

The Role of Subjectivity and Seduction in Architectural Design

Multi-Sensorial Experience in Contemporary Consumption Spaces

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Abstract: In this paper we explore various *formulas* and *power strategies* often used in design of contemporary consumption spaces to impose certain experiences and ultimately fulfil higher consumption goals. Predominant in recent research is a belief that these strategies manipulate users' sensorial and emotional experiences in such a way that their actions are considerably constrained. We challenge these critiques and focus on power of seduction and ambience, as well as user's subjective reading of spaces, starting with the assumption that current design strategies are not necessarily negative phenomena. Recent transformations in the design of consumption spaces may result from the softening of representations of power, and *vice versa*. Using multi-disciplinary, human-oriented and phenomenological approach we aim to develop an appropriate research instrument for investigating seduction as a subjective and elusive phenomenon.

Key words: *seduction, architectural design, subjectivity, multi-sensorial experience*

1. Introduction

The most common initial response to built environment is emotional and multi-sensorial. Architecture has an immense potential to engage with people's sensorial and emotional experience more effectively than other art forms. However, it seems that architectural practice either neglects this fact or manipulates with it in such a way that people's behaviour is determined. In recent research predominant is a belief that contemporary public spaces are both monotonous and over-aestheticised, using various unidirectional formulas and obvious power strategies to impose certain experiences and ultimately fulfil their higher consumption goals. [3]

We challenge these negative critiques and re-explore these power strategies that span from rigid control and surveillance, to less obvious ones such as pleasure principle, theming, atmospherics or aestheticisation. Our focus is on understanding and defining of the nature and manifestations of power of seduction in contemporary consumption spaces. Moving the attention from 'power over' to 'power to' [5] we start with the assumption that current design strategies should not be understood as necessarily negative phenomena, as the essence of every design is to produce certain outcomes. Operating primarily on a subconscious bodily and emotional level, seduction considerably depends on number and diversity of positive sensorial stimuli provided. Seductive design

can thus trigger and subtly direct people's bodily and mental attention towards positive distractions that otherwise would not be seen, and thus contribute to their subjective well-being.

We describe *contemporary consumption spaces* as complex and hybrid spaces that have slowly abandoned unified schemes of common shopping environments such as those of typical shopping malls, opposing to the rules of manipulation and opening possibilities for more diverse experiences and space-user interactions to occur. In fact, these recent structural and functional transformations may have resulted from the softening of mediation and representation of power in these spaces, and *vice versa*. We trace these transformations focusing on the phenomenological nature of seduction, which is manifested in the blurring of the borders between seducers and seduced, user and space, in interactive play with power exchange, which rules are elusive and yet transparent. However, this dilution of power representation does not necessarily indicate its weakening.

Finally, we propose an appropriate research instrument for investigating and evaluating the role and potentials of seduction (as subjective and elusive phenomenon) in architectural design, in more rigorous and scientific manner, leading to a new theoretical concept of seduction. Through this we are re-introducing subjectivity and re-evaluating its role and validity in architectural design research.

2. Manipulative Design Strategies – Critical Review of Recent Theories and Design Practices

2.1 Privatisation and Consumption

Predominant in the existing literature on public space is that its character and quality has been lost. The majority of critiques take a similar direction emphasizing the privatisation and commodification, together with surveillance techniques, as the main factors that led to undermining of the variety, democratic values and uniqueness of traditional public space. [3,5] As a consequence, contemporary public spaces are often characterised as quasi-public, homogeneous and inauthentic, inaccessible and pseudo-diverse.

However, consumption plays an important role in our everyday life. It can no longer be described as a 'parasitic activity' [2], but rather a force according to which our cities are designed and re-shaped. Recently built consumption spaces, including shopping malls, the me parks, and museums, seem to break the traditional distinctions between private and public, leisure and consumption, culture and economy, etc. Instead of involving explicit money exchange consumption has rather transformed into the pursuit of pleasure that comes from space experience.

2.2 Manipulation vs. Seduction

Dovey [5] defines *manipulation* as a mode of coercion which operates through keeping the subject ignorant and obeying. The intrusion of power is almost invisible to the subject and creates an illusion of free choice.

Seduction in consumption spaces is usually linked to a leading astray mode of 'power over', which manifests itself through prescribed architectural design in order to manipulate people's pleasure, time and money spent. [7] For Dovey [5], although softer and sometimes pleasant it strikes someone's desires and facilitates the illusion of the free development of self-identity, while in fact it shapes someone's perception, cognition and preferences.

However, seduction has been an innate part of many designs in the past, such as pleasure gardens, arcades or theatres. [15] Once it got used as a commercial instrument and for consumption goals seduction has been misunderstood and marked as a negative phenomenon. We define seduction as a subtle and suggestive form of power exchange which, unlike manipulation, does not try to deceive the seduced. Its power rather relies on interaction and acknowledgement of both real and unreal, pleasure and pain, limit and limitless, material and immaterial, etc. While manipulation keeps the subject ignorant, seduction acquires both bodily and mental/emotional action, and this is where its actual power is situated. See Figure 1.

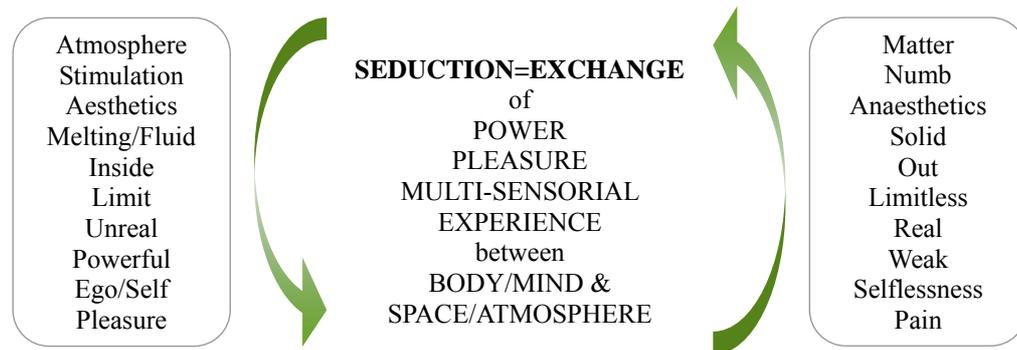


Figure. 1 – Phenomenological Nature and Principles of Seduction – Body/Space Interaction

2.3 Seduction, Multi-Sensorial Experience and Emotions

Another understanding of seduction refers to sex appeal and sexual enticement. This erotic dimension of seduction in architectural discourse has been manifested through a metaphor of human body [15]. Space may be sensual by the very means of its construction, materials, colours and textures. However, it is only the specific relationships of these elements and their symbolic meanings that give a space an ‘erotic aura’. It is the ambiguity and ambivalence, which make a space erotic. Accordingly, transitory experience, penetration and mobility seem to be essential for seductive experiences of space. According to Tschumi eroticism has its architectural manifestation in deconstructivism and excess, in discontinuity and non-linearity, inventiveness and dynamics, in establishing of new links while breaking the old ones. [16] Many of our spaces may seem monotonous and without any sensorial appeal. However, seductive experiences require time for looking and luring, for playing and exploring, but the rapid tempo of modern life often does not provide much of it.

The concept of seduction seems to be more positively applied in marketing and branding discourses. Successful products go beyond mere functional and visual innovation to spark human emotions - especially curiosity, surprise, and imagination. Seduction is seen as an inherent process of design consisting of three main steps – enticement (building attention, surprise, novelty, small promises), relationship (building connections to user’s emotions and personal goals) and fulfilment (promising and giving award, pleasure and deeper experience). [9] While the first and last steps are momentary, the middle can be drawn out almost indefinitely. Similarly, from early on retailers realized that consumers are considerably influenced by atmosphere and physical stimuli experienced at the point of purchase. Atmospheric research examines a wide range of cognitive, affective and behavioural responses and proposes a PAD framework based on responses along three emotional dimensions: Pleasure/Displeasure (P), Arousal/Non-Arousal (A) and Dominance/Submissiveness (D). [4]

Although criticized for being driven by the economic interests and focused on individual properties of space or products, these methods seem to be useful for better understanding of the phenomenon of mediating power in contemporary public spaces, of the ways people's sensual attention can be triggered and guided. The design research needs to go beyond the five corporeal senses and include neglected *higher senses*, such as the sense of ego and self-awareness, balance and motion, thoughts, language and speech, life and time continuum. [6]

2.4 From Manipulation to Seduction - Hard vs. Soft Boundaries

Manipulation in typical shopping malls goes beyond the surveillance, 'hard boxes' and 'hard boundaries'. It involves numerous space and sensorial elements, including space layout, allocation of activities and communications (entrances, escalators, elevators, stairs and parking), limited visibility (uncertainty and confusion), 'muzak' and strategic smell, etc.

Pleasure principle is another strategy criticized for inducing hedonic aesthetic values and naturalising the right to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Over-aestheticised space, filled with endless pleasant stimulations, actually creates a so-called blasé outlook that is an inability to fully respond to various stimuli. In other words, aesthetic experience becomes anaesthetic. [11]

The critiques of commercialized public spaces most often refer to a *dumb-bell* plan of a common shopping mall. It is usually an elongated box, consisting of two large *anchor* stores at either ends of a shopping mall joined by an arcade with smaller shops. The principle is that the *anchors* (the most attractive stores) act as *magnets*, being located in the deepest cells of the structure. In such an arrangement familiar mall tricks occur: 'limited entrances, escalators placed only at the end of corridors, fountains and benches carefully positioned to entice shoppers into stores.' [3] Their numbing repetitiveness continuously stimulates impulsive consumption. However, dumb-bell shopping malls have been rarely built in their pure forms. Their structure has been changed over time. It is easy to slip into a rhetoric which considers the publicness of commercial spaces as nothing more than an artifice, spaces which are cut-off from the surroundings, enclosed within forbidding walls and inward-looking. In fact, only a few traditional enclosed shopping centres have been built in the United States and Canada in the last two decades. [17] However, the concept of shopping keeps being criticised as it becomes the main model for all other types of public spaces today. The recent trend abandoning traditional shopping malls, actually demonstrates its overwhelming success. Abandoned from the mall, shopping conquered the city as a whole. The whole city is becoming 'malled'. [10]

However, the melting of physical structures, the softening of hard physical boundaries between inside and outside and better connection with the surrounding context challenges the immense inflexibility of our architecture and opens new possibilities for more creative and interactive design. Although this phenomenon can be interpreted as dematerialisation of architecture [8,14], where the physical, sensual and embodied essence of architecture is disappearing, we propose the opposite. Human bodies are porous and permeable, deeply connected with the external environment and incomplete, taking in sensation, matter and information, as well as producing them. As such, they may better resonate in more organic and ambiguous spaces. Seduction manifested in constant change, irregularity and active interaction can trigger and encourage these connections. See Figure 2.

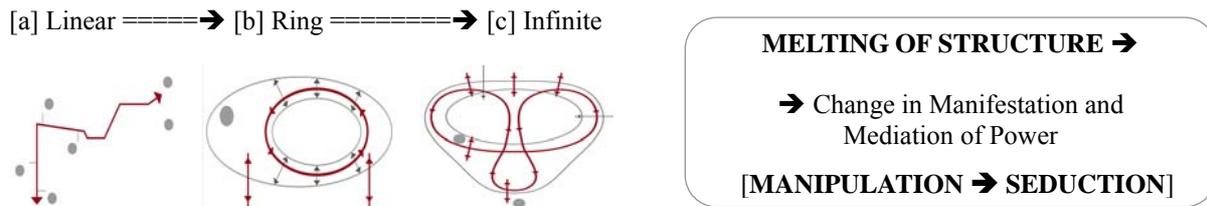


Figure. 2 – Research Process - Process of Developing Research Instrument

3. Investigating Seduction – Principles for Developing a Research Instrument

The main principles according to which our research instrument is developed is explained below. As seduction is an elusive phenomenon and users' interactions with space are highly subjective, affective, and therefore difficult to perceive, measure and evaluate, the approach proposed is predominantly phenomenological. The research methods include critical review, interpretation and inter-connecting of relevant theories and design practices (as reviewed above, but not limited to) and a proposal for original research based on post-occupancy evaluation (POE) and an experiential phenomenological approach. See Figure 3.

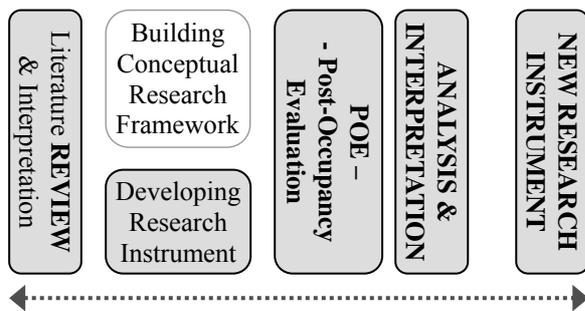


Figure. 3 – Steps in Developing Research Instrument

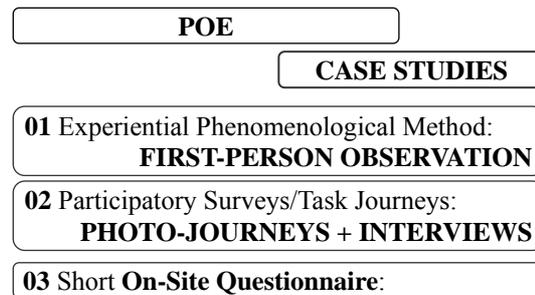


Figure. 4 – Post-Occupancy Evaluation Phases

3.1 Post-Occupancy Evaluation (POE)

Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE) is defined as ‘the process of evaluating buildings in a systematic and rigorous manner after they have been built and occupied for some time.’ [13] Numerous benefits of POE include: indications of problems and potential solutions, increased understanding of users' needs and building performance, appropriate decision making, reduction of costs, improvements in future design, etc.

We propose an investigative form of POE, which steps are summarised in Figure 4. It serves to indicate: the existence and modes of representation and mediation of seduction (and other power strategies) in contemporary consumption spaces; seductive elements of consumption space design; user's attitudes, subjective perceptions, preferences and evaluations of space; relations between attention, seduction and multi-sensorial stimulation.

Case studies

The case studies should be carefully selected to meet the above stated objectives and hypotheses and after brief preliminary investigations. The main principles for choosing appropriate case studies are summarised below:

1. For better comparison all the selected spaces should be of the similar type (i.e. all shopping malls, all theme parks, etc.), comparable in size and surrounding context, number of activities they accommodate, etc.

2. In order to trace the latest transformations in both design and manifestation of power, case studies should represent different types, both in terms of their structural layouts and programmes (i.e. underground spaces, open spaces, enclosed spaces, semi-open spaces, predominantly shopping spaces, leisure and entertainment spaces, transitory spaces, etc.). Such typology should be primarily linked to public areas within these spaces. Typological analysis may show that more complex, hybrid and organic types possess more seductive and sensorial qualities, as opposed to simpler types where manipulation and control are arguably easier to maintain.
3. As we assume that seduction is utilised globally, if possible it is preferable to choose spaces from different cultural and urban contexts. The investigators should be familiar with and feel comfortable within the spaces under investigation, in order to make the fieldwork easier and ensure more meaningful and accurate data, interpretations and evaluation. The critiques argue that commercialised spaces are still built according to the same principles, creating chains of so-called *non-spaces* [1] and having the same influence on people and urban development. The results may actually show that a different cultural background can shape the spaces, similar in their structure, but different in use and level of appreciation.

Experiential phenomenological method – first-person observation

Experiential phenomenological method suggests that the aesthetic quality of an environment is inseparable from its meaning to people. It uses a descriptive form of evaluation and emphasises the subjective role of a researcher as an active participant who observes and interacts with the particular setting.

During structured first-person observation the researcher should focus on: overall ambience of space; sensorial qualities of spaces; architectural elements of space (sub-spaces, façades, passages, meeting points, etc.) and their relations (inside-out, up-down, covered-uncovered, light-dark, light-heavy, opaque-transparent, etc.); people's movement, behaviour and use of spaces. Both quantitative and qualitative data should be obtained using detailed description, various measuring techniques, mapping, check-lists, research diary, photography, video recording, etc. Observations should be conducted during at least two whole workdays and two weekend days.

Participatory survey/task journeys

As it is assumed that seduction occurs primarily on a subconscious level and is related to sensorial experience a more indirect type of surveying technique is proposed. This technique advocates for users' active participation by performing certain tasks which should provide indirect evidence for investigated phenomenon. In each space, we propose two walks followed by two in-depth interviews, and a short questionnaire. The number of participants should be at least 10 in each selected case. The time of the walk should be limited to 30-45 min.

- **First 'seductive' journey:** During this walk participants need to take 10 photographs of whatever they want, without any limitations, except that they are not allowed to take photos while being inside any of the retail stores. During this walk the participants should not be aware of the purpose of the investigation, in order to avoid any biased outcomes. For the same reason, the route of the walk should not be controlled. The intention is to indirectly find out the participants' first affective, emotional and sensorial subjective reading of space, and thus uncover what elements of space affected their attention and attracted them the most.

- **First interview:** After finishing the first task, each participant should describe his/her overall subjective

experience and the atmosphere of space in his/her own words, without any interference from the investigator. Then they should describe each photograph they have taken in five keywords, as well as to elaborate on what exactly attracted their attention and why. Further questions can be added. They should be formed in such a way that they do not indicate the investigator's personal opinion.

- **Second 'multi-sensorial' journey:** After the first interview the researcher should explain the purpose of his/her work to the participants. Having that in mind they then pursue the second journey and take another 10 photos, but this time focusing on positive and negative multi-sensorial stimuli available, their subjective mood and comfort in space. They should be told that they are allowed to take the same photos again. In this more guided walk the participants should take a similar route, so that the outcomes from the two walks are comparable.

- **Second interview:** After finishing the second task, each participant should explain the dominant sensorial stimulation/s and/or mood in each photographed space, how pleasant or comfortable the detected stimulation/s is/are. This time they do not necessarily need to describe each photograph in five keywords; for the sake of later comparative analysis the researcher should extract five (if possible) the most prominent words and phrases from gathered descriptions. Finally, the participants describe and evaluate in detail the overall place, considering each of five generally known senses (vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell), as well as the functionality of space and their emotional relationship with space. The researcher should pay special attention to any indication of expressed higher senses.

- **Short on-site survey**

At the end of the second interview the participants should complete a short questionnaire based on principles of environmental psychologists' research on atmospherics and approach-avoidance behaviour methods (Mehrabian and Russell's PAD Framework) [4], as well as on the concept of seductive experience developed by Khaslavsky and Shedroff [9], as explained above. The purpose of this on-site survey is to further test the relation between seduction and number, diversity and intensity of sensorial stimuli in space, as well as to determine the level of seductiveness of each space. The number of participants completing this questionnaire should be greater than these 10 in order to create a valid sample for later statistical analysis.

The survey should consist of two parts – the first related to seductive properties of space and the second concerned with sensorial qualities of space. Each part should include the same number of opposite properties (not necessarily in negative-positive relation) and the participants need to evaluate, as fast as possible, the level of intensity and pleasantness of each set of properties on scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 and 5 indicate the lowest and the highest levels of intensity/pleasure/comfort respectively, and 3 means neutral).

The choice of properties should be determined after an analysis of data collected through a preliminary study. For this reason a pilot questionnaire should be given and tested on-site during the preliminary investigation. It should also include users' comments regarding the survey length, clarity of properties given and possibly missing properties. The final survey should be short including only the most important and clearly defined properties, easily understandable for the users, giving a possibility for not answering the questions which are not relevant for their individual experiences. This will ensure a greater number of passers-by willing to participate.

The survey also needs to include participants' profile information (age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, familiarity with space, visit frequency, average time spent, visit purposes, etc.) keeping the same balance in each space.

3.2 Analysis and Evaluation

The analysis of all the information gathered in form of photographs and narratives consists of 4 main phases, followed by synthesis and further interpretation through relevant theories. See Figure 5 below.

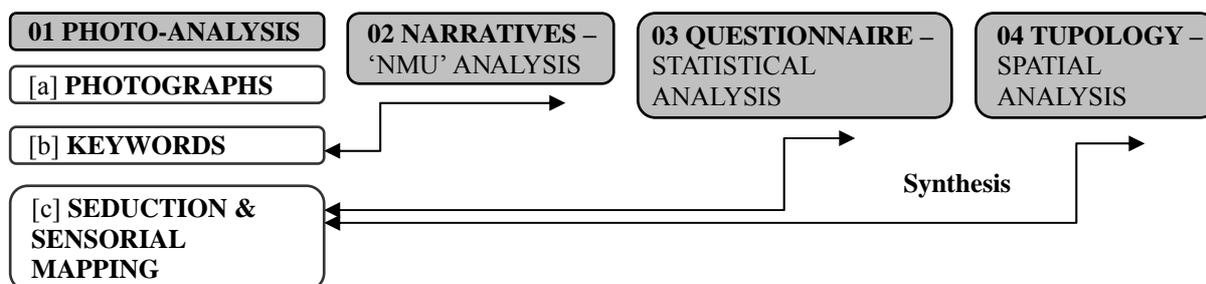


Figure. 5 – Phases of Analysis

Phase 1: Photo-analysis

We propose 3 sub-phases for the analysis of the 100 collected photographs:

1. **Photographs:** All photographs from both walks are to be grouped according to the main motifs they represent, namely: overall space/ambiance, space elements, social space/activities (open space, greenery, gathering, cafés, passers-by, self reflections), shopping (shop windows, advertisements), functional elements (wayfinding signs, practical facilities) and art pieces. Their number in each walk indicates what spaces and motifs are perceived as the most attractive and sensorially stimulating to users. The number of photos repeated in both walks indicates to what extent seductive qualities of space depend on sensorial stimulation.
2. **Keywords:** All the photos are then to be re-grouped and analysed according to keywords assigned to them. The keywords should be also grouped according to the main 'themes' they reflect, namely: emotions/affects, seduction/attraction (enticement, relationship with space, promises), sensorial clues, functionality (usefulness, comfort, wayfinding), atmosphere and social activities/people. This quasi-linguistic analysis provides further insight into people's preferences, attitudes towards space and spontaneous interactions with its elements.
3. **Sensorial mapping:** All the photos taken in both walks should be carefully mapped. Such a mapping tool unfolds broader spatial relationships between seductive and sensorial clues, their allocation and rhythm. The dispersion and repetition of spatial elements and ambiances, sensorial stimuli and sensorial breaks, as well as their links to size of space, visibility, entrances, open space, activities, etc. provide insightful means for understanding the logic of seduction and pleasurable experiences it can engender. These maps should be further used to complement the typological analysis of selected spaces, and interpreted in relation to relevant theories.

Phase 2: Analysis of the Narratives

To analyse the descriptions gathered through interviews we propose a 'natural meaning units' (NMU) method, which consists of five consequent steps: 1. intuitive/holistic understanding of the raw data; 2. recognition of central themes; 3. forming a thematic index; 4. description and 5. synthesis of extended description.

Phase 3: Short Questionnaire – Statistical Analysis

The analysis of data gathered through the survey is statistical. The results may indicate the level of seductiveness and sensorial richness of investigated spaces, but also differences in experiences between different users' profiles.

Phase 4: Spatial/Typological Analysis

Typological analysis serves to spatially explore the connections between different properties of space with the levels of seduction and subjective pleasure. Overlapped with other phases of analysis it may show that recent transformation of consumption spaces and the change in the mediation of power are correlated. Interpretations of the results need to be careful and taken with caution, related solely to spaces under investigation.

4. Conclusions

Although being an innate part of design, seduction and subjectivity have been marked as negative and unwelcome in scientific research. Our daily experiences however show that more systematic and rigorous understanding of these phenomena is needed. Built environment has always been one of the primal sources for (re)producing, mediating and legitimising power in its various forms and on various levels. Architecture keeps being used to promote economic and political power, technological advancement and global identity through its aesthetics. Accordingly, architectural discipline is fully ensnared within the condition of permanent tensions between form and function, intentions and results, aesthetics and ethics, at the same time possessing power and being weak, being used and being abused.

Living in the age of *supermodernity* [1], *incomplete nihilism* [8], growing uncertainty and stress, subjective human experience – aesthetic, symbolic and multi-sensorial – plays an increasingly important role. Due to these circumstances people change the ways they perceive, evaluate and appreciate their built environments. However, these phenomena have usually been stigmatised and neglected in scientific research, as too elusive, unreliable, and too difficult to measure and evaluate. This resulted in misunderstanding the power of architectural design and creating uniformed solutions applied uncritically. Seduction and subjective experience need to be reconsidered in architectural design, and acknowledged as relevant in design research. In order to do so, new research instruments are needed, that would be multi-disciplinary, user-oriented and holistic and approach.

The realm of architecture has been historically seen as the realm of the real and material, and our contemporary spaces constantly show their inertia, conservativeness and inflexibility. Understanding the power of seduction can improve both design of spaces and people's interaction with them, the level of their physical and programmatic flexibility. Our preliminary results show that seduction operates primarily on subconscious bodily and emotional level, and that it considerably depends on number, intensity, diversity and allocation of positive/pleasant sensory stimuli provided. Initial results also seem to suggest that more complex, hybrid and organic spaces have greater seductive and sensorial qualities (as well as greater flexibility) as opposed to early generation shopping malls. Furthermore, people seem to resonate better to such spaces, and to establish more positive bodily and mental dialogues with them. This correlation between mediation/representation of power and space structure/atmosphere, as well as their mutual influences and transformations call for further investigation.

The logic of seduction may play an important role and possesses potentials for its creative application in architecture, particularly in healthcare design. It can allow architecture to regain its freedom to fully commit to designing spaces according to very fundamental human needs that have often been ignored in past decades.

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