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Redefining identity in shopping environments –3rd year interior design studio

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Abstract

With the rapid increase of large scale shopping developments in Eastern European Countries , retail design has become a major issue in the professional practice . Imported models and international branding are bringing upon a global and uniform imagery in commercial design . Students in the 3rd year of study at the Faculty of Architecture , department of Furniture and Interior Design have been appointed to analyze existing commercial spaces ,abstract their findings and come up with novel understanding through the design process . A special emphasis has been put on translating the concept of shopping as a memorable experience into spatial coordinates. The exercise has been carried out on the two major types of shop units : internalized mall and high street. Although the developed projects were highly realistic and followed up the professional practice phases (from preliminary to detail design) , the academic environment insured freedom in creating valid innovative models. The final result is not an purpose in itself, but a means for providing the student with a deeper understanding of spatial design that he will be able to apply later on into practice.

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1. Introduction

Retail industry is a strong component of our society and a major driving force of the capitalist economy. While we are living in an age that is now defined by the paradigm “hyperconsumption society” , patterns and types of

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shopping are in a continual process of change that imply further mutations onto the spaces that host them. Economic studies reveal that “The consumer of the hyperconsumption society is more and more informed, his tastes change rapidly and they are profoundly individualized, thus the firms must make important efforts to keep up with his needs and desires, both through complex investigations and through a rapid process of innovation and renewing of the products, by increasing their variety.” (Popescu, Popescu & Stroe, 2010). Considering the inherent link between store environment and the shopping activity, a major challenge regarding retail design is to tailor space according to these shifting ways of consumption.

Along with the rise of competition between retailers selling similar merchandise, the stores and their atmosphere have become instruments in defining brand identity. Interior architects have to appropriate in their projects a distinctive image that is strongly related both to the products in display as to the targeted customers, in order to provide a unique and memorable experience of the purchase. As pointed out by Floor (2007) “retailing today is not only about products, but also about experiences, recreation and having a good time”, the store thus becoming a “stage” for “telling stories and providing excitement”. Store design is among the key factors that concur to define the customer experiences: “A good-looking store counts for as much as a good range.” (Floor, 2007)

Whereas the literature is mainly concerned with economic and sociological issues, few studies research how these features should actually translate into interior architecture and built environment. The aim of the exercise carried out at the Faculty of Architecture, department of Furniture and Interior Design, with the students in the third year was to raise awareness upon the complex issues involved in retail design while creating innovative spatial models that respond to them.

2. Theoretical issues :

2.1. Context :

Romania, as former communist country, has been experiencing considerable changes over the last 25 years as a direct consequence of adopting capitalist logic and the free market. Retail industry has been thriving and it is still considered ascendant, as gross leasable area (G.L.A.) values per capita indicate a strong lag behind developed European countries. In these conditions and doubled by an expectancy of a growth in terms of gross domestic product values, financial research predict that “Romania’s modern retail space is likely to further expand hand in hand with the recovery from the global economic and financial situation”. (Pricewaterhouse Coopers and Sonae Sierra, 2012). The first large scale shopping mall was built in 1999 in Bucharest and since then the number have increased rapidly, the new investments reaching an estimated G.L.A. of 3 million sqm in 2011 according to the same PwC report.

Our previous research on dynamics in shopping mall design shows that new markets are more exposed to changes due to the expanding character of shopping developments and the rapidly evolving consumer. While lack of modern retail space insured success for most of the investments, regardless of their spatial qualities, rise in competition and the emergence of a more sophisticated shopper is to induce a more careful approach in terms of design criteria. (Feier, Milincu, 2014)

Concerning high street shopping, precarious quality of city center constructed fabric has strongly influenced the low interest in its commercial development. Although regenerating urban historical centers has been on the agenda of the local authorities, lack of sufficient funding still is an issue when it comes to creating a solid infrastructure for an integrated high street retailing. Along with the rehabilitation of public spaces such as historical city squares and connecting pedestrian grid, it is expected that ground floors will regain their commercial value and high quality shopping will become an inherent component of these areas. Completed urban refurbishment in Cluj or Sibiu as well as ongoing project in Timisoara, show a strong potential for further development of central historical areas.

Considering these context matters it is clear that an important component of the professional practice involving interior architects consists in retail design with applications both in an enclosed mall type environment as in high street. The studio embedded in the third year curriculum of furniture and interior design studies aims to challenge the students to a creative problem solving exercise, based on a theoretical approach and on the critical analysis of the context. The brief has been carried out in regard with this aspect and was concentrated on accessible environments for the students. Whereas during the first semester the location was clearly specified, consisting in a hypothetical

premises within Iulius Mall Timisoara , during the second semester the students have been given the opportunity to chose their site freely, having a dimensional restrain only.

Iulius Mall Timisoara is a recent commercial large scale shopping mall with a total built area of over 150000 sqm. While in 10 years since its opening the center has doubled its commercial surface, the developer stated his intentions for further expansion by initiating a mixed-use project that is currently subject of city council discussions (Opportunity Notice, 2014). Both the continuous shifts in the layout generated by tenant migration, as the predicted extension lettable surface enhances thus the chances for students graduating interior design to be involved in retail projects.

2.2. Current trends

Developing countries such as Romania have been experiencing an powerful influx of international retail chains, with a negative impact on the local small scale enterprises. The high acceptance of these formats has been influenced mostly by their newness, as Romanians were eager to experience purchases from western types of shopping environments.(Dabija, Babuț, 2014) Global retailers such as Inditex or H&M, have a grown a strong brand image and they are widely recognized as setting "new standards in storefront and fit-out, and have often been at the

forefront of raising benchmarks and taking new ideas from one country to another" (Coleman,2006). Shopping centers are making considerable efforts in appropriating these brands as they act as important anchor stores attracting a large number of customers. An important backdrop regarding this type of approach is a relative uniformity both as imagery and product range, regardless of context conditions. As economic studies indicate the emergence of a more informed and sophisticated customer (Pricewaterhouse Coopers and Sonae Sierra,2012), creating a unique purchase experience will be a major challenge both for large shopping facilities as for individual units. With the increasing in competition, local brands have to align to the standards of international retailers, whilst defining their own identity.

The literature review clearly states changes in consumer habits and expectations and the need for the built environment to adapt to these new conditions. Coleman(2006) considers "shopping is about transformation, or collecting a thought – about collecting aspects of a lifestyle or things that contribute to a person's mental well-being, pointing out its new knowledge giving aspect. He emphasizes on the role of high standard architecture in creating a sense of place, making "the visit memorable, even to the extent that the shopping trip becomes more important than the purchase". Uniqueness and diversity are central issues for a competitive design.

The "play before you pay" concept is also widely spreading , as it gives consumers a strong participative experience, transforming the shop into an entertainment place. Floor is insisting on several examples, like the NBA shop on Fifth Avenue that she describes as having "many of the characteristics of an amusement park" , or the "Build a Bear Workshop" , an interactive store that enables young children to build their one of a kind teddy bear.

Instore education is another technique that has been recognized as an efficient method of linking and bonding customers to retailers. Shoppers can "attend in-store tutorials and demonstrations relating to basic trades and products for sale in the store"(Coleman,2006) providing them with a meaningful and fulfilling experience.

3. Teaching methods and studio brief

The design studio is a commonly used method of teaching in architectural schools, while it is the only place where students can exercise the complex act of designing. The curriculum assigned 3 tutors that followed up on the activity of a number of 25-30 students enrolled. Besides individual critiques, the students were appointed to present their works (at the end of each project phase) in a multiple critique when all of the studio teachers and their colleagues would overview the projects together. Students were asked to discuss and compare their projects in order to achieve a deeper understanding regarding the issues concerning the project development. Although oral presentation are time-consuming, we considered that they were extremely useful in constructing a coherent argumentation of their architectural discourse.

The applied research had multiple objectives: investigating current trends in retail design and seeking innovative formal and spatial solutions to fit them, while enabling the students to apply and test their theoretical knowledge in

an imaginative exercise within a given framework. The brief has been carried in both fall semester of the academic year 2012-2013 and fall-spring semester of the academic year 2013-2014.

The third year being final for the first cycle of Furniture and Interior Design, at the end of it some of the students are supposed to start their professional practice. In this regard the project structure was following the "real-life" phases : analysis of the existing location, development of the individual brief / critical analysis of similar examples, preliminary design and conceptual consideration, construction drawings and detailed design. The schedule was set up according to the amount of information required by each stage and was marked by an oral presentation. Students were thus compelled to actively participate in the studio classes throughout the year, having a constant feedback to their work both from their tutors and their colleagues. The adopted pattern aimed to induce both a creative and a technical approach.

Each student had developed two projects, one in the first semester having as object a shopping mall unit and the second during the spring semester that involved an urban location. While for the first project the brief pointed out the premises, for the second one the students were asked to find freely their own choice of location.

In order to create a highly realistic scenario, we have contacted the project architect of Iulius Mall Timisoara that provided us both with necessary drawings of a proposed premises and the tenant design criteria guide of the mall. The latter document contained essential information on the standards required by the shopping center management regarding all aspects of interior fit out: storefront, materials, colors, signage, and lighting, while the drawings gave an accurate description of structural elements and dimensional constraints.

For the second project the students were appointed to choose a space according to their personal approach, providing a thorough site analysis and including measurements.

Right at the beginning of the semester they were asked to make an investigation of existing retail spaces in Iulius Mall Timisoara with selecting a shop fit out that they believe to be appropriate in setting up a coherent brand image. Among their choices, there were mainly strong international chain stores with an insignificant number of local shops.

The task of the brief indulged them to invent their own commercial brand (either inspired by actual local businesses or not) that would have a strong identity throughout the drawings and the store atmosphere that they create. A special emphasis has been laid upon the concept of shopping as an experience and its implications in constructing their functional scheme. Their choice in type of retail activity and their individual brief is argued by a theoretical research and case studies analysis of similar approaches.

4. Selected projects

The following student projects presented in this paper are selected from design studio work done at department of Furniture and Interior Design, Faculty of Architecture, Polytechnic University of Timisoara.

4.1. Francisc Pataki – project Jecza Art Gallery (see Fig 1.)

The project developed by Francisc had the existing Jecza Gallery as a start point. Although the function has a strong cultural component, being a privately owned venue, art dealing connects it to the commercial environment. It is important to state that the art shop is a local striving business ran by the Foundation Interart Triade and it is probably the only place that deals contemporary local artists. His research pointed out that currently there are some deficiencies regarding the way the space has been configured and used, both in commercial revenue terms as in functional layout. The brief that he developed defined as primary goal flexibility, creating a multifunctional space that would favor different uses: exhibitions, small conferences, projections, book shop and cafeteria. Deciding on exhibiting artifacts from the late sculptor, Peter Jecza in a specially built addition placed in the courtyard enhanced both the symbolical and educational values of the place. Features of his design rely on clear lines and noble materials (marble, bronze, leather) that remind the visitor of the abstract style of Jecza.

Besides the qualities of the interior atmosphere, he carefully managed to identify and solve issues of service area such as sanitary facilities, bar area and storage. The innovative side of the project relied on his custom made furniture pieces that could serve to multiple purposes, doubled by a flexible lighting system.

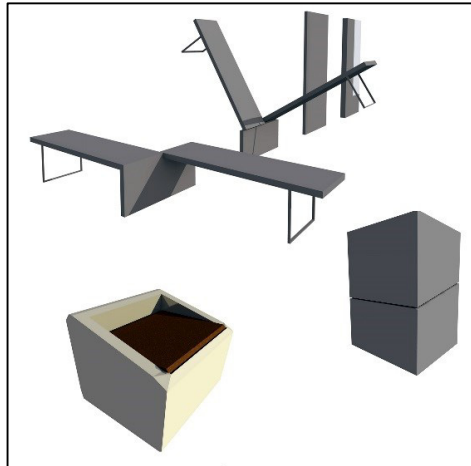


Fig. 1.Excerpts from project Jecza Art Gallery, multifunctional furniture

4.2. Cristina Blaga, project *Fleur du monde* (see Fig.2)

Cristina imagined in the premises of Iulius Mall Timisoara a complex brief for a flower shop that would contain multiple activities: flower and book retailing, landscape design showroom that offers consultancy and interactive workshop area. Pinning out the recent interest in vertical gardens and gardening as an important hobby she built up a viable scenario and created an innovative setting for a knowledge transmitting space.

She also proved the ability of dealing with commercial value by maximizing both exhibiting surfaces and floor plan usage. A good layout control enabled her to solve differentiation and functional zoning. Using the height of the space, she proposed a second floor over half of the premises area that hosts the more private activities like consultancy and workshops. Exploiting the vertical garden theme she relied on an art gallery like effect that exhibits large living flower surfaces, that change according to their blooming period. She successfully constructed a dynamic setting for a memorable and mind changing experience, argued by a clear discourse and ingenious ideas.



Fig. 2. Excerpts from project Fleur du Monde, interior rendering and conceptual details of green wall

4.3. Cristina Blaga, project *Mana Bakery* (see fig.3)

The space that Cristina chose for the second exercise is located at the ground floor of a historical building that relates to a recently pedestrianized street. Its vicinity to the Jewish Synagogue informed her theme and the brand that she defined subsequently. The word *mana* has well know and profound valances in the Jewish culture that Cristina exploited in her discourse. During her research she contacted local architect Codruta Popa ,who is involved in traditional bread production (organizing workshops and researching techniques). The information provided by her helped her out on setting up a highly realistic brief with an adequate functional scheme. Cristina's bakery is divided in 3 major areas : the fast selling area, the cafeteria/workshop space and the kitchen. The separation between them is quite seamless as functions are intervening together. Her choice to display the back of the house area as a spectacle through glazed openings converge to the idea of shopping as a knowledge gaining experience. The central piece of her design is marked by a custom made oven that has both symbolical values (gathering people by the fire) and a functional purpose while it is used during the bread making workshops. With a carefully chosen material use and an interesting mix of custom and prefab object she manages to induce a refined atmosphere and a deep sense of place.



Fig. 3. Excerpts from project *Mana Bakery* a. custom made oven detail b.interior view

4.4. Razvan Iftode, project *Cyclopath* (see fig.4)

Razvan chose to locate a bicycle store within the given premises in Iulius Mall. The concept for *Cyclopath* has been driven both by the "play and pay " idea and the recent development of biking communities in Timisoara. He also followed up on an existing local business that is producing custom made design bicycles from recycled parts. The space he designed would serve as a workshop, a meeting place and a showroom, creating an interactive and dynamic environment. In order to maximize use of the commercial surface, he adopted a gallery solution , moving the workshop area on the upper floor and making room for a cycling path at the entrance level. Bike parts are ingeniously displayed along the surrounding walls, exploiting their chromatic and texture effect. The storefront is inviting and creates a seamless separation between the adjacent common space. In Razvan's project bicycles become artifacts that are expression of oneself, throughout a participative implication of the customer in the design and creation process. The shopping experience is fun and educative at the same time.

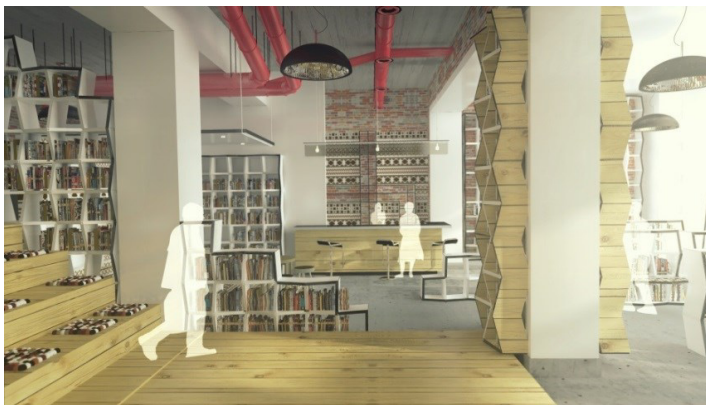


Fig. 4.Excerpts from project Cyclopath, interior views

4.5. Razvan Iftode, project Mihai Eminescu Bookshop

The second project developed by Razvan identified as a starting point an existing bookshop located in the city center of Timisoara. His research revealed that the store is strongly connected to the memory of people living in Timisoara, while it is one of the few commercial spaces that survived through communism. Razvan found that the existing facility is strongly outdated in terms of both functional and esthetical values. His proposal was to inform the space with a new identity and a wider activity range. The bookshop becomes a meeting place, where events can be hosted, books can be read and people can chat over a cup of coffee. Exploiting the height of the space Razvan designed a theatre like structure that hides storage underneath and can be used as sitting area for projections and events. A highly original feature of his design, strongly connected to his intention of creating a brand identity, consisted in informing his custom made elements with the geometry inspired by a traditional texture pattern. Local feel and sense of place is thus induced by architectural components.

a.



b.



Fig. 5. Excerpts from project Mihai Eminescu Bookshop, a. interior view b. inspirational pattern

5. Conclusions and discussions

Regarding the fact that actual practice has numerous constrains involving both social and economic conditions, it is important to note that developing projects in the academic environment insures freedom and indulges students to a creative and coherent thinking. Although the exercise didn't ignore completely cost regarding issues, it didn't set up budget limitations (a major constraint in Romania's economic conditions) . Students were aware of their budget as

they were asked to deliver cost control, but had they freedom of choosing both expensive materials and innovative technical solutions. Another issue regarding real practice is the strong dependency to the client's cultural and educational background, which in some cases might negatively influence the final results of such projects. The oral presentations and the group critiques aimed to build up the student's ability to construct a coherent discourse that backed up their graphic material, which s/he will use further on in negotiation with clients.

The projects that were developed in the Studio had a good feed back, while the second semester material was presented to an external jury. The tutors considered most of the projects were rated as well, with a number of around 5 projects/ semester that contained outstanding features. The students have been innovative in the following fields: experimental spatial and functional configuration, establishing contextual ties, custom made furniture elements and innovative product ranges. The interest shown by the students during design studio hours was triggered by the freedom of choosing their own briefs, which also had a backdrop, as some of them had issues in defining their functional schemes. Although shopping as an experience is to some extent a major trend in western European countries, the romanian lag behind in terms of market maturity, gave them few examples that they could actually relate to, which made the task more difficult then expected. The exercise managed to induce a deeper comprehension of the complex issues involved in retail design while creating new spatial models that respond to them. The final result is not a purpose in itself, but a means for providing the student with a complex understanding of spatial design that he will be able to apply later on into practice.

The experiment discussed in the paper has two major issues in concern: finding formal solutions for current retail trends and presenting a teaching method for interior design students. While current research indicate a wide economic and sociological approach of shopping environments and habits, few of them investigate the implications of changing market conditions onto the constructed space and from an architectural point of view. Although the academic conditions insured students a highly creative medium and provided us with wider range of solution to the same given situation, further research possibilities are opening up towards the professional context. Also, given the complex intervening matters regarding retail environments, multidisciplinary experiments could come up with a holistic view.

Related articles show that design studio is a widely spread and strongly rooted method in architecture teaching (Ciravoglu, 2014). The current article aims to enhance the importance of the studio brief in attaining specific learning outcome goals. In the context of immature and expanding markets, that lack of quality models, the retail topic in the interior design studio is essentials in enabling the student with a complex set of tools and a solid theoretical approach, that he can later on apply as professional.

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