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virtuous
circle

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Conference
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Luisa Collina, Laura Galluzzo, Anna Meroni

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For further information on Cumulus Association:

Cumulus Secretariat

Aalto University

School of Arts, Design and Architecture

PO Box 31000, FI-00076 Aalto

Finland

E: cumulus@taik.fi

W: <http://www.cumulusassociation.org>

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Retail Design: Objectives and Methods from a Training Activity in Tianjin

*Alfonso Morone, Assistant Professor - alfonso.morone@unina.it
DiARC Dipartimento di Architettura Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, Italy*

*Yuan Sinan, Lecturer - yuansinan36@qq.com
School of Architecture Tianjin University, China*

*Hu Yeke, Lecturer - 563537280@qq.com
School of Architecture Tianjin University, China*

*Raffaele Catuogno, Assistant Professor - raffaele.catuogno@unina.it
DiARC Dipartimento di Architettura Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, Italy*

*Marco Sorrentino, Tutor - msorrentino@outlook.it
DiARC Dipartimento di Architettura Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, Italy*

*Massimiliano Campi, Associate Professor - campi@unina.it
DiARC Dipartimento di Architettura Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, Italy*

This text wants to describe a didactics methodology to generate culture values in Retail Design. It's very important in this kind of process the relationship between the store brand and the social need of the host town. Could we integrate social issues within the retail space? This need requires a specific design methodology that can link social needs and local characteristics to integrate them in the commercial space. We used a Design Workshop to test these principles and to introduce a new design methodology. The initiative summarized here was developed with the collaboration of the Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II, the School of Architecture of Tianjin University and Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, during the Tianjin Design Week 2014. The purpose is to give its contribute to this methodological advancement.

Keywords

Brand identity, Social needs, Design workshop.

BACKGROUND AND BASIC CONCEPTS

The current economic crisis forces us to rethink the mechanisms that have ruled the world of consumption for decades. The main contributions are cultural values and social needs, fundamentals of customer's experience. In this framework,

the Experience of Economy has a principal role since its first formulation. (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, 2008).

Starting from this point of view the process of Retail Design has become crucial in the process of goods development (Gentile, 2007). The Retail Design can translate the theory of the first and second generation of the Experience of Economy into a design practice.

The words "Retail Design" indeed include several aspects that need to be tackled in the design of commercial spaces. They are physical aspects, or more in general, aspects related to the consumer's experience with the brand (Tongeren, 2013).

Since design has gained in status in retail management, it is argued that the role of Retail Designers has progressed from plain shopfitting to the provision of inspiration to customers (Backstrom & Johansson, 2006; Kumar 2013).

This implies that 'experiences', as conceptualized in Pine & Gilmore's first generation of Experience Economy, do not necessarily work in a European retail context. The present parameters for creating and directing memorable experiences are authenticity and originality. Design of retail environments should be directed towards values and creating appropriate sense in the current second generation of 'Experience Economy (Prahalad & Amaswamy, 2004). Therefore, it is of growing importance for retailers to be on the same wavelength as their customer, not only to determine the functional needs of a retail store, but also



FIGURE I - Concept Brand Assets

to understand what appeals emotionally to customers (Inman & Winer, 1998; Underhill, 1999). For instance, customers in today's retail stores ask and expect

more than just being satisfied with the purchased brand or product and the delivered service level. They look for value; therefore, value creation is currently seen by many authors as the key to long-term retailer success (Babin & Attaway, 2000; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

Therefore, the present parameters for creating and directing memorable experiences are authenticity and originality (Boswijk & Peelen, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 2008)

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES AND GENERAL MODALITY

The workshop addressed a particular aspect of the design: the design of a temporary commercial space, using industrialized components in order to make it potentially replicable and adaptable to different locations and dimensions. The teaching activity was concentrated in a very short time, a workshop that in design education assumes a specific role. Precisely because of its specificity the teaching of the workshop design was the subject of a series of studies that have thoroughly analysed the teaching and operational methods¹.

The main feature of the project proposal is the need to accommodate into the store a social function, next to the commercial one. Each group of students from the School of Architecture of Tianjin University and Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts had a fashion brand with a specific cultural identity, of which they had to interpret and represent the values. At the same time was required in each group a synthetic representation of predominantly visual identity of the city of Tianjin, through a personal and motivated itinerary, eventually identifying the urban area and the specific location for their temporary.

It was subsequently developed a concept relating to a Temporary Store. This concept is characterized by the adaptation and integration of the distinctive elements of the brand with its own identity and needs from the reality of the host city, obtained by the development of an appropriate theming. The project proposal of the commercial space has been developed taking into account two fundamental elements: the low cost and the integration of commercial and social functions, together in the same spaces.

WORK PHASES AND EXPECTED MATERIALS

The workshop was carried out through four stages: Brief, Concept, Solving and Final Work.

¹In this field there is a vast literature, for example we can mention here: Vijay Kumar, 101 Design Methods: A Structured Approach For Driving Innovation In Your Organization, John Wiley & Sons Inc

PHASE I_BRIEF

The phase of the Brief, the definition and study of the projects theme, has been divided into three parts: A_Brand Analysis - B_Tianjin City Analysis - C_Location

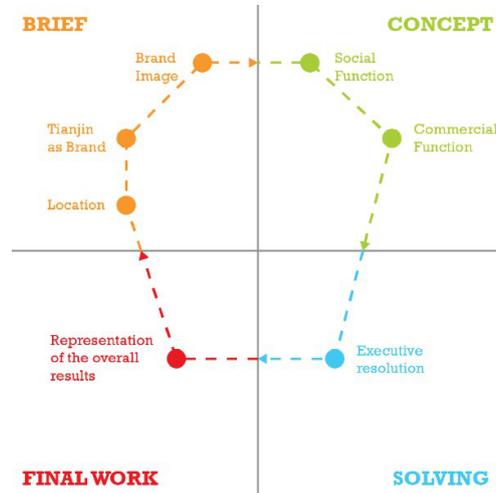


FIGURE 2 - Design Workshop General Structure

A_Brand Analysis

Subject:

Starting from assigning to each group a brand, describe through a guided analysis the identity of the brand image and representing it with keywords.

Contents:

The work must be structured according to the following points: _Brand identity

Identify core values, summarizing them in three key words and linked symbolic images _Customer We need to know who is the typical buyer of the brand through a reasoned analysis. Also here use three images and three key words _Products Represent the main features of the products of the brand. To describe this point should be used four words with symbolic images _Spaces Analyze the main characteristics of the retail spaces of the brand, representing them through four spatial concepts, colour, materials, four key words and four images _Brand Representation The analysis of the logo, website, packaging, graphics, etc_ Synthesis In this phase it should be summarized the whole idea of the brand through a single image and a slogan.

B_Analysis of Tianjin city

This phase is oriented to provide insights into the identity of the city of Tianjin, imagining this representation, as that of any brand, telling it by selecting items from the direct experience in the city. These items will be materialized through a

catalog of goods, places or situations. Each catalog, therefore, must be consistent with the specific identity of Tianjin.

Contents of this “Tianjin’s brand” are the places, the goods and situations that characterize the city. The method that is a simulation: the idea is to select, for a hypothetical tour operators, a specific route, but not the usual one for tourists.



FIGURE 3 - Tianjin and Workshop activities

We want an original, generational and coherent narrative representation of Tianjin’s identity, with typical goods, products belonging to the city and places where everyone can find a precise image of the city. Should be carried out an initial survey and research in the city, supplemented by desk research to track down examples, cases, experiences, actors who have the potential stimulus for the conduct of the exercise. In this phase the students are ready to choice products, places and situations, from their experience in Tianjin, meaningful and consistent with the general survey previously expressed. This Catalog must have at least 10 subjects. The idea is to select a specific route, unusual and not for tourism, through Tianjin, made by objects, goods and places.

C_ Location

Consistent with the interpretive analysis carried out in the previous paragraph, are asked to first identify the urban area in which to place the future of the store and then, into it, the exact location of the space. The physical space in which it is suggested to place the store does not necessarily have to be empty and unused, but may be currently occupied by a different business establishment, or other activity. It requires, however, a justification of the choice made, highlighting the following points: 1_ Description of the road identified for the location in relation to urban dynamics: goes, rhythms, functions, business activities, shops, residences, offices, street furniture, etc. 2_ Mapping of the types of stores in the street 3_ Identification and description of the area proposed for the shop.

PHASE 2_ CONCEPT

Starting from the physical space of the store, it was designed a place where the commercial activity is associated with the brand and its specific products, and a social function linked to the city of Tianjin. In this we must identify a specific

theme around which we can develop the exhibition design, integrating social and commercial functions.

It has developed a set-up for a temporary space that will last for only one year. The store will be realized at low cost. The functional space with a social nature will be hosted inside the store integrated into the business. This additional function will represent the theming of the store and represent the idea of the exhibition set up, which will then be developed, in the next step of solving, through some solutions: the choice of materials, the arrangement of elements in space, the use of colours, etc. The choice of this social function, it may be, without limitation, related to the preservation and knowledge of the artistic and architectural heritage of the city, a form of awareness of a social need in the city, the promotion of local production, as well as to any other function of group and social. These elements, like the coherence of the aggregative function with the cultural characteristics of the brand, they will be taken from the first work.

Each group has adopted a commercial space of an approximate size of 150 to 300 square meters. On one floor and overlooking the street with at least two windows, already identified in phase 1 Brief_Location. It will be sufficient to assume the size and distribution obtainable by a summary visual inspection of the existing space.

PHASE 3_ SOLVING

This phase is dedicated to the resolution of the executive project concept and its representation. It's the phase of production of dimensional drawings, construction details, identification of materials, finishes, colours and lighting solutions and setting with appropriate graphical simulations, the project in a real situation of use.

PHASE 4_ FINAL WORK

The final presentation was conducted by simulating a professional type of exposure, with a public presentation of their work addressed to a hypothetical client, represented in fact by a jury composed by Italian architects present at the Tianjin Design Week. Thus all the work product was prepared in a small spatial area in which to create the best conditions for understanding the entire design process, from its initial motivations in relation to the brand, those related to the choice of the integrative function that commercial, the concepts, until all the aspects of the choice of materials, finishes, the executive aspects, and the representation.

DESIGN PROCESS AND WORKSHOP ACTIVITY RESULTS

This experience has shown two different ways of tackle, exemplify, solve and present design solutions. The limited time available to transmit and get a result has made the process even more interesting. Distant cultures like the Chinese

and Italian, perhaps, have created, for a single episode, an intriguing methodology that can be summarized in the introduction already made upstream for the description and understanding of the results. The different skills already within each working group has determined that homogenization that has made the inevitable chaos of constant information passed from the teacher to the learner, an abstract and orderly flow of bricks with which each one has contributed to the generation of the overall result.

The most important aspect in teaching activity concentrated in a limited time lies in its methodological clarity, which is the key used to obtain the required result.

In our case the first methodological issue is in the specific nature of the target, the object of experimentation that lends itself to countless simulations aimed at both morphological and perceptual modification of a place. This goal is configured in setting up a temporary store, a retail space resurfacing the constitutive principles of the brand identity, and that will settle after appropriate analysis in the urban fabric of the city of Tianjin for just one year. A dynamic space, with a strong identity interacting with the built environment of the city will create those relationships essential to the success of the operation. The design of the commercial space has been dealt with at first from the social point of view and then from the functional one. The right way to identify the social function was to interrogate the cultural nature of the brand and, in parallel, looking for a social necessity from the direct experience of the city of Tianjin.

To each group was assigned a fashion brand with a strong characterization, every brand have been interpreted and represented on some "brand stories". At the same time was required to each group a synthetic representation of predominantly visual identity of the city of Tianjin, through a personal itinerary motivated, eventually identifying the urban area and the specific location for the Temporary Store. It was subsequently developed a concept, which provides for the adaptation and integration of the distinctive elements of the brand with social needs from the reality of the host city, obtained by the development of an appropriate theme of project. These premises have led the work on which you have grappled students of two universities, the Tianjin University (School of Architecture) and the Academy of Fine Arts. Students worked on geometric analysis and the measurements of a space to be created using different techniques. The work was carried out by traditional ways of representation, and computer graphics through the implementation of physical and digital models, both in the planning stage that during the final presentation of the project.

Were formed heterogeneous groups of students taking advantage of the individual experiences' diversity. It was precisely this diversity that has contributed to the enrichment of the content and results of the work done during the workshop. The skills and prior knowledge of individual student have created a common basis on which each group has shaped its own identity that positively has revived in the assigned topic. Interesting from this point of view, the mode of interaction between the members of the groups in the choice of the most suitable and most congenial to them, the technique best suited to the

representation of the idea to the simple graphic sign to express the concept. The experimentation carried out has tried in the graphic representation of all possible relationships between traditional and digital representation, and analysed in parallel generative processes then merge results. The product was the creation of a space represented by drawings, sketches, floor plans, elevations, sections, and scale models with a different mode of exposure of the project, creating graphic compositions for clear legibility and visual impact.

THE URBAN CONTEXT

The context where the students of the workshop have worked is a metropolitan area of 12.000 km² with a population of around 14 million of inhabitants. A city that has become one of the major economic nodes of northern China. An urban context with a highly innovative character, a city that maintains an identity deeply rooted in the past also made up of the West. In fact the city has an Italian neighborhood, as has happened in other Chinese cities: Beijing and Shanghai. The Italian neighborhood is located along the Hai River between the boroughs French and Austro-Hungarian districts. The city has preserved these architectures and today these are open to the public, housing cultural and entertainment functions, some Italian companies were involved in the restoration of these buildings. The city has a port called Xingang that is the most important of the Northern provinces and is also the port of Beijing.

Tianjin, halfway between east and west was the place where the identity of the brands, industry and craft have been compared and mixed, giving rise to interesting products of temporary architecture.

DESIGN RESULTS

The brands selected by each group of students have a strong cultural identity that is worth to summarize here, starting first by some elements in common. The experimental and youthful issues, then the attention to the environmental needs.

We can now describe the design results obtained from each group.

BRAND I

The concept started from the observation of the particular expression of the brand: minimalist, conceptual and tied to handcrafted products, finding in the traditional craftsmanship of the rice paper of Tianjin, a possible element for the concept.

It was then developed an installation based a dynamic set up, in rice paper shimmed with a structure made of wood. In the shape of paper were derived a series of cuts that create a subtle texturing, which accentuate the play of light and galvanizing the Light, paper, monochrome are the basic elements of the project proposal, which has a functional organization, so the retail spaces

are integrated with laboratory activities craft where is possible to exercise an exemplification and communication of traditional paper processing. The social function of this space is the new dialogue between an ancient tradition and a modern context. Through the use of bent and textured walls, we get a kind of simulation of what happens to an handcrafted sheet of paper.

BRAND 2

Brand 2 space, in keeping with the strong dynamism and colour that characterizes the brand identity has been chosen an exhibition space floating on the Hai River. In this way the temporary store will move to a planned route, in which at various times of the day there are many stages of the river route, each one will represent in itself a unique way to generate attention and create opportunities to socialize.

Inside the commercial space, made of split-levels, are located many giant reproductions of the small-scale porcelain figures, typical of the handmade tradition of the city. Just to accentuate the evocative element, these reproductions are used in fragments and not complete and intact. These installations will be entrusted to an artist of the contemporary scene of Tianjin who will make his traveling gallery and a small space for creative workshop.

The floating barge has a structure in wooden sticks of different diameter, coloured white, and joined with ropes, so as to create a very dense cage in which, in transparency, it will glimpse some polychrome elements: the large figurines fragments and the Brand 2 products on display.

A further constituent of this floating pavilion is given by the particular reaction to light. During the day, in fact its brightness is given by the colour white, in stark contrast with the colour of the river landscape. While the white cage at night, lit from within, will act as a sort of floating lantern, an explosion of light on the river. The social function of the store is its traveling exhibition, which for its transparency is visible from the shore, creating a stunning panorama.

BRAND 3

Tianjin is one of the most important trading ports in China. A trading port from which in the past were leaving for Europe goods as tea and silk. The evocation of this dynamic and adventurous story of the city has been identified in the use of the peaks: ropes and pulleys thus represent the underlying theme of this project proposal. In keeping with the spirit of the brand, the space has a full convertibility. The use of pulleys allows you to suspend the two peaks of the strings of the components that characterize the functional alternation of space. On a side, what will turn to day, we find exhibitors, products and accessories for sale, just take a tour of the pulley to bring the ceiling above the ground and bring musical instruments and accessories that will be used to set up a small stage of music and create a meeting place for young people in the port city.

This game powered by the movement of the peaks allows to create a singular point of view from the bottom to the top of all the elements suspended from the ceiling and, at the same time, through the ropes to create vertical walls easily permeable, to cross easily to switch from one part of the store.

BRAND 4

Brand 4 is a company that produces bags and accessories made of recycled materials, like the PVC tarpaulin from trucks. From this insight comes a real business philosophy devoted to recycling, sustainability and diversity. These principles have been transferred in the project proposal, creating a parasite architecture under one of the bridges in the city of Tianjin crossing the Hai River. A series of light hanging structures, coating randomly from PVC components of recovery, in order to create a visual texture very diverse, which alternates a texturizing and casual living areas with neutral and monochromatic, graphically and content that reflect the Brand 4 identity. This small village suspended, accessible from the driveway of the floor deck above, has a longitudinal path that, thanks to a series of stretches of pavement in the crystal structure, allows the spectacular visibility of the river below. A path on which, together with the commercial function, a range of social activities, such as small rooms or entertainment areas for river fishing, opens up.

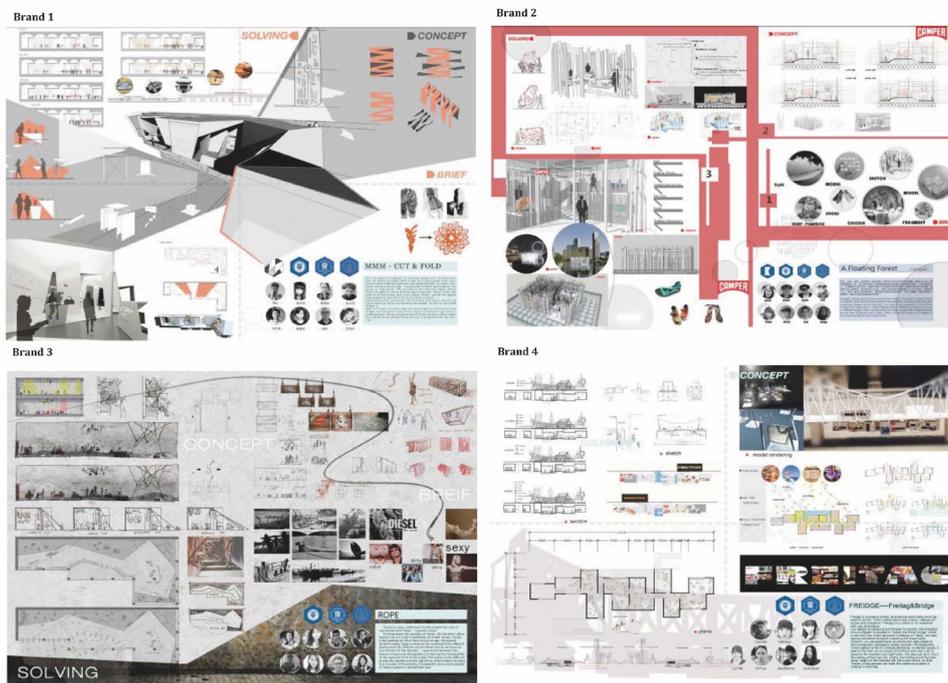


FIGURE 4 - Workshop results

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this contribution is to explain clearly that is crucial to establish design methodologies that allow to give a cultural value to the experience of purchase, because of the progressive migration of the economy from goods logic to a services one.

As well Brand Identity must be able to integrate cultural characteristics that makes it fit to an economy more and more influenced by ethical values of goods. In this context a key factor is the Retail Experience. Commercial Spaces are not just mirrors of commercial values of the brand. They've be a way of integration of issues and meanings from their location. In the light of this sympathy methodologies and project activities, such as that described in our contribution, play a crucial role and may create replicable models in different situations.

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THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE

CUMULUS CONFERENCE 2015

DESIGN CULTURE AND EXPERIMENTATION

Design comes out of the interaction between a practice, which seeks to change the state of things, and a culture, which makes sense of this change. The way this happens evolves with time: practices and cultures evolve and so do the ways they interact; and the attention that is paid at different moments to one or other of these interacting polarities also evolves. In the current period of turbulent transformation of society and the economy, it is important to go back and reflect on the cultural dimension of design, its capacity to produce not only solutions but also meanings, and its relations with pragmatic aspects. Good design does not limit itself to tackling functional and technological questions, but it also always adopts a specific cultural approach that emerges, takes shape and changes direction through a continuous circle of experimenting and reflecting. Because the dimension and complexity of the problems is growing, it is becoming evident that to overcome them it is, above all, necessary to bring new sense systems into play. This is ground on which design, by its very nature, can do much. Indeed, the ability to create a virtuous circle between culture and practical experimentation is, or should be, its main and distinctive characteristic. However, for this really to happen it is necessary to trigger new discussion and reflection about the nature and purpose of design practice and culture.