

# The Aesthetics of Urban Production and Trade.

## Introduction

Annette Haug

Investigating the aesthetics of urban production and trade brings together three areas of research, which are often analysed separately: 1) urbanity, 2) economic production and consumption, and 3) aesthetics.

The ties between these categories take various forms in different historic contexts. In early modern times, it was the growing importance of consumption that had consequences for aesthetics and urbanity.<sup>1</sup> From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, ever larger parts of society were able to afford goods, and the quantity and quality of the goods a household possessed steadily increased. This process becomes particularly tangible in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the broader population became interested in quality goods. One could call this a veritable “consumer revolution”.<sup>2</sup> Markets responded to this new need by providing affordable objects and offering them in new ‘temples’ of mass consumption. This most recent history of consumption provides us with two quasi self-evident insights:

- Production and consumption are dependent upon the economic possibilities of societies.
- Consumption has an immense social relevance.

Starting from these insights, we will discuss the following three aspects: 1) the assessment of the social relevance of consumption, 2) the aesthetics of consumption and 3) the aesthetics of consumer spaces.

The **social relevance of consumption** has been assessed very differently throughout history. *Consumption-critics* state that human desire is dependent upon what the market offers. In the act of consumption, people thus become passive agents.<sup>3</sup> *Consumption-proponents*, by contrast, underline the fact that consumption is the realization of an (individual or group-specific) desire. The symbolic potential of goods allows for their use as a means of social distinction.<sup>4</sup> In the moment of choice, which is inherent to consumption, lies a basic formative principle of sociality and identity: “Identities are affirmed and contested through specific acts of consumption”.<sup>5</sup> Consumption becomes a means of self-distinction and self-expression, which creates social belonging and social differences.<sup>6</sup> “No longer is position ascribed by birth: rather people are able to choose various types of identity through the goods they consume”.<sup>7</sup> These discourses provide us with two further insights:

- Forms of consumption have the potential to create (contested) identities.
- Via consumption, materialities (goods, architecture) become a medium for the expression of social values and attitudes and the construction of identities.

The prominent social relevance of consumption leads to the **aestheticization of the consumed goods**. In line with Adorno, Gernot Böhme states that objects do not only possess a use value (Gebrauchswert) and an exchange value (Tauschwert) but also re-

ceive an aesthetic value (Inszenierungswert).<sup>8</sup> Aesthetics becomes a value in its own right, not only for art objects but also for everyday objects.<sup>9</sup> The aestheticization of material objects is thus at the center of a wide-ranging aestheticization of everyday life.<sup>10</sup> The stage for this process is the contemporary city.

This **aestheticization** thus also directly affects the **design of urban spaces**.<sup>11</sup> Houses and house interiors become a medium for self-representation, while public architecture turns into a subject of political discourse.<sup>12</sup> With regard to spaces of production, trade and consumption, strategies of aestheticization and semanticization play a specific role. The aesthetic design of economic spaces provides a “multi-sensorial stimulation that caters to consumer imagination and creation of cultural meanings”.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, it allows for an enhanced aesthetic experience of the process of consumption itself,<sup>14</sup> and thus fuels the desire for the offered goods.<sup>15</sup> To conclude, economic spaces become aesthetic spaces for several reasons:

- Economic spaces are part of a more general tendency towards the aestheticization of the “Lebenswelt”, urban spaces included.
- Aesthetics communicates the social value of production, trade and consumption; economic activities receive a valuable architectonic surrounding.
- The aesthetic design of economic spaces enhances the consumption of the produced, traded and consumed products. Shopping spaces are specifically designed to make people spend their money.
- The atmosphere of the economic setting provides a frame for the perception and esteem of products. Thus shopping spaces are designed as affective spaces. The design of shopping spaces affects their perception (by the evocation of specific atmospheres) and the ways the consumer behaves.

The preceding discussion of the interrelation between consumption, aesthetics, and urban spaces builds on our present day situation. The following contributions, however, will discuss their interdependency in Classical Antiquity – a premodern, pre-capitalist context. According to our hypothesis, the process of an aestheticization of material objects and urban spaces becomes particularly tangible when the production and consumption of goods receive new significance. This may have been the case in late Republican and Imperial times when new object categories appeared, and new building-types were implemented in Roman cities. Therefore, it may be no coincidence that most of the following contributions refer to this chronological timeframe, spanning a geographical area that reaches from Delos via Campania to Rome itself.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Trentmann 2017; Jäckel 2006, esp. 121 f.; Luxury consumption has been identified as a driving force behind the rise of capitalism, see Sombart 1996, esp. 137 f.; Schrage 2009, 91–93. 119. 141–196.

<sup>2</sup> McCracken 1990, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Explicitly Baudrillard 1970. With regard to a different philosophical background, Simmel [1900] 2016, 568 also develops the idea of a passive consumer: “Wie wir einerseits die Sklaven des Produktionsprozesses geworden sind, so andererseits die Sklaven der Produkte: d.h., was uns die Natur vermöge der Technik von außen liefert, ist durch tausend Gewöhnungen, tausend Zerstreuungen, tausend Bedürfnisse äußerlicher Art über das Sich-Selbst-Gehören, über die geistige Zentripetalität des Lebens Herr geworden.”

<sup>4</sup> See Veblen 1971; Bourdieu 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson – Thrift 1995, 227; see Friedman – Friedman 1980, 23; Venkatesh – Meamber 2008, 50 f.; Schrage 2009, 118–132.

<sup>6</sup> See Ullrich 2016 refers to the ‘creative consumer’.

<sup>7</sup> Knox – Pinch 2006, 54–56.

<sup>8</sup> Böhme 2016, 27; building on Baudrillard 1970; Featherstone 2007, esp. 14 f.

<sup>9</sup> Lash – Urry 1994, 15; Welsch 1996, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Featherstone 1991; Schulze 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Welsch 1996, esp. 2 f.

<sup>12</sup> Schulze 1992, esp. 52 f.

<sup>13</sup> Venkatesh – Meamber 2008, 47.

<sup>14</sup> Aesthetics, therefore, has a stabilizing effect on social orders, see Everts et al. 2011, 327 with reference to Nigel Thrift. They claim that social and economic orders – such as capitalism – are sustained through “the engineering of affect, such as through the purposeful design of cityscapes that elicit playful consumerism and out (unwanted) political activism”.

<sup>15</sup> Knox – Pinch 2006, esp. 56; Schrage 2009, esp. 151.

### References

#### **Baudrillard 1970**

J. Baudrillard, *La société de consommation* (Paris 1970).

#### **Böhme 2016**

G. Böhme, *Ästhetischer Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt 2016).

#### **Bourdieu 1997**

P. Bourdieu, *Die feinen Unterschiede* (Frankfurt 1997).

#### **Everts et al. 2011**

J. Everts – M. Lahr-Kurten – M. Watson, *Practice Matters! Geographical Inquiry and Theories of Practice*, *Erdkunde* 65, 2011, 323–334.

#### **Featherstone 2007**

M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London 2007).

**Friedman – Friedman 1980**

M. Friedman – R. Friedman, Chancen, die ich meine. 'Free to choose'. Ein persönliches Bekenntnis (Berlin 1980).

**Jackson – Thrift 1995**

P. Jackson – N. Thrift, Geographies of Consumption, in: D. Miller (ed.), Acknowledging Consumption (London 1995) 204–237.

**Jäckel 2006**

M. Jäckel, Einführung in die Konsumsoziologie. Fragestellungen – Kontroversen – Beispieltex-te (Wiesbaden 2006).

**Knox – Pinch 2006**

P. L. Knox – S. Pinch, Urban Social Geography. An Introduction (Harlow 2006).

**Lash – Urry 1994**

S. Lash – J. Urry, Economies of Signs and Space (London 1994).

**McCracken 1990**

G. McCracken, Culture & Consumption (Bloomington 1990).

**Schrage 2009**

D. Schrage, Die Verfügbarkeit der Dinge. Eine historische Soziologie des Konsums (Frankfurt 2009).

**Schulze 1992**

G. Schulze, Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Kultursociologie der Gegenwart (Frankfurt 1992).

**Simmel 2016**

G. Simmel, Philosophie des Geldes (Cologne 2016).

**Sombart 1996**

W. Sombart, Liebe, Luxus und Kapitalismus. Über die Entstehung der modernen Welt aus dem Geist der Verschwendung (Berlin 1996).

**Ullrich 2016**

W. Ullrich, Kunstsammler als 'role model' für kreative Konsumenten, in: D. Hohnsträter (ed.), Konsum und Kreativität (Bielefeld 2016) 121–130.

**Trentmann 2017**

F. Trentmann, Herrschaft der Dinge. Die Geschichte des Konsums vom 15. Jahrhundert bis heute (Munich 2017).

**Veblen 1971**

T. Veblen, Theorie der feinen Leute. Eine ökonomische Theorie der Institutionen (Munich 1971).

**Venkatesh – Meamber 2008**

A. Venkatesh – L. A. Meamber, The Aesthetics of Consumption and the Consumer as an Aesthetic Object, Consumption Markets & Culture 11, 2008, 45–70.

**Welsch 1996**

W. Welsch, Aestheticization Processes. Phenomena, Distinctions and Prospects, Theory, Culture & Society 13, 1996, 1–24.