsical goods are placed near the tills because easily when consumers have finished their planned purchases and while they are queuing to pay- they buy, in an impulsive way, this kind of products.

The effectivity of all these kinds of techniques is widely proved. As a statement of their success it is possible to point out, for instance, as it follows:

- Between 40% and 70% of decisions on purchase are made in the shops themselves and lots of them refer to those items that consumer had not planned to buy before entering the premises.
- 95% of consumers who come into a mall without any clear idea of what to buy or just come to have a look end up making some acquisition.

Spend one's life shopping. Psychological and social effects of the new commercial systems and trade centres.

Times before shops used to be set up in the streets of the cities, nowadays those shops have shaped their own streets: the malls have turned into cities and have originated a new world focused on consumerism. They are fake cities but they actually pretend to be real where it is easy to park, one feels safe and it is all considered to seem welcoming and attractive so as to ease the shopping. The danger of letting oneself be dagged by this seduction is obvious, mainly in the case of children and youngsters, since they choose these premises as the places where the more of their leisure can be spent. Without stepping on the street, complete families move form the garage at home to the one in the mall. And once there ramble, look at shopwindows, buy, go to movies, or eat at a restaurant, so that, without leaving this indoor space, they spend the whole morning and evening.

It seems that citizens have forgotten they have been shaped up in the quest for everything that might make them more attractive and profitable from a commercial point of view, that is, more pushing to the purchase.

It is true the big attraction of the malls is explained, in big deal, by the negative aspects of the big cities, where often the only near and easily accessible places are these big premises that are open long hours, where entrance is possible without appointment and where one can park easily.

Current cities are more and more non-human and less liable to the contact with others. Meeting friends or relatives turns to be much harder and uncomfortable than going to the nearest mall.

However, consumers are not conscious about the effects that spending a big portion of their lives in these indoor cities, created by the trade, bring about. Staying long hours surrounded by shopwindows, shops and commercial lures has a deep repercussion on anyone.

Consciously or unconsciously one ends up assuming a consumist vision on life, in which happiness and social success depend on what somebody buys and whereby it is impossible to enjoy without spending money.

By generalising the use of these huge commercial centres as leisure spots, the range of non-consumist aims of the people and the society close up. A lot of consumers say that they visit these malls because everything can be found there. Obviously this is not true. Every single metre in there is meant considering their economic profit, and therefore everything which does not bring, directly or indirectly, the benefit above, is left apart. For instance it will be hard to find in them art exhibitions, libraries, conference halls or social meeting points where consuming is not a must.

Another dull consequence of the former is that the streets in the cities have lost their traditional relevance as meeting and staying places, and citizens use them, a lot of time by car, only as commuting areas between dwelling and shopping centres. Enclosed in these fake cities shaped by trade, they turn against the non-consumist leisure and cultural offers that their cities might bring and they keep apart the possibility of a more human urban development in which life and contact with the others take place in outdoor and public spaces.

It has not been considered enough what the triumph of these indoor cities based on trade implies. Although the feeling of loneliness and the lack of boosters of the modern urbanite finds relief there, they drag them towards a materialistic and non-satisfactory lifestyle. The actual progress should lead to a less superficial and more fulfilling and sustainable human development.