

A Paradise of Decorated Sheds

Consuming Cities, Virtuality and Postmodernism

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The department store building type became the official construction task of the 2nd half of the 19th century. The contemporaries regarded the famous *Grand Magasins* of Paris, such as the in the years 1868-1887 constructed Bon Marché, as perfect examples of architectural splendor and uniqueness. Founded upon a perfectly calculated sales strategy, the layout conception was supposed to evoke the public's attention. The impression of elegance and an exotic flair was imparted with the help of modern skeleton construction methods. Émile Zola called the Belle Époque department store "The Ladies' Paradise" in his eponymous novel, first published in 1883.

At the dawn of the 21st century these architecturally linked sales strategies are experiencing a renaissance, only this time implemented in the context of new and sophisticated urban planning concepts, so-called "consuming cities." At the outset of this urban development are American shopping malls, such as the Horton Plaza in downtown San Diego, planned in 1977 by Jon Jerde and carried out between 1982 and 1985.¹ Instead of building a fully air-conditioned and roofed-over shopping center, the architect transformed an in the 1970's utterly neglected downtown area of San Diego into an urban landscape containing plazas, streets and colorful facades, behind which the typical consumer offer of stores and fast-food restaurants was to be found. This shopping mall is a six city-block sized public space, incurring a sales volume of 5 billion dollars and counting 9 million visitors annually.²

1 Steiner, D. (2003); Herwig, O. and Holzherr, F. (2006): 34-36; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Jerde; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westfield_Horton_Plaza

2 Guratzsch, D. (2011)

This exceptionally successful concept was continued with the planning of so-called “consuming cities,” at first in North America and subsequently also in Europe. Here a frequently chosen form of operation is the “Factory-Outlet-Center,” FOC for short, within which well-known producers offer their brand-name products at reduced prices.³ By 1995 324 FOCs were built in the U.S.A. alone, by 2009 160 in Europe. These stupendous numbers do not only point to a recent boom in urban planning and construction, they also substantiate the economic efficiency of consuming cities.

Within architectural-historical research the phenomenon of consuming cities has received little attention and hence the scientific consensus is accordingly disparate. “Potempkin Village” or “brutally indifferent architecture” has been heard, as well as “dream worlds” and “paradise of consumption.”⁴ On the other hand, consuming cities are comprehensively discussed within the cultural and social sciences.⁵ Notwithstanding that their fast-paced urban development is well recognized, criticism of consumer-oriented pragmatism within planning prevails. This pragmatism of course causing privatisation and commercialization of public space. Consuming cities are often interpreted as “non-places” (Non-Lieux), in the sense of the word coined by Marc Augé, referring to places not holding enough significance, such as amusement parks and shopping malls.⁶ And last but not least consuming cities represent the urban nadir of postmodernism's continuity after the turn of the millennium, while their architectural stock often is a part of those “constructions with postmodern frills” which Ingeborg Flagge and Romana Schneider did not include in their well-known exhibition catalogue “Revision der Postmoderne” due to mediocrity and banality.⁷ Regardless of one considering consuming cities a “fascinating trend” or damning them as a “Disneyland of shopping”: no survey meeting formal criteria exists evaluating this urban phenomenon of town construction forms and architectural structuring.⁸

Three consuming cities in the specific operational form of a Factory-Outlet-Center are the focal point of the following analyzes: the Palmanova Outlet Village in North-Italian Palmanova in the vicinity of Udine, the Ingolstadt Village in Upper Bavaria and the Wertheim Village in Franconian Wertheim west of

3 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Factory-Outlet-Center>

4 Borrmann, N. (2009): 182-83; Herwig, O. and Holzherr, F. (2006): 150

5 Miles, S., and Miles, M. (2004); Gerbing, C. (2012)

6 Augé, M. (1994): 94

7 Flagge, I., and Schneider, R. (2004): 7; Wefing, H. (2004)

8 Miles, S., and Miles, M. (2004): 128; Gerbing, C. (2012): 107

Wuerzburg.⁹ Having total areas ranging from close to 10,000 up to 24,000 square meters, the size of these consuming cities is quite typical for a factory outlet center. These cities have had several million visitors since their openings between 2003 and 2008 in the urban peripheral area.

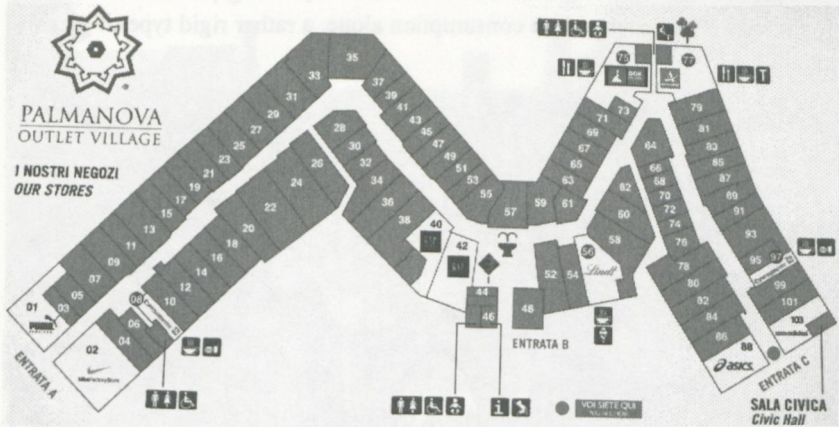


Figure 1. Palmanova, Palmanova Outlet Village, overall plan.

All three cases are a matter of a site similar to a village consisting of a main street as a central axis with access to the middle section and to both narrow sides (figure 1). The configuration of the streets is not based upon an orthogonal grid, but rather shows multiple curves and indentations, letting small open places emerge. The individual buildings surround the street configuration densely, but the facades are offset unequally. Not letting the whole appearance of the consuming city give the impression of being newly planned was carefully looked after. The axial configuration is reminiscent of old city centers in Europe, whereas the staggering of the fronts evokes the impression of being built at different times. The diagrammatic plan of the consuming city should imply a development over a longer period of time – somewhat like the buildings showing a kind of organic growth – so as to compensate the shortcoming of being built as a whole on neutral ground in next to no time.

The main entrances, closed after business hours, show that the analogy to an historic town or city layout is based on the adoption of formal design principles (figure 2). No people live in the consuming city. There are no private dwellings, no communal buildings that could host public events. Almost all buildings

9 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Factory-Outlet-Center>; <http://www.promosbrescia.it/en/palmanova-outlet-village.html>

contain businesses and the daily masses consist of sellers and buyers. The urbanity of these commercialized enclaves bordering city centers is merely virtual. After shop closing time the consuming city is hermetically locked-up and reopens with the beginning of shopping hours. Reminding us of the – since the 1970's – increasing phenomena of gated communities, the operating procedure of a consuming city is concentrated on consumption alone, a rather rigid type of ghettoization.¹⁰

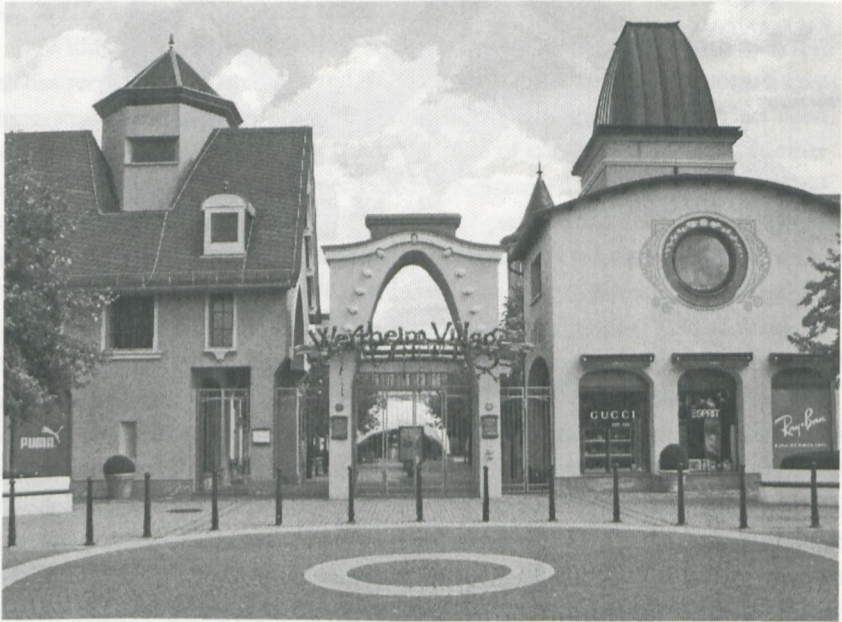


Figure 2. Wertheim, Wertheim Village, main entrance.

Every building receives a noticeably different front; material, color and form are distinctly different (figure 3). In Ingolstadt and Wertheim glass wall membranes alternate with crenellated plaster facades, also with curved and tiled gables. This creates the illusion of buildings dating from different architectural eras. Templates from the Middle Ages up to modern times were used to create an architectural potpourri with varied references to different styles. On the other hand Palmanova orientates itself on old central city streets in Italy with their two-story palaces and their arcaded sidewalks (figure 4). The appearance of variety is attained here by the change of architectural motifs, such as columns, arches and

10 Erben, D. (2012)

gables. Intense and bright coloring contributes to the overall impression of opulence in all three consuming cities.

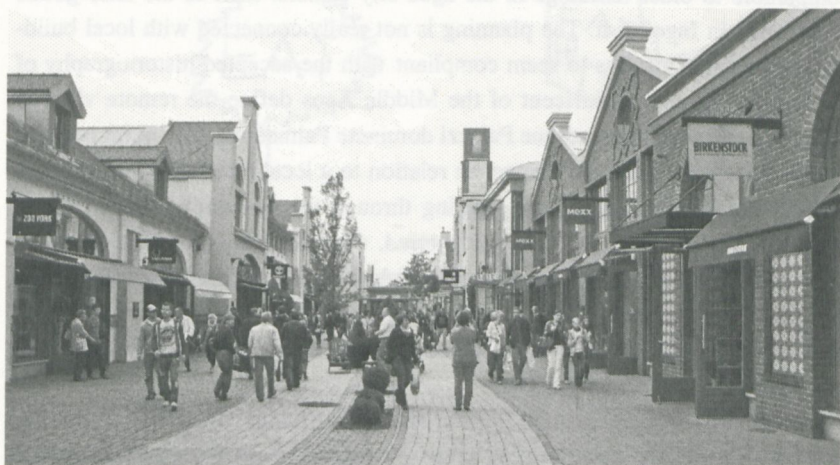


Figure 3. Ingolstadt, Ingolstadt Village, main street.



Figure 4. Palmanova, Palmanova Outlet Village, main street.

Every commercial building gets an individual character and also shows a historicizing design vocabulary, thus inaugurating an exchange with architectural histo-

ry, in order to cancel out an obvious absence of any kind of past. The planning does not bear reference to a specific architectural heritage as it would if being comparable to older buildings in the aged city centers, such as the later gothic style found in Ingolstadt. The planning is not really connected with local building traditions; it just has to seem compliant with the accepted historiography of the region. Towers reminiscent of the Middle Ages define the remote view of Wertheim, whereas Italianesque Palazzi dominate Palmanova. The point is not to build in a largely authentic manner in relation to a local context, but to create a historic illusion for the visitors strolling through the consuming city by using these facades. As soon as a shop is entered, this illusory world ends abruptly, since behind the facade hard-to-change standardized sales areas are to be found. The purism of these interiors is hardly mitigated by their décor, but now it is all about the consumer and the most important thing is buying high-quality brand-name products at a reduced price.

The American architecture theorist and critic Charles Jencks would certainly have declared these consuming cities paradigms of postmodern design had they been built during the last quarter of the 20th century. After all, Jencks did – as a world-renowned leading figure of this movement in architecture theory – demand a postmodern radical eclecticism.¹¹ Simultaneously, the appearance of these three consuming cities represents the principle of double or multiple coding which – according to Jencks – is a core value of increased communication in architectural postmodernism.¹² Architecture as a phenomenon analogue to language must reach a level of increased communication through “coding,” as Jencks typifies the languages of architecture. Double-coding – building around two languages – is a fractal formula and can hence be supplanted by multiple-coding. Through the constant change of taste and culture, the language of architecture must submit to transformation by short-lived codes and therefore a postmodern architect must use a severalfold-coding in order to convey a message.

Behind Jencks’ approach to defining postmodern architecture we find a simple principle of combination which can easily be applied because it is so readily understood. The dazzling historical array seen in the three consuming cities is based upon the intent of reaching different target audiences with distinct codes. In order to encourage consumption, the architectural designs must show high variability in expression, only by doing this can they remain able to deliver their message. This is achieved by the use of a multitude of stylistic elements and forms.

11 Jencks, C. (1988): 92-94

12 Krämer, S. (2010)

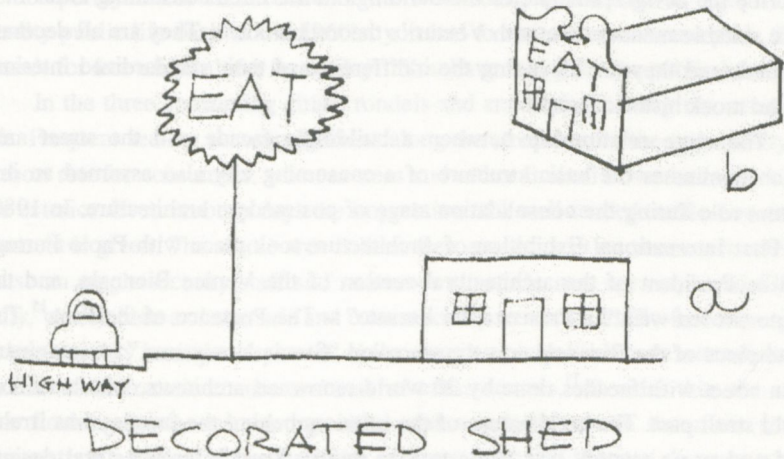


Figure 5. "decorated shed"¹³

Inevitably the design of the facades takes center stage because of the primary importance of the outer appearance of the stores. At the same time, the stores' interiors are chosen rather indifferently and are of a simple standard type. The contrast between the utilitarian neutral inside and the flamboyant portentous outside is another dictum of postmodern building, just as first theoretically expressed by the doyen of American postmodernism, Robert Venturi. In 1972, Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour published the famous manifesto "Learning from Las Vegas."¹⁴ The main subject of the research project was the optical impact of the Las Vegas Strip – with its multitude of enormous billboards using bright colorful neon lights to give notice to the cities' casinos, hotels and restaurants. As signal bearers these were more important than the buildings themselves, which were often somewhat set back from the main street and unaspiring utility constructions. The split of the signal bearer and the building itself was the most important insight gained by Venturi through the exceptional symbolism of Las Vegas' architecture. The result of his research was the so-called "decorated shed" which clearly demonstrated this breach (figure 5). Basically, Venturi expresses the fact that the "show-side" of a building can carry a

13 Venturi, Robert, Brown, Denise Scott and Izenour, Steven: *Lernen von Las Vegas. Zur Ikonographie und Architektursymbolik der Geschäftsstadt*, Braunschweig 1979 (First Publ. Cambridge/Mass. 1972), 107

14 Venturi, R., Brown, D. S., and Izenour, S. (1979)

message, while the construction itself needs no special attention. It is difficult to describe the design principle of the buildings in the three consuming cities in a more suitable manner than with Venturi's theoretical ideas. They are all decorated sheds and they are all hiding the indifference of their standardized interiors behind mock historic facades.

The close relationship between a building's facade and the street area which dominates the basic structure of a consuming city also assumed an important role during the consolidation stage of postmodern architecture. In 1980, the First International Exhibition of Architecture took place with Paolo Portoghesi as President of the architectural section of the Venice Biennale, and the theme chosen was "La Presenza del Passato" – The Presence of the Past.¹⁵ The centerpiece of the Biennale was the so-called "Strada Novissima," an imaginary main street with facades done by 20 world-renowned architects, which visitors could stroll past. The architecture of the interiors behind the facades was irrelevant and so no attempt was made to give them a specific architectural design. The majority of the facades should pertain to architectural history, as the official theme of the exhibition required. The magnificence of colors and shapes shown by the mock historic facades of the Strada Novissima made up – using Venturi's expression – a closely spaced series of "decorated sheds." His postulate of a division between an unpretentious utilitarian interior stated in 1972 and a message-bearing show-side was thus fulfilled during the first exhibition – with international participation. Even today's consuming cities are nothing more than imaginary main streets with the visitors strolling past postmodern facades. Just as the Strada Novissima in the Biennale of Venice assisted postmodernism's breakthrough, we can well observe the repercussions today in consumption-oriented city-planning, even in rural areas of northern Italy, in Franconia and in Upper Bavaria.

One last reference to postmodern architecture theory shall be shown. In the year 1965, Charles Moore – next to Venturi one of the most important American postmodern architects – published an essay with the strange title "You have to pay for the public life."¹⁶ Moore researched the then existing urban architecture of the American west coast in regard to the question if it in any manner evoked public life. He found out that public space and public life had no role in urban planning concepts – with one exception – Disneyland, built in the vicinity of Los Angeles in 1955. Moore didn't care about the amusement park's glittery illusions. What excited him were open public spaces in Disneyland, the streets, the

15 Pirovano, C. (1980)

16 Moore, C. (1965)

plazas and the star-shaped rondels: exactly those urban qualities he missed in the contemporary urban architecture of the west coast. To be able to enjoy high-quality public life back in the 1960's, you had to visit an amusement park. This wasn't for free and isn't for free today: "You have to pay for the public life."

In the three consuming cities, rondels and small plazas bring the streets to life. Frequent seating accommodations along the street ensure the opportunity of a short rest for consumers, whereas trees and rather limited flowerbeds green up the exterior. Even on busy days the impression of a well-tended traffic-free environment is given. The whole area is litter-free, no bums sit on street corners, because an ample security staff and numerous street cleaners are employed. Basically, we see here a clean, safe and commercially attractive traffic-free zone, just as it is a reality in major city cores, since many municipalities have extended and broadened their maintenance and care of urban centers.¹⁷ Besides this, the visitors flocking to the consuming cities and wandering down the main street demonstrate a typical urban behavior of anonymity and discrete distance while shopping. Ultimately almost all of them are consumers, busy spending their money. So we can reinterpret Moore's 1960's slogan as: "You have to consume for the public life," because being in a consuming city has a very commercial nature.

In spite of the fact that research repeatedly deals with the appearance of consuming cities, one vital question remains: what are the exact characteristic traits and particular architectural mechanisms?¹⁸ Furthermore, a detectable undercurrent of critical sentiment is expressed, often just like the undertheorized scathing critique heard in the early 1990's, when postmodernism was declared dead.¹⁹ The claim that consuming cities are "postmodern illusory worlds" or "shopping Disneyland" is an assertion with next to no value, based upon an already well-known line of argument found in social, culture and architecture theories.²⁰ Umberto Eco already referred to Disneyland as the "quintessence of consumerism" in 1977, and one year later Jean Baudrillard called it "a perfect model of the intricacies of simulacra."²¹ In 1978 Rem Koolhaas labeled the phenomenon Lunapark "a large cardboard reality."²² As these examples demonstrate, targeting at a perfectly calculated consumer ideology while using illusory reality

17 Wiegandt, C. C. (2011)

18 Bormann, R. (1998): 33; Bittner, R. (2001): 16, 226

19 Krämer, S. (1995): 105

20 Bormann, R. (1998): 33; Gerbing, C. (2012): 107

21 Eco, U. (1987): 82; Baudrillard, J. (1978): 24

22 Koolhaas, R. (1994): 42

and mirages as arguments does have a kind of tradition. The fundamental question – with which architectural methods the sales strategy is accomplished – remains unanswered.

The design maxims of the 1960's and 1970's postmodern architecture, such as Charles Jencks' double and multiple coding, Robert Venturi's decorated sheds and Charles Moore's demand for the revitalization of public space are as a whole still valid in the 21st century as far as consuming cities are concerned. This new urban phenomenon attracts little attention within the "Revision der Postmoderne" because it does not seem to show "a positive effect of pluralism and complexity" in the present.²³ But in this case one of the present concepts of international urban planning is not heeded, within which the so often heralded "death of postmodernism" just didn't happen. The consuming city is a paradigm of the continued existence of postmodern architecture in the new millennium.

The reasons for using this type of architecture for planning consuming cities are obvious: The impression of an organically grown traffic-free town center is supposed to help gain the visitors' trust, and he is supposed to feel comfortable strolling down a traditional street area, because it seems to be familiar. The variety of the shapes and forms used in designing the facades not only demonstrates the multifariousness of the products for sale but also lets every brand-name store have a special appearance. The colorful mixture of architectural forms and styles from different epochs is expected to draw the visitor's attention towards the individual storefronts. He is supposed to be encouraged to enter the salesroom so that – at last – the prime function of the consuming city can be fulfilled, namely selling. The focal point of the detailed sales strategy of a consuming city is the direct addressing of the customer. A high degree of transmitting information is wanted, exactly as offered by postmodern architecture, since it has been interpreted – from the beginning – as analogue to language and allows a very high degree of communication.

Since the 1990's, a style of "New Abstraction" dominates the international vanguard of architecture, but simultaneously does not permit this method of communication.²⁴ Based upon the abstract and non-representational language of classic modernism, it is classified as a kind of "Second Modernism."²⁵ Contemporary trends such as textual or sculptural architecture deliver new meanings, but do not fit in a scheme of pre-planning a perfected sales strategy.²⁶ The use of a

23 Flagge, I., and Schneider, R. (2004): 7

24 Klotz, H. (1994): 153-61

25 Klotz, H. (1994): 153-61; Klotz, H. (1999)

26 Pahl, J. (1999)

postmodern form language in the conceptual design of a consuming city is no great surprise because of the easy transmission of the planned and desired content.

The criticism of the consuming city phenomena by cultural and social sciences is no doubt justifiable. This is because simulated urbanity serves the sole purpose of commerce. Urban life is broken apart and reduced to fragments, but these still have an enormous impact as they remain an important part of today's "consumer culture."²⁷ Moreover, a consuming city is not only an urban-style illusory world but is developing towards an increasingly dominant parallel reality.²⁸ The large number of intensely discussed and/or already approved plans for new FOCs in Germany during the past few years is proof enough.²⁹ These developments explain many fears municipalities have concerning the desolation of the inner parts of towns and cities. For this sole reason, criticism of a consuming city is sensible and meaningful but scientific research must also deal with this design phenomena because the high attraction of a consuming city rests upon its form language and thus upon formal criteria.

On the other hand, consuming cities do exert a strange fascination, international corporations let these ideal consumer-oriented miniature cities pop up one after another without worrying a bit and not caring about scientific objections of any kind. It seems like a kind of a gold rush in international urban development with astounding dynamics in spite of its downsides. It looks as if the dictum of the English historian Ruth Eaton will be consistently implemented – that in the future, the planners of ideal cities will have to operate locally.³⁰ In the beginning of the 21st century, the legacy of the ideal city has turned into urban worlds of illusion, the "promised land of consumerism."³¹ In spite of the pragmatism of pure commerce, the consumer city is seen as a Foucault-type heterotopia with its urbanity as an exactly planned and orchestrated illusion; or as Umberto Eco said, "the reality of commerce playing with fiction."³²

If we regard the rising number of publications dealing with "amusement architecture," we find urban virtuality and simulation booming.³³ Despite of all the

27 Bormann, R. (1998): 43

28 Bormann, R. (1998): 33

29 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Factory-Outlet-Center>

30 Eaton, R., (2001): 241

31 Miles, S., and Miles, M. (2004): 23

32 Guratzsch, D. (2011): 25; Eco, U. (1987): 80

33 Herwig, O., and Holzherr, F. (2006); Bittner, R. (2001); Quentin, B., and Ottinger, D. (2010)

criticism, many authors hope for new impulses concerning urban planning when they research the vital mechanisms of theme- and amusement parks or event- and consuming cities. By doing this, they are perpetuating a tradition within architecture theory, the beginnings of which are Venturi's and Moore's appraisals of Las Vegas and Disneyland. "Learning from Las Vegas" must now be taken seriously again, even if the researched objects are today more complex than in the Sixties and Seventies.

The commercial success of consuming cities justifies its important role and at least in Europe, no end is in sight. Consuming cities can teach us valuable facts if we refrain from viewing them as pure illusions of urban virtuality. The results are impartial and unprejudiced and can be either of a positive or negative nature. A department store, or as Émile Zola called it – The Ladies' Paradise – is comparable to a consumer city since the architectural concept is in both cases determined by the sales strategy. The exotic and exclusive interior of the department store had the role the exterior of the consuming city – with its colorful facades – has now. There seems to be no more fitting description of the consuming city than Venturi's terminology: a Paradise of decorated sheds.

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