



## Spaces of Consumption: From Margin to Centre

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### abstract

Organization theory is very much focused on the internal organizational processes of production of space, that is, the use of and inscription of social spaces. But organizational space is also a space of consumption, a space in which meaning is produced through the relations of certain items, entities and symbols. This paper is an attempt to align theories of consumption and space in order to show that just as organizational spaces are produced, they are equally being subject to an aesthetic of consumption. Consumption and consumerism has been examined as an embodied experience, as a political strategy for control, as an ideology pervading everyday and working life, as a social practice, and as a more deeply transformative force in late modern society. Some writers are very concerned about consumerism and its effects on society, while others embrace the new consumer-driven economy. Consumerism is not very often examined from a spatial perspective in organization theory. This paper aims at conceiving consumption as being essentially embodied and spatialized, distributed across entities, spaces, symbols, and practices of consumption.

### Introduction

In this paper, space is defined in accordance with de Certeau's (1984) distinction between place (*lieu*) and space (*espace*). De Certeau writes:

A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which the elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence... A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. A space exists when one takes into consideration the vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables... In short, *space is a practiced place*. (1984: 117)

For de Certeau (1984), space is what is practiced, what is produced. Thus de Certeau speaks, just like Lefebvre (1991), of 'spatial practices', of production of space. Space is what is produced through interaction; it is what is becoming through practical undertakings and activities. Next, this paper makes use of a conceptual framework including the notions of production and consumption. These two terms are inextricably entangled. In Marxist theory, consumption plays an important but somewhat neglected role. For Marx, production and consumption are always presupposing and implicated in one another. Marx and Engels write that consumption is products becoming

“appropriated by individuals”. In addition, “production is simultaneously consumption as well” and “consumption is simultaneously also production” (1970: 129):

just as in nature the production of a plant involves the consumption of elemental forces and chemical materials. It is obvious that man produces his own body, e.g., through feeding, a form of consumption. (*ibid.*: 131)

Marx and Engels thus offer a dynamic view of consumption as being a component of production and the other way around. Consumption is therefore not an isolated process. de Certeau agrees with this view and writes:

In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production called ‘consumption’ and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products...but in an art of using those imposed on it. (1984: 31)

Both space and the duality production/consumption are thus dynamic concepts based on practices. When the notion of spaces of consumption is employed in the paper, it is used in this fluid and fragmentary manner, both embodying a produced space and the dual nature of consumption (i.e., consumption as the termination of production/consumption as a form of production). Spaces of consumption are in brief; a space of becoming, a space where consumption is taking place, where commodities are appropriated and used. Thus the notion of spaces of consumption is not intended to serve as a fixed and ready-made construct but rather to serve as an ideal type model for an emerging form of social space.

In organization theory, space is generally treated as a domain of production: Organizing is spatial practice aimed at production. The Marxist view of consumption as production (exemplified by de Certeau’s example – also discussed by Roland Barthes – of the reading of a text wherein the text is becoming produced through its consumption, its reading) is not thoroughly theorized. Therefore, the notion of spaces of consumption may be used to reintroduce a less “productivist view” of organization space (see Collins, 2003: 191-192). A space of consumption is an organized, cultural and economic space, marked by practices (see de Certeau, Girard and Mayol, 1998). In addition, it embodies aesthetics and ethical issues; a space of consumptions is thus a polysemic and heteroglot space comprising a multiplicity of qualities. In summary, organizing is a spatial practice aimed at producing spaces of consumption just as spaces of production. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the qualities of such a space of consumption.

## **Spaces of Consumption**

Walter Benjamin’s massive torso, *The Arcades Project* (1999), was one of the first works to actively theorize the relationship between space, aesthetics and consumption. The architecture of the arcade, popularized by the Parisian Haussmann architecture, precedes the late modern aesthetic of consumer space. In the arcade, the goods are on display at the same time as the *flâneur* is capable of passing through the arcade as an autonomous, enterprising, and choosing subject. Consumption becomes an aesthetic

experience; space and consumption are merged in the spatial practice producing spaces of consumption. The visual qualities of the arcade architecture enable a spatialization of the goods, a display and spatial distribution in consumer space. Therefore, the arcade is one of the first distinct urban spaces; spaces of production are characterized by rural aesthetics and ethics emphasizing accumulation, the physical transformation of nature. The spaces of production are paradoxically rural spaces located within urban environments. The industrial revolution was orchestrated by the increased productivity in the agriculture sector during the take-off phase. The rural proletariat moved to the urban centers and helped reproduce new forms of rural spaces. The arcade is overturning this assemblage of aesthetics and ethics and makes consumption a spatial practice distinguished from that of the spaces of production. The space of consumption is thus characterized by its *loss of facticity*; its ontological status is never once and for all determined – a certain degree of uncertainty is always present in consumption because of its symbolic qualities. Alluding to the anthropologist James Clifford, a space of consumption “is an itinerary rather than a bounded site – a series of encounters and translations” (1997: 11). In addition, the arcades have a distinct quality of ‘liminality’: they are neither inside (e.g., proper boutiques), nor outside (e.g., open street markets); not a building (representing the private sphere), nor a street (representing the public sphere), but passages *in-between* buildings, a route of transition (see Grosz, 2001; Augé, 1995) – spaces of consumption enabling for goods to be displayed and, at the same time, walking is made possible. Compare with the more recent architectural innovation of the shopping mall. Here, there is no ‘liminality’, no sense of being ‘in-between’: the shopping mall is constituting a center of relations in itself. Thus, there is a difference between the architecture of the modern arcade and the late modern shopping mall: spaces of consumption are becoming the center rather than the margin.

Furthermore, the arcades are symbolic spaces; they are spaces where art is becoming a consumer commodity. Although Benjamin has expressed his belief in the revolutionary potential of the mass-production of art (Benjamin, 1973), in the arcade, Benjamin (1999) argues, art becomes kitsch. Benjamin writes:

Kitsch...is nothing more than art with a 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption. Precisely within the consecrated forms of expression, therefore, kitsch and art stand irreconcilably opposed. (Benjamin, 1999: 395, K3a, 1)

Similarly, Adorno says: “[T]he tension between culture and kitsch is breaking down” (1974: 147). For Eco, kitsch is a “substitute for art”, a *supplement*: “As an easily digestible substitute for art, Kitsch is the ideal food for a lazy audience that wants to have access to beauty and enjoy it without having to make much of an effort” (Eco, 1989: 198). Linstead argues that kitsch is not only a substitute but representative of an anthropocentric, humanist ideology: “The narcissistic properties of kitsch, and the tendency of the familiar to follow a trajectory of deepening approval from the aesthetic (it is comfortable, pleasing) to the moral (it is approved, advocated, required, the natural way of things) underpin a cosmology which positions humanity at the centre of creation” (2002: 664). Kitsch here represents a certain worldview and a *modus vivendi*: a form of hedonism. In addition, kitsch shares some important characteristics with the hyper-real. They both go beyond the immediately observable, the ‘really real’, and they are distinguishing marks of the modern age. For Benjamin, kitsch is debased art; For Eco, the hyper-real conceals the anxieties of the loss of “the authentic”: “[T]he frantic

desire for the Almost Real arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories; the Absolute Fake is offspring of the unhappy awareness of present without depth” (1986: 30-31).

Thus one proposition can be formulated: Kitsch and the hyper-real emerge in the margin, which then moves to the center. Rem Koolhaas (1978) discusses how Coney Island, the seaside amusement resort in Brooklyn, New York, became a site of experimentation for what he calls the “the technology of the fantastic”. In Coney Island, various amusement parks such as *Luna Park* and *Dreamland* were built at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1906, Maxim Gorky visits New York and reports with great contempt: “The City, magic and fantastic from afar, now appears an absurd jungle of straight lines of wood, of cheap hastily constructed toy houses for the amusement of children... Everything is stripped naked by the dispassionate glare, The glare is everywhere and nowhere is the shadow...the visitor is stunned; his consciousness is withered by the intense gleam; his thoughts are routed from his mind; he becomes a particle in the crowd” (Maxim Gorky, cited in Koolhaas, 1978: 67-68). Koolhaas writes:

Gorky’s disgust represents the modern intellectual’s dilemma: confronted with the masses, whom he admires theoretically, in the flesh, he suffers from an acute distaste. He cannot admit to this disgust; he sublimates it by identifying external exploitation and corruption as the reason for the masses aberrations. (1978: 68)

The technology of the fantastic found its laboratory on Coney Island. In the early twentieth century, the technology of the fantastic was transferred to Manhattan, serving as one of the pillars of what Koolhaas calls *Manhattanism*, an ideology of hyper-density and “culture of congestion”.<sup>1</sup> The technology of the fantastic enters urban life. In New York City, the 42<sup>nd</sup> street became its first site. Today, Time Square is marked by Disney’s products and other representatives of the culture industry. It used to be a sordid place in the 1970s and early 1980s, the tourist guides tell us; today it is a space where the technology of the fantastic triumphs.

The archetypical space of consumption based on the exploitation of kitsch and the hyper-real is Las Vegas. Parisian arcades, Coney Island, Las Vegas – the trajectory of kitsch and the hyper-real in modernity; its movement from the ‘in-between-ness’ of the arcades, the leisure dome of Coney Island to the desert city: initially, all spaces on the margin. Located in the middle of the Mojave desert in Nevada, Las Vegas is a saturated space in terms of symbols (Venturi, Brown and Izenour, 1972; Ritzer and Stillman, 2001; Linstead, 2001). In Las Vegas the entire space is turned into a symbolic space taking the aesthetics of consumerism to its boundaries. Slavoj Žižek writes on capital: “‘Money which begets more money’: Money-Commodity-Money...in short, Capital is Money-which-became-subject” (1993: 27). In Las Vegas, the entire economy is based on the circulation of capital; capital is becoming a subject. The importance of the subject of money is reflected in the symbolic space of Las Vegas. However, it is important to acknowledge the difference between Las Vegas as the ‘Sin City’ and the amusement park it is turned into today. For Taylor (1998), Venturi, Brown and Izenour’s (1972) analysis deals with the culmination of a certain era, that of the ‘Sin

1 It is noteworthy that Koolhaas’ *Delirious New York* was written in the end of the 1970s, when New York City was on the verge of bankruptcy and when urbanism was contested.

City'. For instance, the casinos of the 1960s maintained a strict boundary between inside and outside; the outside was marked by the relationship between cars (their routes and parking spaces) and various signs and symbols directing the traffic. Since the 1960s, pedestrian areas have become a more significant spatial arrangement. Taylor writes:

While Venturi and his colleagues recognized certain similarities between Disneyland and Las Vegas, they never could have anticipated the extent to which the thematization of urban space characterizes the city today. From frontier villages and tropical oases to Mississippi riverboats and Mediterranean resorts, from medieval castles and the land of Oz to oriental palaces and the New York skyline, every hotel-casino is organized around a theme. Fantasies fold into fantasies to create worlds within worlds. (1998: 200)

He continues:

The primary motivation for thematizing Las Vegas is economic. As we have seen, to attract people who had never considered gambling, illegitimate vice had to be turned into legitimate entertainment. Moreover, the city had to be made hospitable to the middle class and their families. The Disneyfication of Vegas is intended to sanitize the city by white-washing its sin and corruption. Far from a den of iniquity, Vegas creates the facade of a user-friendly amusement park. (*ibid.*: 200-201)

Las Vegas has thus moved from the margin to the centre. Las Vegas was dangerous, on the fringe, ruled by the mob. Today, Las Vegas has become one of the fastest growing cities in the US and one of its most popular destinations. This is to say that the idea of the arcade is no longer one of a space 'in-between' streets and buildings; instead, it is becoming the primary space. The space of consumption is thus defeating competing spaces, the order is overturned and the parasitic space, the 'liminal' space of the arcade, is becoming the center of relations. Talking with Derrida (1987), the consumption space is no longer the *parergon*, the surrounding framework that gives order and meaning to the work of art (production in this case), but becomes the work of art itself, turning the normal, non-saturated space into the margin. Benjamin's Parisian arcades were a novel, highly modern phenomenon and architectural innovation. In Las Vegas it becomes an archetype; the arcades are the centre of relations (Venturi, Brown and Izenour, 1972).

Today, Las Vegas is becoming a role model for consumption spaces. Consumerism is blended with technologies of fantastic, hyper-real representations; kitsch and spaces of consumptions are produced. Consumption is no longer a parasitic activity, but is at the center of the economy (Baudrillard, 1998). Spaces of consumption are inscribed with qualities and values: Some talk of consumerism, others of the liberation of consumption.

## Aesthetics, Consumption and Space

Gaston Bachelard says:

Imagination is not, as its etymology would suggest, the faculty of forming images of reality; it is rather the faculty of forming images which go beyond reality, which *sing* reality. It is a superhuman faculty. A man is man insofar as he is a superman. A man must be defined by the tendencies which impel him to go beyond the *human condition*. (1987: 15-16)

Man is a creation of desire, not of need, Bachelard says elsewhere (1984). To imagine is to overcome the human condition. Consumption essentially serves the same function. Imagination is based on the capability of leaving the actual in order to embrace the potential; to create images of not *what is* but *what may be*. Following Douglas and Isherwood (1979), one may argue that consumption is imagination in practice; the consumer is becoming through the consumption of signs and symbols, enabling for a potentiality: consumption is a form of social production. They write:

Theories of consumption which assume a puppet consumer prey to the advertiser's wiles, or consumers jealously competing for no sane motive, or lemming consumers rushing to disaster, are frivolous, even dangerous. (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979: 89)

This is an exceptional statement. Normally, the backside of consumption is – for good reasons – being examined and brought into the daylight: its exploiting effects, its dependence on non-egalitarian access to resources, its use of scarce resources (see e.g., Klein, 2000; Schlosser, 2001). Most consumption is a matter of taste (Bourdieu, 1984). And taste is in turn a materialization of relationships of power in a social formation (Veblen, 1994). Therefore, consumption is also an economic issue, an index of the distribution of economic resources in a society (Marx and Engels, 1970). As a consequence, certain forms of consumptions are deplored. The masses, the multitude, the common man, are often claimed not to be able to master their consumption. The intelligentsia (a Russian concept, Holquist [1984: xiii] reminds us) is prone to claim that consumption is a problematic social fact. It is often regarded as being parasitic, in-between production and the *Bildung* (education) favoured by men and women of letters (recall Gorky's contempt for Coney Island). In strict economic terms, consuming a book is not different from consuming a meal in a hamburger restaurant; it is merely contributing to the circulation of capital: but these two items have different social values; high-brow *versus* low-brow consumption. The practices of consumption are therefore subject to aesthetic and spatial practices. Space is never innocent; it is always an integral part of the practices of consumption. Since consumption is inherently political, aesthetic, ethic and economic, spaces of consumption are always produced as a field of forces, exchanges and interactions. Gorky's rejection of Coney Island is representative of the privileged position of the intelligentsia. Spaces of consumption, such as Coney Island, are therefore just as politicized as the spaces of production theorized by labour process theorists. As a consequence, such spaces need to be examined *qua* spaces of consumption.

Douglas and Isherwood (1979) write:

If it is said that the essential function of language is its capacity for poetry, we shall assume that the essential function of consumption is its capacity to make sense. Forget the idea of consumer irrationality. Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty. (1979: 62)

They continue: "The meaning is the relations between all the goods, just as music is in the relations marked out by the sounds and not in any one note" (*ibid.*: 72-73). Consumption is always a *systemic* concept (see Barthes, 1983); it is not solely located in the very act of consumption, nor is it centered on the very commodity *per se* (Baudrillard, 1993, 1998): it is the totality of different processes and entities.

Consumption is based on the use of symbols that in turn produce meaning in social formations. Consumption of goods *makes sense*; goods inscribe qualities into human beings and forge relationships between individuals. Consumption is therefore *spatialised*, to use Bergson's (1998) term; it is based on the spatial arrangement and organization of consumers into categories, clusters, strata and groups. In a similar manner, space is striated and divided. No consumption without meaning, no consumption without space. Meaning emerges from consumption. This is the point worth making. "What is worth saying once is worth saying twice or more" (Aragon, 1991: 28).

## From Margin to Centre

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre (1991) argues that there is no 'facticity' of space; space is not an assembly of *facta bruta*, but space is continuously *produced* through various human actions and undertakings. Adhering to a Marxist tradition of thinking, Lefebvre tends to favour the concept of production ('production of space') at the expense of consumption. In our account, space is not only produced; it is equally consumed or becoming a space of consumption. Consumption is always spatial: it is based on the spatial-aesthetic arrangement, associations, and display of commodities in social space. Consumption is spatial practice. Spaces of consumption are fundamentally spatial constructs, material assemblages constituted by material artifacts, signs, and symbols. Alluding to John Berger's (1972) text on art, we may say that consumption is a way of seeing, a way of perceiving the world (see also Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Spaces of consumption are also heavily monitored spaces; indeed they are subject to surveillance (Bogard, 1998; Lyons, 1994; Davies, 1990). Thus, consumption and seeing become associated. There is an interest in monitoring and determining the trajectories of consumers in spaces of consumption, to examine their movements and activities. The space of consumption is a domain wherein spatial resources are subject to minute economic control and calculation. For instance – this may be a most common sense reflection – why are luxury goods such as perfumes and cosmetics always located on the ground floor in department stores? Do they attract certain groups that are especially prone to consume, or do cosmetics stalls denote glamour and luxury that in turn have the capacity to attract less enthusiastic and dedicated consumers? Here aesthetics and economy become important categories of spaces of consumption. Spaces of consumption are by no means innocent; they are, instead, rather elusive in terms of being fabricated domains designed to attract, to speak with a marketing vocabulary, attention, desire and action. Benjamin's arcades are paradigmatic examples of spaces of consumption because they were designed to enable for spatial practices manifested in consumption. Today's consumption spaces are no longer located in the margins of, or 'in-between', the spaces of production but have become the most important spatial arrangement. Again, the shopping mall appears as its most generic form: a pure consumer space, designed to impress consumers and enable for spatial practice. It is commonplace to argue that meaning no longer derives from the space of production but from the space of consumption (see e.g., Du Gay, 1996); that the Marxist subject shaping his or her life-world through material transformations is an outmoded image of the human subject (cf. Spivak, 1999: 357). In the early 1960s, Guy Debord wrote:

For classical capitalism, wasted time was time that was not devoted to production, accumulation, saving. The secular morality taught in bourgeoisie schools has instilled this rule of life. But it so happens that by an unexpected turn of events modern capitalism needs to increase consumption, to raise 'standard of living' . . . Since at the time production conditions, compartmentalized and clocked at the extreme, have become indefensible, the new morality already being conveyed in advertising, propaganda and all forms of the dominant spectacle now frankly admits that wasted time is the time spent at work, which latter is only justified by the hierarchized scale of earnings that enable one to buy rest, consumption and entertainment – a daily passivity manufactured and controlled by capitalism. (1981: 73)

According to this view, spaces of consumption are no longer produced in the shadow of spaces of production but rather become their role model. Again, a movement from margin to centre may be identified. There are several alarming examples reported that support this idea. For instance, Klein (2000, Ch. 4) reports that American schools have admitted multinational fast-food companies to promote their products on school premises. In addition, such companies are often involved in developing and promoting teaching material. Schools are thus turned into spaces of consumption (see also Hertz, 2001; Ritzer, 1998). Spaces of consumption are the primary domain for the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1977), the society in which consumption plays an important role in terms of veiling the economic and social inequalities and the underlying mechanisms of social reproduction of power. Spaces of consumption are therefore two-sided: on one hand, they are (to some extent) domains for liberation and desire – this is Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) position; on the other hand, they are the stages on which the machinery of social reproduction is played out – Debord's (1977, 1981) position. As a consequence, organization theory researchers need to take this double function of spaces of consumption into account: it is both a domain of liberation and of repression in the same manner as spaces of production are two-sided.

## Final Remarks

Welcome to Dachau . . . and welcome to McDonald's (Schlosser, 2001: 233)

(Text in a promotion leaflet distributed at the visitors' parking lot outside Dachau, the first concentration camp built by the Nazis.)

In Benjamin's view, consumption spaces of the nineteenth century were located in specific domains of shared social space. In today's society, consumption spaces tend to colonize domains that have previously been sheltered from what Baudrillard (1998) calls the institution of consumption. In spaces of consumption – by definition, according to Benjamin – the boundary between the domain of art (the realm of purity) and that of kitsch (the realm of symbolic saturation) dissolves. McDonald's enters the concentration camp, which today is supposed to be an historical site suited for reflection and redemption. There is a most disturbing irony here; the space of mass production of death (Bauman, 1991) and the space of mass production of food come together in one single site. The boundary between the sacred and the profane (Durkheim, 1995) becomes violated. This is not only an ethical violation to our agreements but also an aesthetic gesture that one may refuse. Nothing frivolous at these historical sites; no Ronald McDonald clowns, no fast-food promotion, no 'Happy Meals'. Writing poetry after Auschwitz is perverted, Adorno (1981: 34) argued. What about promoting fast-

food at its entrance? If nothing else, this is a sad example of how different spatial practices may clash. Benjamin's (1999) arcades are no longer parasitic spaces gnawing on the roots of the spaces of production, but become the center of relations, a centre where 'money becomes subject'. Marx and Engels (1970) insistence on seeing the mutual relationship between production and consumption is here manifested in the confusion of consumption and production spaces. One may argue that the problem is that consumption spaces are colonizing social space, that we see possibilities for consumption expanding into domains that previously have been excluded from consumption. The food court enters the museums (for example, the Tate Modern in London, a reinvention of the arcade in an old production facility), the cathedrals and the national parks. But there is also a movement in the other direction: shops are becoming museums and tourist attractions (for example, the renowned New York City Prada Shop designed by Rem Koolhaas/OMA). Brands on display in places previously not thought of. The meaning and aesthetics of such spaces and its propensity for surveillance will follow. Thus, we may be further departing from the free exchange of liberal ideologies of consumerism and the free choice advocate (see Bourdieu and Haake, 1995; Bourdieu, 1996).

Speaking from an organization theory perspective, organizations are not only making use of space in their production of services and artifacts. Labour process theorists have been successful in examining the production spaces of the organization. Organizing is a spatial practice (see e.g., Hernes, 2003), a production of space, and therefore it is, when following Marx and Engels (1970), also a consumption of space. The duality between production and consumption may be a fruitful domain for investigation. Rather than leaving the analysis of spaces of consumption to the field of cultural studies, organization theory can engage in analyses of the production of spaces of consumption.

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