4 Theoretical Context

Consumerism vs. Architecture: an essay investigating how our environments are shaped by our consumer driven paradigm and the role of the architect within it.
The Paradigm

It is undeniable that we live in a consumer driven society and that it affects every aspect of our lives. Airports, museums, stations, universities, hospitals, cities and even entire countries are able to market themselves as products which can be consumed (Loeng 2001:135-154). Consumerism can be seen as a dominant force in the shaping of our environments and should be considered an important factor in the production of architecture (Chaplin 1998:7). Consumerist trends have to keep up with the most subtle changes in society resulting in the need for architecture to produce new forms in order to sustain the consumer market (Loeng 2001:131,155). While consumerism is politically wedded to capitalism it cannot be considered the absolute ideal. Capitalism brings with it a negative connotation, but due to the lack of a workable substitute it is difficult to imagine a radically different system or ideology in our lifetime (Chaplin 1998:7). It is imperative for the architect to act responsibly while utilizing the opportunities presented by the consumerist market.

The Environment

This need to consume has had a detrimental impact on the environment, causing the depletion of the earth’s natural resources as a result of society’s rate of unnecessary consumption. The consumer market has reacted by promoting the consumption of products that contribute to a cleaner environment. Environmental marketing uses the principle of ecological correctness to create a situation where the activist appears to become the corporation, which in turn makes a profit by using principles of sustainability. Environmental imperatives are thus seen as opportunities rather than constraints, aided by the fact that credibility and effectiveness are only measured by what the company actually achieves and not by what it intends to achieve. It seems apparent that architecture has reacted in a similar fashion, as sustainable building design becomes a sales technique, thereby allowing clients to feel as though they are saving the environment by spending money on an ecologically correct building(Cha 2001:319-306).
It's a Mall... It's an Airport

It's Both: The Latest Trend in Terminals

University of Pretoria Std. – Mootee N (2007)

A landmark from the age of rail is updated for the age of retail.
The User

Similarly the user is lured into a world of guilt-free shopping. The commercial environment allows for inclusiveness - public spaces where people can roam, sit and talk. Partaking in commercial society can now be representative of an activity in which all can participate and which thereby unites all kinds of people (Loeng 2001:131,153). Ethical imperatives concerning ecology and sustainability are prioritized by consumers and thus shape the market in a subtle manner. It is ironic that, in a world driven by consumer choice, opportunities are lacking for the consumer to choose more responsibly. Architecture itself has become an object to be consumed and is thus also driven by consumer choice. Seductive imagery and lavish forms have raised the consumer's expectation of what architecture should be. It is, however, important to remember that, while architecture can be consumed by the user, the resultant space is ultimately where the user lives and experiences his/her everyday life. Concerning this consumerist activity, theory suggests that when a consumer alters a consumed object to suit his or her own purposes, the user is acting in an anti-consumerist way. Some can, through their direct action, consume the object completely. Architecture can therefore design for this consumption of space as does Viennese architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, or discourage the user from altering his or her environment as in the works of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (Chaplin 1998:7). This leaves the architect to choose how to approach the challenge of having a consumer as the primary user of space.

Fig. 4.2: Shopping = Airport; Church
Fig. 4.3: Shopping = Train Station
Fig. 4.4: Shopping = Underground
Fig. 4.5: Shopping = Education
Fig. 4.6: Shopping = City
Fig. 4.7: City = Mall
Fig. 4.8: Government = Shopping
Fig. 4.9: Shopping = Hospital; Military
Fig. 4.10: Duanne Hanson – Young Shopper
What do you call an establishment designed by a high architect for the purveying of goods? That's right: a boutique.
In architecture there exists a mutual prejudice between architects who design commercially and those who do not, essentially between those who design for the masses and those who keep themselves distanced from the populist idea of retail architecture. This difference in approach has even resulted in a distinction between commercial ‘firms’ and the more design-orientated ‘practices’.

"An invisible hierarchy of value and merit exists within the profession which categorises and castigates those who build for profit, leaving more ‘committed’ architects the moral victors. This has created the situation in which what gets the highest accolades in the architectural press is not the vast majority of highly effective projects built but those considered aesthetically or theoretically worthy.” (Chaplin 1998:7)

The architectural elite refuses to engage in retail architecture and even when they do, they prefer to describe commercial developments as something other than what they really are (Herman 2001:391). The architect’s agenda seems to be at odds with commodification. The ‘proper’ calling would be to work towards some utopian ideal. It’s as if architects strive to achieve well-designed surroundings for everyone, trying to free society from structures of desire (Chaplin 1998:7). The idea of “good” architecture is mostly related to projects like housing, schools, and museums; this is termed ‘what “serious” architects do’.

Stanley Marcus, CEO of Neiman-Marcus, described this dilemma very well when he said “high architects do not understand shopping, nor do they want to.” (Herman 2001:392,395) It would appear that this refusal results in architects not realizing the potential of commercial architecture. It should be noted that architecture, while being a slow and ponderous process, cannot react quickly to consumerist pressures. Only at the most commercial end of the architectural ‘spectrum’ does an awareness of these reactions get built into the product: shop interiors and amusement arcades (Chaplin 1998:8). It is perhaps important that the architect makes public approval a higher priority than peer acceptance and starts creating architecture that serves the user and not merely the client.
Fig. 4.14: Jane Jacobs on the Streets of New York
Utilizing Consumerism

At its very core the commercial market strives to be accessible and appealing to the public and has been used as a tool to revive urban centres (Loeng 2001:153). Commercial developers have used the four conditions of Jane Jacobs in her "City Life Model" to create profitable environments. Although it could be surmised that this is not what Ms. Jacobs intended, it is what the commercial market needs to generate vibrant city spaces. The combination of twenty four hour usage, short blocks to increase movement and opportunities, a mix of buildings both in age and condition, and a sufficiently dense concentration of people proves to be a successful recipe to renew urban environments. As Jane Jacobs stated in her 1961 book "The Life and Death of Great American Cities":

"The necessity for these four conditions is the most important point this book has to make. In combination, these conditions create effective economic pools of use... All four in combination are necessary to generate city diversity; the absence of any one of the four frustrates a district's potential." (Jacobs 1961:162).

There is a need for areas to remain alive, a need for people to enjoy their environment. Leisure theory has even proved that, without spaces that cater for our need to relax and be entertained, we would be more dysfunctional. The motivating force behind progress in the 20th century has been consumption, so why not harness this energy and realize its potential rather than struggle against it? Increasingly, commercial areas are the places where the experiences of modern life occur - places where people meet, make friends, and share their experiences (Chaplin 1998:8). So why don't we design for these experiences?