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Technical frames of affect: Design-work and brand-work in a shopping mall

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the dense network of politics and practices through which experts and institutions frame, instrumentalize and act on the problem-space of affect. Focusing on a new shopping mall cum residential tower in Singapore, I show how urban planners, architects, tourism regulators and retail managers were motivated by a self-reflexive awareness of the indeterminate nature of affect to continually experiment on defining and capturing its value. By highlighting the heterogeneous conditions of practice across multiple domains of expertise, I argue that each expert domain conceptualizes and intervenes into the problem-space differently, reflecting existing professional boundaries and technologies of control as well as divergent political interests. Because the perceived values of affect as well as the points of intervention are not consistent, the work of one group of experts can be negated, undermined or ignored by the work of another. This article argues that it is important to acknowledge the constructed and contested nature of affect, and analyze how its emergence in specific contexts, as discourse and practice, becomes imbricated in the structures of governance that in turn frame affect as the declared object-target.

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Introduction

In March 2009, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) announced the completion of a state-funded rejuvenation of Singapore's main shopping street, Orchard Road. This project was carried out in response to a government report, "Tourism 21: A Vision of a Tourism Capital", released after the Asian financial crisis of 1996. It proposed a new strategy which moved away from the previous model of producing enclosed pockets of exotic themed environments to a model that conceived of open attractions in different parts of the city (Chang, 2010; Savage et al., 2004). By overlaying onto the stream of everyday life a thematic map for touristic consumption, this model of embedded tourism conceived of exoticized local culture as lived and continuous, rather than suspended and segregated.

The overall objective of the rejuvenation was to produce a "multi-sensory seamless experience for shoppers" (STB, 10 March 2009). It divided Orchard Road into three "thematic zones", reinventing and representing select parts of its history through the introduction of flora, lighting effects and other decorative elements on the pedestrian boulevard. Around the same time, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) sold the remaining

few large parcels of land along Orchard Road, setting the conditions and expectations for iconic development and market competition that would spur a new round of capital investment. The Orchard Road Business Association (ORBA) which represents many of the stakeholders was also given funding by the government to take on more responsibility as the place manager, an approach modeled after Business Improvement Districts (BID) in other shopping streets such as the Fifth Avenue of New York and New West End of London.¹ Thus, a mixture of market competition, neoliberal institutional reform and differentiated theming incited various actors to think about Orchard Road as a collective but segmented shopping environment.

The evocation of senses, movement and immersion captured in the slogan "multi-sensory seamless experience" points toward the very conditions of a mode of consumerism that is exciting, stimulating and fluid. This article is concerned with the dense network of politics and practices through which experts and institutions frame, instrumentalize and act on the problem-space of affect.

¹ In this arrangement, the STB adopts the role of a facilitator which provides networking opportunities, bureaucratic support, tourism data, training programmes and seed funding, while ORBA takes up the role of advocating for the stakeholders and coordinating the brand positioning, retail strategy and event organization of Orchard Road as a whole. Interview with Mr. Steven Goh, executive director of ORBA, 15 August 2013.

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Focusing on the planning, designing and management of the new shopping mall cum residential tower, ION Orchard, it shows how the building and its context has become an experimental site where different actors come to share certain perspectives and techniques on how to gain traction on this elusive object, even as their power-relations are being reconfigured in a neoliberal model. In this space, affect emerges within management and retail practices as a new frontier of value creation where the intersections between psychological, spatial, corporeal and informational forces are changing the modalities of consumption practices. Experimenting on these “atmospheric affects”, business consultants Babin and Attaway (2000: 93) advise, can help to induce “hedonic shopping” – “the store atmosphere evokes emotions, these emotions help determine value, and this value motivates customers to patronize a given choice repeatedly”.

The growing literature on affect in the disciplines of science and technology studies, human geography and architectural geography provides a broad canvas of theoretical debates and methodologies on which this essay rests. This turn toward affect does at least two things: first, it moves away from a semiotic analysis of the built environment in favor of a materialist ontology where non-human agents have the capacity to shape socio-technical relations; and second, it extends the complex politics of urban life into deeply human conditions of passions, moods and feelings, where the very contingency and unpredictability of life enters into relationships with modes of neoliberal governance (Anderson, 2012). Within this literature, affect is distinguished from emotions and subjectivity because it operates outside and independently of meaning and intention – the famous “founding” case being Massumi’s (2002) analysis of Benjamin Libbet’s experiment which he claims reveals a half-second delay between the brain registering a stimulus and the body reacting to the stimulus. My purpose, however, is not to build on this ontology, but to use it as a category with which to analyze how certain experts and institutions frame, instrumentalize and value this domain of human experience they themselves can only refer to in vague and indirect ways.

As a space of heightened consumption, it is not surprising that the shopping mall is one of the key laboratories of affective organization. As early as 1993, Goss analyzed the “magic of the mall” as the connection between mall design and management with the “consciousness industry”. He mentions the quality of indoor lighting that acts as a “silent salesman” (Connor 1989, quoted in Goss, 1993: 32) as well as the use of music that immerses the shopper “in anesthetic or tonic aural fluid” (Boorstin 1961, quoted in Goss, 1993: 32). He notes that Victor Gruen, the pioneer of the modern shopping mall, paid considerable attention to the deeply human conditions of being in a mall – his formula was intended to “counteract the phenomenon of alienation, isolation and loneliness” (Gruen 1973, quoted in Goss, 1993: 23) by creating enriching and pleasant spaces to shop, socialize and relax. The turn toward affect has taken up these latent observations about music, lighting and sociality and generated new investigations into what may now be called the *unconsciousness industry*. The current thrust has been to open up questions about the complex and fluid agencies between materialities, ambience, users, designers and spatial practices, generally operating at the edge of cognition and outside the realm of the visual (Miller, 2014; Roberts, 2012; Jacobs and Merriman, 2011; Lees and Baxter, 2011; Knudsen and Waade, 2010; Rose et al., 2010; Lorimer, 2008).

Yet, the turn to affect should not leave behind critical analysis of spectacles as social relations mediated by images. The Situationists, for example, were cognizant of the techniques of shock and disorientation, and thought of their counter-mapping psychogeographies as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, *consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals*” (Debord, 1955: 23, emphasis

added). Affect construed as something absolutely prior to cognition and outside of representation is a problematic conceptualization that has been vigorously debated elsewhere (e.g. Pile, 2010; Leys, 2011). On the one hand, representation can be experienced as “things and events ... rather than simple go-betweens tasked with re-presenting some pre-existing order or force” (Anderson and Harris, 2010: 14). And on the other, affect as corporeal and neurological responses also enters into relations with signifying, narrative elements and acculturated sensibilities, and does not operate in an isolated and automatic fashion that precludes and precedes all other forms of subjectivities (Rose et al., 2010; Butcher, 2011; Edensor, 2012). Thus, it is important that a critical analysis of urban politics in the context of consumerism takes into account how the social is mediated by images as well as bodies, information and the various infrastructures of feeling that affect theory has foregrounded.

By focusing on ION Orchard, one of the most prestigious development built during the Orchard Road rejuvenation exercise, I show how the “disruptive openness of affect” (Anderson, 2010: 168) emerged as a common referent object, and how the experts were motivated by a self-reflexive awareness of its indeterminate nature to continually experiment on defining and capturing its value. In these experiments, the planning, designing and management of shopping malls and urban environments flow across processes that operate on various sensorial and cognitive registers, very often in flexible and unpredictable combinations at the same time. Thus, signages, built form, material finishes and the uniforms of service staff appear on the radar of experts not merely as rigid systematizations or bodily automatisms, but also as problematic unknowns and culturally mediated perspectives that resist and elicit further rounds of experimentation.

Through this case, I also show the heterogeneous conditions of practice across multiple domains of expertise from urban planning to architectural design to retail and brand management. I argue that each expert domain conceptualizes and intervenes into the problem-space differently, reflecting existing professional boundaries and technical knowhow as well as divergent political interests. While the experts might agree on the importance of a “multi-sensory experience” understood broadly, and while one might collect these multiple projects within the larger arc of biopolitics, the perceived values of affect as well as the points of intervention are not consistent, such that the work of one group of experts can be negated, undermined or ignored by the work of another. Paying attention to the heterogeneous conditions of practice forestalls claims about the “claustrophobic” closing-in of affect for the “redeployment of discipline and biopolitics” (Anderson, 2012: 40) and tendencies toward an ontologization of affect, turning instead to a critical analysis of the internal inconsistencies of power within a given context of urban governance.

I begin by slicing the literature on affect, drawing out existing studies that explore the heterogeneous conditions of practice to make a case for my contribution. Then, I present my empirical analysis as two related clusters of work – design-work by planners and architects and brand-work by retail managers. This analysis is based partly on my own experience as an urban planner in the URA involved in the renewal of Orchard Road between 2004 and 2007. Subsequently in 2013, four years after the building opened, I interviewed the architects of ION Orchard, nine stakeholders of Orchard Road and a few of my ex-colleagues. A guided tour of the building and a public design symposium² gave me further opportunities to

² The public symposium, “100% Design Singapore”, is an interior design exhibition for professionals centered in Southeast Asia held from 11th to 13th September 2013. The architects and managers of ION Orchard gave a presentation about the design and branding of the development at this symposium.

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