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The Concept Book

A New, Methodological Approach to Interdisciplinary Retail Design

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COMMON GROUND

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The Concept Book: A New, Methodological Approach to Interdisciplinary Retail Design

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Abstract: The design process is becoming more increasingly complex and multidisciplinary. In the 1970s, researchers studied the confluence of design's functional, symbolic, and technical elements. Later, research expanded to include the spatial dimension and design's role within the Experience Economy (first theorized by Pine and Gilmore and more recently by Prahalad and Ramaswamy). Today, the study of design as a "complex systematic entity" requires new methodologies and instruments through which it is possible to develop the design activity, assuming a language that is common to the involved disciplines. This premise introduces the importance of the concept book, which originates from retail design and involves a visual interpretation of the brand identity. The objective of the concept book is to express a motivated philosophy of a project's goals, to use a mainly visual language with keywords, and to exclude the use of common executive technical skills. It is a descriptive handbook that is developed to share the evolution of the design process with appropriate stakeholders. This paper describes this new instrument by analyzing case studies.

Keywords: Scenario Planning, Design Methodology

Background

Historically, design has been known as a single discipline, articulated primarily through the expressive, spatial, and conceptual visions of the designer, in relation to a buyer who was not involved in the design process (Gregory 1966). The goal of the design was connected to stable and long-lasting factors such as high quality of materials and of their processing. Such an exclusive approach is inadequate and incomplete today, as the design process is increasingly characterized as strongly interdisciplinary.

The trend toward multidisciplinary design applies to many fields, but is perhaps most prominent in retail design (Manuell 2006; Vernet and de Wit 2007). The popularity of brands has caused the consumer world to distance itself from the objective to buy goods for functional needs. Today, consumerism is increasingly stimulated by imaginary needs which are created by the brands themselves (Riewoldt 2002).

We have transitioned from an economy based on the value of the product to one based on the experience of the consumer. A milestone in the "Experience Economy" is the relationship that transforms the consumer into a fully-fledged "disciple" of a brand; the consumer purchases not only products but also membership to the symbolic all-consuming world (Pine and Gilmore 1999; 2008; Van Tongeren 2013). In this dynamic the design of the commercial environment has a special significance, in that it must create an appropriate atmosphere that substantiates the ideal and symbolic values of the brand in a specific physical space (Petermans and Van Cllempoel 2009). The designer must create a customer experience that is fully integrated into the space. These needs require companies to integrate design with disciplines such as marketing and corporate economic planning (Gentile, Noci, and Spiller 2007).

Methodologically speaking, the emergence and consolidation of the Experience Economy is one of the stronger signs of change enveloping the world of design. At the center of the change is the role of the consumer, who transforms from a passive actor, a beneficiary of a production it can no longer influence, into a conscious actor, capable of interacting with the company and with the production world and conditioning strategic decisions based on his or her own tastes and choices (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). The emerging change has forced companies to review their traditional systems of creating values, from the product to the shopping experience (Schmitt and Simonson 1997).

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On this basis, the importance of retail design becomes evident within the present strategies used to create brand identity (Cristian 2009). Retail design is the discipline which most directly tries to cross, through the shopping experience, the needs of the brand with the consumer's aspirations. Retail design integrates needs linked to the intangible representation of the brand with those linked to the realization of tangible components, directly connected to the product's sales. This system applies most prominently in fields such as fashion, in which the brand has a high value.

The Shopping Experience: Changes in Time

One of the critical aspects of the Experience Economy lies in a company's ability to create value in retail spaces between consumers and brands (Pine and Gilmore 1999; 2008). Studies of the Experience Economy have focused on the ways in which the shopping experience facilitates a process of superficially encouraging the consumer. Even in light of the social and economic crises of recent years, many studies have reviewed and explored this concept (Miller 2012).

The shopping experience is no longer a top-down process. Rather, it results directly from an equal relationship between the consumer and the brand, in which ethical and cultural aspects come into play. During the buying process consumers take action based on a system of values that goes beyond that of the product alone. They react not only to the value of the brand, but also to the service and user experience of the retail environment. In many cases the place, or better, the intangible atmosphere of space, takes on a crucial role in the purchasing decision. As a result, starting in the 1980s the concept of brand environments became the key competition leverage (Miller 2006).

Today designers must consider which design tools will allow them to create spaces in which consumers and brands can meet to form memorable experiences. Designers can achieve this result by creating an experience that derives from the uniqueness and specificity of the brand's commercial space.

Retail Design as a Multidisciplinary Activity

If we wish to circumscribe the space in which design works it is absolutely necessary to proceed from the simple recognition of what surrounds us. This indispensable and pragmatic exercise shows that design is not an autonomous discipline. Even the development of a simple product shows that a variety of players must participate in the design process. The process results in a cross-pollination of skills that increases according to the design's complexity. The final design includes a multiplicity of functional, symbolic, and cultural elements (Philips 2004).

Design and products stop manifesting themselves as autonomous entities and instead express themselves as system sets that require a multidisciplinary approach. Adopting the concept of a system within our research challenges the idea that design results from a linear sequence of autonomous, independent, *a priori*, planned contributions. At the same time, reality shows us a methodology that develops through interactions and from past knowledge, in a process characterized by the simultaneous presence of various parties; a condition which makes it unfeasible to break down the parts in a linear fashion and to reorder them in a top-down, logical sequence. If we think of this process as an image, it resembles a horizontal sequence of operations that omits strict hierarchies among the parties involved. In this evolving situation, we not only express corporate identity based on reciprocity between business functions and external design skills, but also use retail space as the primary method for communicating brand strategies. This method develops through a design approach that values the interaction of different skill sets and undermines the traditional division between design profiles and managerial profiles, enabling a dialogue that makes it possible to transfer information and competencies and to develop an

overall strategic purpose for the business through a shared design program (Chiappini and Sfligiotti 2010).

Within a shared design program the designer must apply his or her own areas of knowledge toward business areas and the manager must embrace a culture of design. Another distinguishing element of this program is that of "representation." The expression "representation," once confined to artistic, architectural, and design manifestations, now extends to business contexts as a summarization of complex and heterogeneous aspects of visual expressions. We are living in a phase of transition toward an idea of design as a collective product, wherein the spatial and planning aspects become more integrated into the business process as an interplay occurs between key business and design specialists.

We must reconsider design's role in business, as a key component of products' successful acceptance within the culture and the marketplace. Viewing design in this new light has important consequences. The role of the designer becomes more central to business processes. The designer's adaptable technical knowledge applies to multiple facets of the organizational system and allows the designer to drive business processes. At the same time, the integration of design into the overall business strategy causes a number of business areas, such as design, marketing, strategic planning, and communications, to deviate from a prescribed hierarchy and to adopt more equitable functions (Laurel and Lunenefeld 2003).

Replicating Commercial Spaces and Design Manuals

At this point it is necessary to explain the representation and management methodologies of retail projects in relation to brands.

The Coordinated Image Manual

The coordinated image manual is descriptive handbook that expresses the needs of the brand in relation to the commercial space (Meggs 1983). During the past century, we have witnessed the spread of mass consumption and the distribution chain formula, in the form of franchising (Dicke 1992). Franchising represents a manifestation of corporate identity through an identically reproducible design model, indifferent to location. The coordinated image manual gathers the set of prescriptions aimed at managing the corporate image in time and space. It systematically documents all the expressive features of the brand, including the design of sales outlets. It covers equipment sales, store signage, posters, space layout, and sales window displays, as well as finishing touches, such as packaging, publicity, staff clothing, and logos applied on company vehicles. The goal of a design process that uses the coordinated image manual is to provide a visual reference that will allow companies to replicate their commercial spaces for each new store (Henrion and Parkin 1967). This approach has produced commercial architectures void of quality and brand identities represented by identical design content. Products in these stores are typically industrialized and "identical."

Trend Books

An alternative to the coordinated image manual is the trend book (Jordan 2001). Trend books try to depict future trends related to expressive aspects such as color, texture, and material. They can also document current subjects in order to provide appropriate visual references, in some cases including samples of materials and finishing from before and after the design process. Trend books, therefore, capture the essence of the preliminary design and provide a useful complement to the creative activity. They are used mainly in fashion and certain sectors of product and exhibition design, to provide the designer with a documented system of material and visual cross-references that aid in the development of the design itself (Kim and Fiore 2011).

To create trend books agencies utilize a system of "sensors," who critically analyze trendsetters and privileged testimonials, chosen by them for their specific competences, to predict the next waves of collective taste. Trend books represent a very interesting case in that they integrate sociological considerations of consumers' inclinations with documentation and interpretations that derive from material and visual culture. By trying to characterize the visual expression of a subject, trend books also provide contextual references that are extremely valuable in the design and construction of themed spaces.

Various authors have written about the causes of clothing fads. For Barthes, there are groups of producers, called accelerators, in *pret-à-porter* that contribute to the increase of clothing purchases (Barthes 1967). Abrahamson describes the roles of "fashion setters" that favor the institutionalization of fads (Abrahamson 1996). Hirsch writes about contact men, who identify aesthetic innovations, then select and promote them (Hirsch 1972). Hirsch and Abrahamson further describe a tendency that is inherent in many fields wherein specific players transform "aesthetic innovations" into consumer phenomena. These players position themselves between creators and consumers, filling in structural gaps to become brokers between demands and consumers.

The aesthetic innovation selected through trend books, while marginal at first, becomes more accessible over time, paving the way for massive adoption. Designers extract the main attributes of innovation from trend books, then transform them into a more general interest "trend" (e.g., ethnic, romantic, natural, etc.). Next, designers equip each trend with colors, materials, fabrics, and shapes, so that the trend books can be displayed at specialized trade fairs. Textile professionals, including fashion designers, stylists, and creative designers, view the books as invaluable resources for finding ideas for collections and new products.

Figure 1: Example from a Trend Book
Source: Rustic and Plastic Kaleidoscope A+A Interior Trends 2001 / 2002 vol.3
Courtesy of A+A Design Studio Milan Italy

At first limited to the fashion world, trend books have expanded their range of influence to cosmetics, decorating, furnishings, and even foods. Trend books have proven useful in any field that depends on aesthetics for product adoption. Trend books, therefore, are the opposite of coordinated image manuals, in that they serve an important role in project contextualization rather than implementation.

Developing and Dividing Retail Design Tools

It is possible to overcome the rigidity of the coordinated image manual by dividing the original model of the manual into two parts: the concept book and the technical manual. These two sections represent design's expressive and implementable aspects and are so valued by insiders that they are known as "the Bible."

The technical manual contains operating functions and explains, through technical drawings and details, the components of the show room: the spatial layout, materials, furnishing accessories, lighting, signs for implementation, and delivery. The technical manual uses specialized language to capture executive solutions, as well as proposed solutions, and includes prescriptive aspects of the design that were previously identified as part of the coordinated image manual.

Conversely, the concept book describes the reasons for design choices and the design's overall formalization, pointing toward a design solution that expresses the brand through a relational strategy. It is therefore an essentially descriptive tool. Through the concept book a local architect may carry out his or her work based on a clearly defined design concept.

Figure 2: Concept Book and Technical Manual, General Contents
Source: Courtesy of Vudafieri Saverino Partners Milan/Shanghai

The Concept Book

The concept book is a tool used by high-range value companies with wide-ranging distribution to create a network of single-brand sales spaces that adhere to a common design concept. Such companies must develop extended distribution approaches to open new stores. Their approaches must account for a model of flexibility between two apparently incompatible extremes: the building of a space for homologous and replicable models and the need for diversification so as to emphasize the exclusivity of the products. For high-range value companies, which promote the exclusiveness and uniqueness of their products, it would not be possible to use identical sales spaces, as one finds in mass consumer distribution systems (Bastien and Kapferer 2009).

By providing an effective visual interpretation of the brand identity, the concept book expresses the primary design concept. The concept book represents the main aspects of the brand identity, as it relates to the product identity, consumer profile, and elements of overall expression located within the sales space. However, the concept book is not a manual that describes the physical setup of the sales space. Rather, it is a communications tool aimed at two audiences: the "corporate system," for which the book details the design concept of the company's commercial spaces; and architects and designers, who will apply the general design concept locally. One can think of the concept book as a canvas from which the constant configuration of a model results in practical implementation in sales spaces and full documentation in a technical-implementation manual.

CONCEPT BOOK HIGHLIGHTS

1_BRAND IDENTITY ANALYSIS

2_INTRODUCING SYMBOLIC IMAGES
REFERRING TO THE DESIGN PROPOSAL

3_SHOWING THE CONCEPT PROPOSAL

4_ADAPTING THE MODEL
TO THE DIFFERENT STORES SIZE

Figure 3: Concept Book Highlights
Source: Graphic by the Author

Concept books are essentially descriptive manuals that are directly linked to brand representation and design strategy. As such, concept books can be associated with trend books. Just like trend books, concept books are tools that express content through a narrative language rather than a technical one. This language, predominantly visual, uses evocative contextual images of content or conceptual references. Since the concept book defines the brand's basic design concepts, it is essential that non-designers, specifically corporate executives and consultants, take part in its development. The concept book's strong narrative component provides a common language for its audience. The narrative typically consists of summaries and keywords, followed by a more extended description.
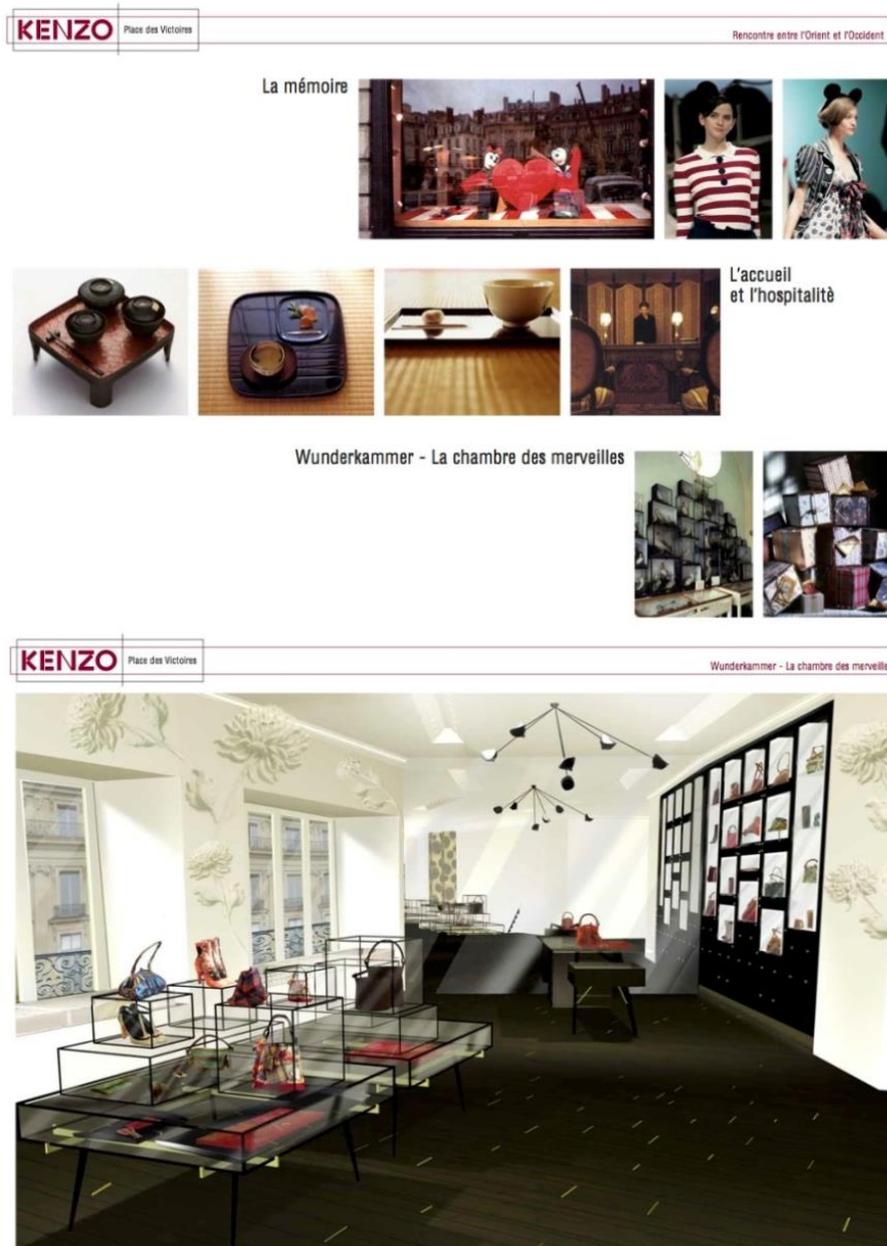
Figure 4: Example of a Concept Book and the Final Result
Source: Courtesy of Stefania Beltrame and Sandra Gelmetti Studio Architetti Associati Milan Italy

The first part of the concept book corresponds to the visual and narrative interpretation of the brand identity. The next part introduces the themed proposal related to the sales space, represented through several symbolic images that capture the design concept. The final part of the concept book includes adaptations of the design solution according to location and dimensional conditions. Such adaptation is normally developed through a series of conventional classes, known as XL, L, M, S, and XS (much like clothing sizes). XL is a store with two levels; L a store on one level facing a street; M a store on one level with only one street entrance; S a shop, with its cash register housed within another commercial structure (e.g., a multi-brand store in a shopping mall); and XS a corner store without a cash register, housed within a commercial structure.
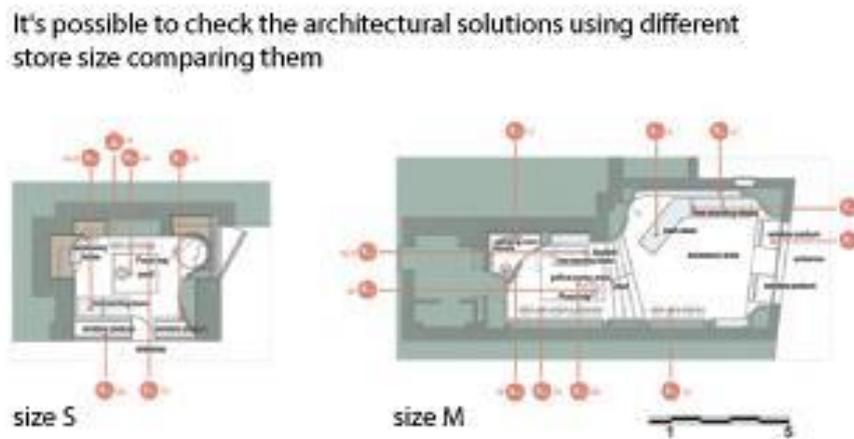
Figure 5: Illustration from Location Approach
Source: Courtesy of Vudafieri Saverino Partners Milan/Shanghai

Through transmitting information in narrative and visual form, the concept book communicates a design philosophy that can be used as a reference. As such, the concept book can serve a valuable purpose for future designers to grow or adapt a retail space according to the initial design concept. Continuous growth of the design concept will allow diverse but coherent solutions to follow.

Illustrative Examples

To complete the description of concept books, we will illustrate two exemplary cases, developed by the Studio Vudafieri Partners of Milan and DeuxL of Paris.

Brand 1: Dupont

Dupont is renowned for producing cigarette lighters, which in their components represent an explicit homage to architecture and rationalist language. The design concept has been developed in view of a possible expansion of business to men's clothing, with a goal to achieve a specific sales system.

The concept book starts out as an exploration of a series of references, applicable to the values of the brand and an essential step for proceeding, through the design, to a development of the corporate expression. This representation process takes advantage of texts that highlight the brand through the use of certain keywords, summed up in the expressions of balance, stability, duration, precision, and timelessness. To represent these attributes, the concept book includes a series of images from the rationalist architectural ideal by Mies Van Der Rohe. By using the same narrative principles built through a system of affinity between text and images, the concept book places the same focus on the interpretation of the tastes and personalities of the Dupont consumer. The concept book represents this typically male consumer as living in a hypothetical world of sports cars and luxury motorboats, like a character teetering between stability and recklessness. He is a character who loves objects, appreciates the tactile and physical expressiveness of materials, and has a taste for well-made things that do not age or belong to a specific time.

This conceptual approach is accredited by theoretical studies concerning this point- (Gentile, Noci, and Spiller 2007). Such approach enables to circumscribe a set of symbolic values which generate the motivations of a project proposal in accordance to the identity values of the brand. The visual mimesis of the brand's identity and the definition of the symbolic values set the assumptions for the further executive solutions. Therefore, one establishes a sharing of the

decisions concerning projects which are no longer determined merely through the designer's contribution.

Selecting the finishing materials, the overall structure of the space, as well as selecting the executive solutions are all determined by a series of guidelines developed in a multidisciplinary environment. Indeed, the executive solutions are preceded by a series of symbolic representations, summarized by a few key words, images, and a definition of the topic which is determined in the first part of the planning process. This decisive part is in fact determined through the Concept Book. The early choices are developed by a multidisciplinary work group in which we find architects and designers as well as figures belonging to the company's communication branch and to the management of the brand's identity. The concept book, above all, is a collection of conceptual content that is developed in a coherent manner, through the representation of all its constituent elements. The design emerges from the unity of pureness, simplicity in the compositional lines, and use of materials and finishing that refer to qualities lasting over time, explicitly evoking the product's essential character.

Figure 6: Brand 1 Corporate Identity
Source: Graphic Elaboration by the Author from Images Courtesy of Vudafieri Saverino Partners Milan/Shanghai

Brand 2: Pucci

Pucci is a fashion brand that represents an idea of Mediterranean elegance. The brand expresses this idea through the colors of its fabrics and its privileged relationship with the worldliness of the 1960s, the gilded age of the company's founder and namesake. The concept book captures this brand identity through a series of product samples and images that evoke the imaginary world in which Pucci goods find their ideal setting. These images show some of the best known members of the international jet set of the 1960s; individuals who played important roles in the history of the brand, either as customers or as inspirations for Pucci.

The Pucci concept book has developed through an evolving process in which a contemporary mode of expression communicates the brand's innovation in relation to its traditions. One of the most important components of the concept is the evocation of a sophisticated Mediterranean quality. In addition, the concept book emphasizes Pucci's attention to color, through the use of strong light within sales spaces and color choices in coatings and finishes (e.g., blues, greens, and whites) that evoke the ocean or the white-washed walls that characterize many Mediterranean countries. Pucci completes this thematic system by designing its show rooms so that a sense of organic roundness prevails, void of any geometric angularities. Pucci has implemented the concept in approximately 20 sales spaces. With each implementation, the concept has naturally experienced a gradual and continuous transformation.

The planning concept originates from the symbolic world of the brand. Colours, which are paramount in the quality of Pucci's materials lie at the basis of a planning theme research for retail spaces. By this, a correlation between the customer's experience of the brand deriving from the product and the experience deriving from the retail space is created. This direct relationship between the product and the retail space, which becomes possible due to the use of the Concept Book, changes the role of customers themselves. They now become the link between the product and the experience of the retail space, and as many authors have highlighted (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004), their experience of the brand can also influence the company's decisions. The aim is to create a customer experience that is fully integrated into the area.
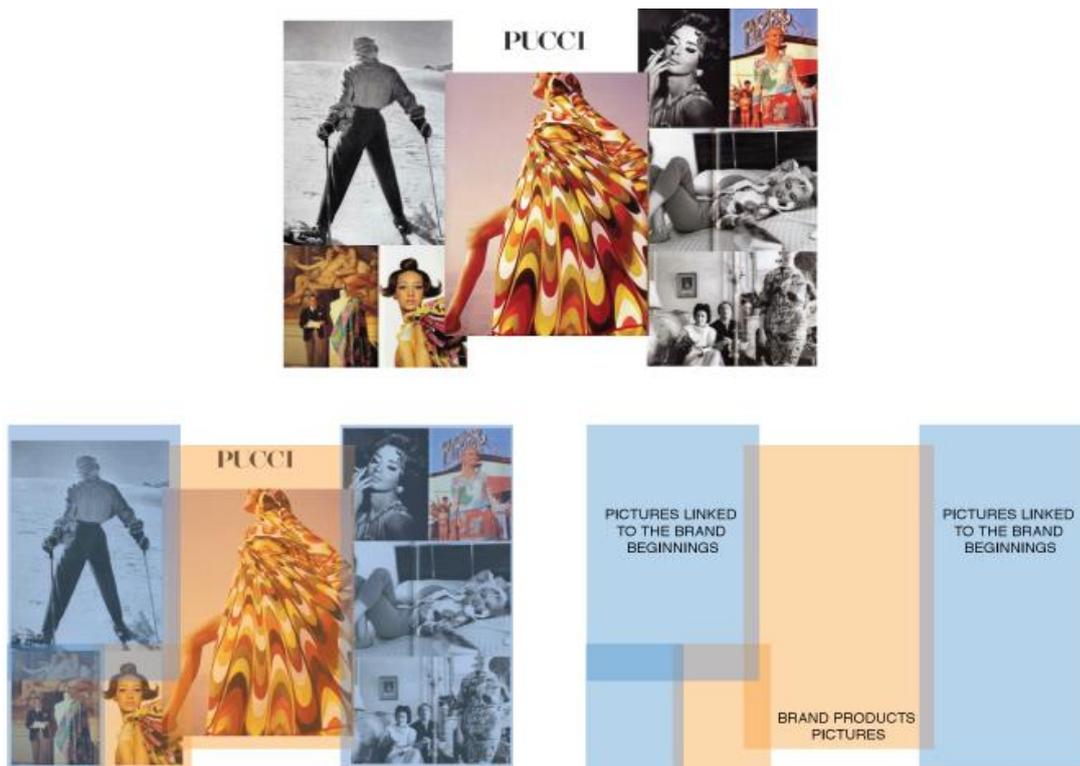
Figure 7: Brand 2 Corporate Identity
Source: Graphic Elaboration by the Author from Images Courtesy of Vudafieri Saverino Partners Milan/Shanghai

Conclusion

The discussion at this point allows us to identify two emerging thematic areas related to concept books. The first is that one must define the design of consumer spaces as a multidisciplinary, integrated activity. According to many authors (Philips, 2004) bearing in mind that the project of a retail space has to include symbolic ad cultural aspects, one finds an integration of disciplinary competences which grows with the complexity of the project's object. The assumption that the generational reasons should include a set of functional, symbolic and cultural features now appears finally assimilated . We are now experiencing an economical transition. We are moving from a phase which focuses on the value of the product to one which prioritizes the customer's experience. Therefore, one can observe, in the capability to appeal to a customer, a predominance of symbolic values which are applied to sales areas as expressions of the brand's cultural identity. One can say that such symbolic values tend to have a bigger role than the product itself (Rienwoldt 2002).

Viewing design in this way requires companies to reevaluate and reformulate its methods for developing products that involve the input of multiple disciplines. Design can no longer be a discrete entity, but must be linked with the mission and continuous development of the brand identity. Consequently, experimenting operational tools which allow critical understanding and the correct representation of the brand's symbolic values is paramount. In accordance to the new definition of retail design as an interdisciplinary activity (Manuell 2006; Vernet and de Wit 2007), the Concept Book can take on a key role. It determines a way of developing a project by considering a series of phases conditioned with various disciplines, giving particular attention to the brand's symbolic values. In this dynamic, the design of the commercial environment has a special significance, in that it must create an appropriate atmosphere that substantiates the ideal and symbolic values of the brand in a specific physical space (Petermans and Van Cllempoel 2009).

The first step to achieve this goal is the correct critical interpretation of the company's identity based on information mainly coming from areas related to company communication. Thereafter, coherently to the company's identity developed in the previous step, we achieve a primary definition of the planning concept. At the beginning this is expressed through images which are merely symbolic and evocative. Such a phase represents a link between the executive and architectonic related planning part and the part related to a purely conceptual symbolic expressivity.

These two parts identify a symbolic and evocative way of expression and planning elaboration which are able to integrate logics belonging to various disciplinary fields, for instance company communication, graphic design and architectonical planning. This flow of disciplines proves the nature of the Concept Book as a multidisciplinary tool of the project. The second emerging thematic area is the need for companies to find, within a unique type of sales space, an effective way for the diverse concepts of differentiation and replicability to coexist. As a matter of fact elaborating a new retail concept requires an enforcement in various situations, places and areas. Like any other industrial artefact, also a sales area can be multiply replicated in different and distant locations. However, complete and identical copying of retail spaces causes the spoiling of the quality and the intensity of the experience of such space, hence this replication has to be avoided, in accordance to the principles of experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999, 2008; Van Tongeren 2013). These studies determine that the value, even the economical one, of experience is in its uniqueness. This uniqueness, which increasingly tends to be heavily personalized, should be extended from the product to the experience of the sales area. It is therefore fundamental for the project concept of a sales area to be extremely flexible, in order to adapt to different locations and different needs, depending on the place it is being carried out. (Bastien and Kapferer 2009). As far as this is concerned, the Concept Book can easily represent the planning concept in different locations, hence being an exceptional management tool for such

a process. But the nature of the project itself which is represented inside the Concept Book, isn't exclusively of executive nature thus presenting strong eagerness to modifications and adaptations which can intervene coherently with the general concept of the project.

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