

Buildings as images.

A case study on the Medieval local mall

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ABSTRACT. This essay explores the pervasive visual culture of postmodernity, emphasizing the continuous need for decoding and interpreting a multitude of images that surround individuals daily. In this context, the study focuses on the Vivo! shopping mall in Cluj-Napoca, examining it as a visual text within the framework of Marc Augé's theory of non-places and Rem Koolhaas' critique of contemporary architecture in "Junkspace." While postmodernism has diversified visual experiences, it paradoxically contributes to architectural uniformity. The essay delves into the dichotomy of shopping malls as non-places, oscillating between private and public, and analyzes their significance in urban landscapes, particularly addressing the exhaustion associated with these seemingly mundane structures.

Keywords: Visual Culture, Non-Places, Postmodern Architecture

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Introduction

“Post-industrial society visual culture is closely intertwined with everydaylife (...) (it) becomes part of daily human production and evolves by multiplying the forms in which it manifests and increasing impact it has on social interaction. is situated between visual arts and mass culture, being consubstantial to the postmodern condition.”- Abrudan, E., 23

The following text is based on the cited present-day diagnosis: we live in a visual culture. A culture that is inextricably linked to the concept of postmodernity and means a constant need for coding and decoding for the individual. We are surrounded, some say inundated, by an ever-growing number of images that need to be individually understood, decoded, and interpreted. Images and discourses do not have singular meanings but are open texts that are read differently by different readers. There are as many meanings as there are images. (Cf. Abrudan, p. 106) These images to be deciphered are by no means only images, but any visual impression. In the following essay, I would like to deal with a specific building as a visual text: the Vivo! shopping mall in Cluj-Napoca.



While post-modernism has fragmented, diversified, and multiplied visual experiences and expressions on the one hand, it seems to have led to unimaginativeness and uniformity in architecture. Architecture died in the 20th century, laments architect and author Rem Koolhaas in his essay "Junkspace", which I will also discuss.

The cities we live in and their buildings are images that surround us every day. Most of the time we take them for granted, even though urban spaces face constant, rapidly evolving change. (cf. Abrudan, p. 107) Precisely because they are such an everyday stimulus, they are worth looking at. In the following, I will first classify the shopping mall itself in Marc Augé's theory of non-places, in the course of which I will discuss Rem Koolhaas' "Junkspaces", and then take a more concrete look at the Vivo! mall. Here I would like to focus on one particular detail, namely the decorative towers at the entrance portals.

Malls as non-places

Shopping malls are spaces that oscillate between private and public, monumental and incidental, everyday and leisure. In general, we appreciate them because they are practical and efficient: here we find everything centralized in one place. In a single visit, the weekly shopping can be done, the gift for the niece, and finally new batteries for the remote control and something nice for yourself, just as a small reward for keeping it up (you go girl!). One visit to the food court, a Subway sandwich to fortify yourself, and then quickly back home before the rush hour starts. Although it is often said that the trend is declining and that malls are dying out, new buildings keep appearing in our (sub)cityscapes. Especially in small towns they seem to enjoy unbroken popularity and are still a central point of public life. Malls appear, especially in non-Western countries, as the dazzling gateway to that very Western- world of consumption: Starbucks, H&M, Zara, and McDonalds, no matter where we are in the world, the likelihood of finding these chains and their iconic bright logos is more than high. But this text is about the other side of the coin. Not about criticism of consumption and the urban planning

policy that gives it so much play, but of the place, the space. The mall seems to be a hostile place. For although the brand logos shine, we are intoxicated by shopping and those sugary Starbucks Frappuccinos, and after a short time in a mall, we are mercilessly weary and exhausted. Is it the building that leeches our energy?”

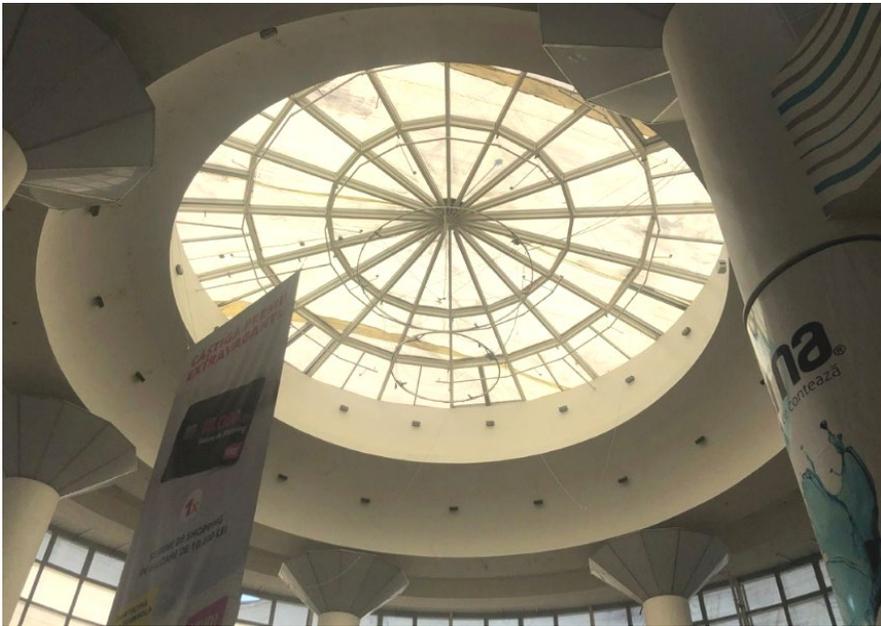


“If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.” - Marc Auge

Like Ferdinand de Saussure’s understanding of semiotics cited in Abrudan’s compendium, “meaning is built in opposition to other signs, through establishing similarities and differences(…)” one can understand what “beautiful is, through understanding what ‘ugly’ is.” (Abrudan, p. 101), this definition is structural and built on a pattern of opposites and similarities.

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Airport, highway, train station, refugee camp, hotel resort, supermarket, shopping mall – in this list of institutions, although they are in part fundamentally different in nature, we can instinctively identify commonalities. Yet this resemblance is only partly the result of similarities in use. But all of them are places of transit, of temporary residence. We enter them just to leave again; our actual destination is another. They are also (except for the refugee camp) places of consumption – but what places aren't in times of late capitalism? The second level of similarity, and the one I want to focus on, is their visual appearance, and their architecture. No matter where we are on earth, everywhere these places look the same.



In his 1995 book “Non-places - Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity”, anthropologist Marc Augé termed these institutions and places “non-places”. These are the spawn of post-modernity or super-modernity: places without history and identity that serve the increasingly networked, mobile human being for transit and have individualizing functions. Their architectures separate individuals and prevent or reduce social interactions.

One thinks here, for example, of the endless spiralling queues before the security check at the airport or the ticket checkpoints in the metros of large cities. At non-places, one is not a human being, but a passenger, user, or customer.

Nevertheless (or maybe precisely because of this), in an increasingly networked and mobile world, these places shape our everyday life and our culture especially. They embody a “New Way of Living”, especially a Western one. This is repeatedly represented and multiplied in pop-cultural products. This can be relatively banal product placement, such as the ubiquitous, ever-present Starbucks cup in the iconic TV series “Sex and the City” or the film “The Devil Wears Prada”, which have forever linked the paper cup with the green logo to New York City, fashion and female strive for success, or it can be more double layered, as in the film “The Terminal”. Here, Tom Hanks’s character, condemned to live in the airport due to a lack of ID papers, begins to repurpose this place such that he doesn’t use it for transit but settles down there permanently, thus making it a human space, a living space, or as Augé would term it a “place”. To be more specific, I would like to briefly apply Augé’s three core characteristics of a place or non-place to the shopping mall: The absence of history, identity, and relationship.

History

While the concept of the shopping mall naturally has a certain history, the real existing buildings do not. They may have a date of foundation stone laying, grand opening, and 100,000 visitors, but they do not have a history that embeds them in the greater whole of the city, culture, and context. It does not emerge from existing structures, such as an ancient agora, a medieval marketplace, or an Art Nouveau shopping arcade. On the contrary, the process of creating a mall is an entirely unnatural one. It is built in a short time outside the city center, in terrain vague, according to a uniform architectural model.

With the advent of the automobile, the practice of moving shopping out of the city center and building a shopping paradise accessible by car in the sub-urban space became established in the USA, not surprisingly the fatherland of the mall. Here there was enough cheap space for buildings and



parking. As cities increasingly began to sprawl into the suburbs (urban sprawl), a global, ongoing development that is also increasingly occurring in Eastern Europe, as well as in Cluj, there is still a need for decentralized shopping facilities to reduce the growing commute to the city centers.

Identity

“The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations: only solitude and similitude” - Augé S. 78

Closely linked to the absence of history is the absence of identity. Identity itself, as an elusive, fluid concept, is also controversial in the architectural field. Over time, there has always been disagreement about what constitutes the character of a building, and to what extent one should even use this term as an architect. But if any buildings can be accused of lacking character without much hesitation, it is shopping malls. The origin



of shopping mall architecture lies in modernism and schools of architecture such as the Bauhaus movement. After the Second World War, reconstruction was urgent, and new living space was needed quickly. Stylistically, one wanted a clear cut with falsely inflated pomp and kitsch: form follows function. The solution was technically advanced, standardized buildings under the sign of functionality, pragmatism, and reduction. If you look at the buildings of the super-modern era, they are the culmination of these ideas in an almost perverse way (cf. Koolhaas). They offer simple, inexpensive solutions to questions of space and function, but are so airy, under-detailed, and of such a globally universal aesthetic that they emanate an almost uncanny quality: they seem familiar and at the same time so interchangeable that one would not necessarily recognize them even if one had already entered them. If there were no linguistic and written clues, you wouldn't even know which country you were in. Both the architecture, inside and out, as well as the shops and goods on offer are of globalised uniformity.

Relations

Relations are the point where the mall falls a bit off the chart, because definitely malls are social places, they have to be in order to fulfil their purpose: To keep people on site for as long as possible in order to maximize the window of opportunity for consumption. To do this, they are equipped with seating, massage chairs, food courts – the building knows that you will be exhausted at somepoint and is prepared for it.

By non-relational, Augé means in his work especially architectures that isolate subjects and reducesocial interactions. Think again of the security check: a barrier tape on the right and left, which you go through together but separately, one after the other.

“Going to the mall”, on the other hand, has essential social aspects, is at least as much pleasureas duty. It’s not just where tedious errands are run and weekly shopping is done, the mall is where people stroll, browse, stroll and just hang out. Think of the teenagers who, especially in small towns, have discovered and cultivated the mall as a semi-public meeting place and hang-out after school. The shopping mall is definitely a social place. So, in a way, the mall resists the category of non-place, but Marc Augé has already anticipated this kind of in-between phenomenon in his text. He writes: “It never exists in pure form (...) place and non place are rather like opposite parties, thefirst is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten.” (Augé p. 79)

Junkspace

“Junkspace is the body double of space, a territory of impaired vision, limited expectation, reduced earnestness. Junkspace is a Bermuda Triangle of concepts, an abandoned petri dish: it cancels distinctions, undermines resolve, confuses intention with realization. It replaces hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition. More and more, more is more. Junk- space is overripe and under nourishing in the same time.” - Kohlhaas, S. 176



Architect and author Rem Koolhaas goes one step further in his essay, which resembles a gritty pamphlet: he describes why these places and buildings are not only non-places, but outright off- places, rubbish places, “junk spaces”. Junkspaces are the type of building in which our modern achievements abolish themselves, the nail in the coffin of architecture, whose death he dates to the 20th century. Modernism had a noble program: to harness the benefits of science in all disciplines, progress for all. But although the individual innovations were great achievements of human ingenuity, as a sum of all parts they add up to nothing less than “the end of enlightenment, its resurrection as farce, a low-grade purgatory” (Koolhaas p. 175) and also the end of the architecture. He describes junkspace as a visual experience of continuity, created by repetition and reflection: reflective surfaces that create an infinite echo: glass, mirrors, gleaming gold, bright marble that make you feel like you are participating in luxury. The architecture functions by addition, the spaces are layered, there are no separating walls, only half-open

segments and transparent membranes (p. 176). Spaces without boundaries, not even temporal. In malls there are neither clocks nor windows to remind us of the passing of time, we are supplied with breathable air by an endlessly repeating stream of air from the air conditioning. This spatial dissolution and constant repetition make Junkspaces itself a universal, meaningless pattern: "Junkspace is beyond code... Because it cannot be grasped, it cannot be remembered. It is flamboyant yet unmemorable, like a screen saver" (p. 177) In their exuberant arbitrariness, all junkspaces make themselves the same. This is why people resort to decorative elements that serve as distinguishing features. Koolhaas writes about the arch, for example: "The arch, once the workhorse of structures, has become the depleted emblem of community, welcoming an infinity of virtual populations to nonexistent theres. Where it is absent it is simply applied - mostly in stucco - as ornamental afterthought on hurriedly erected superblocs." (p. 176)

And here we come to our object of observation, the vivo! Mall. When you first see the grey, long, slightly arched building, the first thing that catches your eye are the knight's castle-like towers at the entrances, which are seem like a rather strange decorative feature.



Vivo! mall

The vivo! Mall opened in 2007 and was the first shopping mall in Cluj-Napoca. It is located just outside the city area about halfway into the suburb of Floresti on an area still under development and houses the classic global shopping giants: H&M, Zara, Carrefour, Decathlon, McDonalds. It is a flat, ground-level, long building, with a slightly rounded base, clad in blue panels, opening onto a large, uncovered car park. The outdoor terrace immediately in front of the building contains mostly similar gastronomic offerings, in some cases hanging plants meagrely separate patrons from the grey asphalt glimmering in the heat and the dust in the air from the neighboring construction sites.

When we enter the mall through a glass revolving door, we find less the false luxury that Koolhaas describes than an interior architecture made of cheap, repellent materials. One is overcome by the feeling of being in a mixture of an indoor swimming pool and a multi-purpose hall. There is too much space that



has been hectically blocked up, so that the rooms feel empty, even though there is different furniture and things everywhere. Everything is white wall, glass panes, empty spaces, high ceilings, columns emblazoned with advertising banners, and photo wallpaper with white-blue wavy lines (one thing that evokes the association with swimming pools). In between, additional sales

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counters divide the space and offer artificial roses, belts, or various types of scissors. In some places, the paint of the white walls is crumbling, one can see through the façade to the brown plaster and thus the pale inner life of the building. The windows in the ceiling, interspersed with white crossbars, pleasantly let in daylight, but also create a feeling of being in some kind of tropical house. The design relies on organic forms: Arches, spirals, curves, curves. The shop-lined aisles open out into circular spaces, a waterscape meanders through like a stream. The general sterility is counteracted with organic-looking materials: wooden seating with green-grey upholstery, a lamp with a warm light and round shade, like in a Scandinavian catalogue living room, with sockets on the side so that you can charge your smartphone while waiting, large indoor plants, partly made of plastic.



In the food court, the same spatial forlornness takes hold. The ceiling, before it opens into windows, becomes an uncovered chaos of steel struts, fans and ventilation shafts. In a last desperate attempt to maintain the “organic” feeling and a minimal standard of acoustics, a few green elements

hang forlornly from the ceiling in round, organic shapes. Kids can ride littlecars or ride a giraffe here if they haven't finished their Cartofisserie fries yet again. The vivo! Mall does not focus on luxurious shopping experiences and shiny surfaces, but rather lives up to the term "junk space" in a literal sense, through its hasty, unaesthetic functionality and emptiness.

But let's move on to the element that originally caught my attention, the towers. They completely break with the visual themes (swimming pool, organic forms, green resting places) that predominate in the interior and add another one to the overall image: medieval knight's castle.

Each of the four entrance portals has at least one of these towers with a pointed roof, the outer two each with a round ground plan, the central ones two square exemplars, between them a roof, designed according to the recurring motif: construction of metal struts and glass connected many times. The tower walls are made of real stone, followed by a visible construction, again made of metal struts, which holds the pointed roof covered with metal plates. On the top is a small pennant in the shape of a flag, with the date of construction: 2007.

At the latest when you catch sight of this, the towers seem a bit like a peculiar joke. They are reminiscent of toy versions of medieval castle towers or a drawing a child would make: building+roof+flag=castle. There is a simplicity about them that is not the result of age or limited technical possibilities, but of rational cost considerations. In addition, they are not accessible and, apart from containing various Fornetti chains, have no other functional purpose; they serve purely for decoration.



“The search for depth and authenticity and for the evocative character of objects is dependent on the affective relations and permanent connotations they incorporate. Starting from this assumption we can say that the old monuments, objects belonging to the urban space, testify to the persistence of traditional meaningful structures within modern society, while the new ones, nearly identical in appearance and in functionality to the old ones, are nothing else than mere objects: there is no connection between them and people as long as they only serve their function.” - Abrudan, S. 111

People look for relationships and bonds with the objects and buildings of their everyday life, for “meaningful structures”. New buildings like our mall do not have these structures, we perceive them as soulless. So, the factor “time” is another essential point when it comes to developing these structures and making a space a place: only over the years do the stories and connections that different people have to a place accumulate until at some point a collectively shared feeling towards the place has grown and it has developed its own history and thus a life of its own.



If you are the architect of a mall, you are inevitably confronted with the problem of a lack of history and identity. You know that you will create a completely arbitrary space that is doomed to be forgotten.

So, it seems like the understandable, if desperate, grasp for the last straw to add decorative elements to the building that ensuresome potential for distinction and pick up visual patterns and traditions that are embedded in the local context.

If you don't have a history and identity, you at least create such an image - maybe the illusion works and appearances are deceptive at least to the extent that people who visit these places more quickly establish a relationship with this new place. This practice is reminiscent of Potemkin villages, complete illusory worlds like Disneyland or the construction projects in northern Macedonia's capital Skopje, where monuments, magnificent old buildings and other identity-giving buildings are completely rebuilt on large scale.



The castle towers function in a very similar way, they are an image of Romanian identity.

More generally, medieval castle towers are a sign of “old”: all over the world we visit castles as stalwart bulwarks of history. In Romania’s case, they are also a more specific sign marking its own older history, especially its history before the communist regime². The country is known for its castles, around which legends of vampires, Dracula and other characters entwine. As such, they are major tourist destinations, serving as identity symbols both internally and externally.

The towers and pointed roofs that adorn them all in the most diverse designs are also found in urban architecture: older ecclesiastical, public and private buildings pick up these architectural elements recurrently.

It seems as if the non-space Vivo! Mall has created these castle towers like a last-minute costume in order to appear not quite so devoid of history, to embed itself in the local, Romanian context and its traditions, and to evoke meanings through its pure surface that it will never be able to evoke, since it is only a quick copy and no original design.

This attempt seems almost so clumsy and naïve that one might wonder if it might not work again? In a way one could argue, these towers, in their way of pretending, in their clumsy disguise, already have something of Camp again. “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a “lamp” (...) To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre.” (S.4)

Not a castle, but a “castle”? - The mall architecture lacks at least the subversive double floor to become a camp object, but this tongue-in-cheek way of looking at it adds another layer to the topos. Which brings us back to one of our first thoughts: a picture has as many meanings as it has viewers.

² As a post-communist country Romania is like many other countries facing the challenge of remaking a new, national identity that is distinct from the communist one, which is liked to discard. To this end, the country is increasingly looking to the past and reviving its traditional heritage, for example through extensive renovation work on old buildings. (cf. Duncan Light, p. 158f.)

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