

11 AESTHETICS AND ATMOSPHERE IN MUSEUMS

A Critical Marketing Perspective

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Some of today's retail consumption spaces are sophisticated products of aesthetic work. Museums too are not immune to the changes brought about in contemporary consumption, boasting carefully designed spaces for special visitor experiences. Historically, museums form part of a larger complex of exhibitions that relates to department stores, shopping arcades, trade exhibitions, and world's fairs (Bennett 1995). The aesthetic interchange between museums and department stores dates back to the 1850s, whereby techniques including lighting and commodity and window display were shared between the different settings, and the first stores used museums for inspiration for their interior design (Henning 2006, 30). Today, however, the luxurious setting of nineteenth-century art museums often seems inadequate for the twenty-first century visitor, and museums of all kinds have adapted many experiential strategies from the world of commerce.

Thus, changes in museums from the late twentieth century are closely associated with developments in commodity display, and, as we argue, with the aesthetic economy as such. In order to *realize* rather than *sterilize* objects, history, and culture on display, museums place increasing emphasis on sensual perception or *aesthetic experience*. The notion of aesthetics is used here in the sense of *aisthesis* and is concerned with the sensual perception of reality, not primarily the fine arts – some of these ideas are known from John Dewey's works, which shifted the emphasis from art objects as the focus of traditional aesthetics to the viewer's experience (Dewey 1934). *Aisthesis* opens the broad range of aesthetic reality to analysis. This approach is useful for capturing the aesthetic experience and atmosphere in museums, which

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go beyond the mere presentation of artworks or other cultural and technological artifacts, testifying to increased efforts to create memorable experiences for visitors in a context of ubiquitous economic aestheticization.

In this chapter, we apply an interdisciplinary perspective to discuss atmosphere in museums, drawing on Gernot Böhme's aesthetic theory and referring to marketing research, which has been concerned with spaces of consumption since the 1990s. We do not present a conventional marketing approach which is typically focused on improving the efficiency of detailed spatial and atmospheric strategies in order to increase people's inclination to consume, and is often myopic on cultural, social, historic, and artistic issues. Given our occupation as marketing lecturers in business schools, and our backgrounds in theater, film, and media studies and sociology, our research adopts a perspective that is interdisciplinary and often critical of marketing practice and theory. We suggest that, in the context of an aesthetic economy, thorough knowledge of the world of marketing allows comparisons between consumption and museum spaces that can help us to better understand aesthetic and spatial practices in the museum. Such practices confirm but also challenge this context of consumption in which museums are socially and economically embedded.

The chapter consists of two main parts. In the first, we discuss the concepts of the "experience economy" and the "aesthetic economy" to show how spatial arrangements are created to influence visitors and consumers by generating specific atmospheres through the use of aesthetic work, with forms, colors, and their specific attributes. We will then present marketing approaches to the design of retail spaces, which, we argue, are not too different from those in contemporary museums. The first part of the chapter concludes by introducing questions of critical marketing and consumer resistance to persuasively styled atmospheres as a means to better understand the contemporary world of museums, which is increasingly oriented toward the marketplace.

The second part of the chapter discusses atmosphere in museums, in a way that is applicable to the broad, but relative, range of museums, including natural history, history, culture, science and technology, and art museums (Waidacher 1996, 299–301). We begin with a discussion of hybrid forms of consumption in museums and consider exterior aesthetics. We consider social interactions in museum space, and end with some critical reflections on atmosphere in museums and the aesthetic economy. Overall, advances in the marketing field, combined with museum studies, provide an interdisciplinary perspective for critically analyzing these contemporary manifestations of the interrelation of culture, education, and marketing.

The aesthetic economy and atmospheres

Museums are not only symbolic or functional ensembles, but they also provide particular aesthetic experiences that are situated in a broader economic and social context. The rise of an aesthetic economy has been identified by philosophers and

was discussed in depth in the area of marketing and consumption research. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Thorstein Veblen ([1899] 1953) emphasized the symbolic nature of consumption that extends beyond the fulfillment of direct needs and wants in a marketing context through his work on “conspicuous consumption.” This idea links to another classical dichotomy that we find in the Marxian framework of use value and exchange value. Half a century ago, Wolfgang Fritz Haug (1971), in his critique of commodity aesthetics, argued that use value, which is determined by practicality within a particular context of use, has come to be dominated by exchange value, the value that is gained in an exchange process that is typically monetary. Developing this argument, Gernot Böhme suggests as a third value category the concept of the staging value (*Inszenierungswert*):

In order to raise their exchange value ... commodities are treated in a special way: they are given an appearance, they are aestheticized and staged in the sphere of exchange. These aesthetic qualities of the commodity then develop into an autonomous value, because they play a role for the customer not just in the context of exchange but also in that of use. (2003, 73)

These values, which extend beyond utility and purposiveness are seen as a new type of use value, which derives from exchange value insofar as it is “made of [the objects’] attractiveness, their aura, their atmosphere, [serving] to stage, costume and intensify life” (Böhme 2003, 73). These values do not serve to address and fulfill people’s needs and wants, as commonly posited by conventional marketing theory; rather they create and heighten an insatiable desire for ever more consumption (2003, 73). Consequently, a broad range of practices within our society, which may include visual, spatial, and performative elements, are directed toward the creation of value. This notion of aesthetic work “designates the totality of activities which aim to give an appearance to things and people, cities and landscapes, to endow them with an aura, to lend them an atmosphere, or to generate an atmosphere in ensembles” (Böhme 2003, 73).

This concept includes the world of arts, but also extends to contemporary service and design practices and all kinds of production, including architects, marketers, music producers, and people decorating and refurbishing spaces. Our everyday life takes place in many of these atmospheres which are products of aesthetic work. Museums only are one element in this context.

Other writers, including the sociologist Mike Featherstone (1992) and philosopher Wolfgang Iser (1997), have identified an “aestheticization” of everyday life by which the values of stylization and sensual gratification have come to permeate the economic, social, and personal dimensions of contemporary capitalism. In their work on the “experience economy,” Pine and Gilmore (1999) have asserted that work is theater and every business a stage, sketching a concept that resonates with Böhme’s ideas of aesthetic and atmospheric work. They argue that businesses must create memorable events for their customers, “experiences” which become

the very product that is marketed and consumed. Many of these practices are fueled by strategies from the world of arts, with all kinds of contemporary institutions applying a broad range of aesthetic, visual, and narrative techniques in the attempt to heighten the experience on offer (Biehl-Missal 2011b). In this aesthetic economy, architecture and spaces for aesthetic consumption play a fundamental role and also affect an increasing number of museums of all kinds.

In order to discuss atmospheres and the aesthetic experience in museums from an interdisciplinary marketing perspective, we have chosen an approach to aesthetics that accounts for sensual experience in its relation to actual market developments in the economy. Drawing on the work of Böhme, we follow a concept of the new aesthetics that goes beyond traditional aesthetics developed in the eighteenth century as a theory of art.

In this approach, the notion of “atmosphere” is central. The notion of atmosphere has received some attention in the discipline of aesthetics within philosophy (Schmitz 1964) and links to Benjamin’s (1968) idea of the “aura” as an immaterial quality that pertains to or surrounds original works of art but is considered absent in their technical reproductions. With the ready-made in art, aura was extended to everyday objects once they were placed in an art context (Böhme 1993, 116). Today, as art, life, and aesthetic work are increasingly united in product and space design, atmosphere can be encountered in any context. Böhme’s concept of the aura also includes Benjamin’s observations on “breathing” the aura: the notion that people corporeally perceive and absorb the atmosphere in bodily ways, for example, when they let the impression of a spectacular natural setting “enter” the body to produce effects of relaxation (Böhme 1993, 118). This is echoed in statements such as “As we enter a space, the space enters us,” which expresses the idea of people’s “innate capacities to internalize abstract emotive structures” (Pallasmaa 2012, 242, 239), and which becomes obvious when we consider odor, which enters the body directly; musical rhythm, which vibrates and affects bodily tensions; or colors that “hurt” the eyes. Atmosphere is something that is, in a certain sense, indeterminate, a spatially extended quality of feeling. Atmospheres are considered spatial bearers of moods, created by a range of different elements: “atmospheres are evidently what are experienced in bodily presence in relation to persons and things or in spaces” (Böhme 1993, 119). Thus the notion of the atmosphere helps us to explain corporeal and emotional responses in carefully designed environments.

So, in this chapter, when we refer to the notion of aesthetic experience, we take into account the entire atmosphere and the sensual perception of people in relation to spaces, objects, and humans. *Aisthesis* refers to the sensual perception of the reality, and focuses on the relation between environmental qualities and human states in actual aesthetic environments (Böhme 1993, 125). Marketing and consumer research also emphasizes experience as the apprehension of something via the sensorial and the corporeal (Biehl-Missal and Saren 2012). This approach is useful in looking at all kinds of museums and allows to take into account their embeddedness in the aesthetic and experience economy.

Marketing research on retail space and atmospheres

In a broader context of the aesthetic economy, research in the area of marketing strongly emphasizes that consumption is more than the acquisition and use of goods in that it includes extraordinary experiences for consumers. Marketing practice, as a melting pot of creative practices that constitute aesthetic work, and marketing research have made some effort to theorize the role and function of architecture and experience. Three decades ago, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) highlighted the relevance of emotional experiences that are created by and are related to products and services. Consumer experiences are influenced and stimulated by many aspects of the environment in which consumption takes place.

Böhme (2006) refers to the plethora of consumption spaces that include shopping malls, a variety of stores, and locations for services as “architectures of seduction” and as products of aesthetic work that serve to further intensify people’s “desire” in a continuous theatrical staging of life through consumption. An example in this endeavor is Louis Vuitton, which cooperates with famous architects such as Jun Aoki, Kumiko Inui, and Peter Marino, and its flagship store, Maison Louis Vuitton, at the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris, France. The strategies applied here are strongly inspired by many artistic and museal concepts (Biehl-Missal 2011b, 63). In the space, the brand is recreated by the visual gestalt and atmosphere: the company’s signature LV monogram and historic Damier pattern are used for optical effect and to provide an illusion of height and depth. The presentation of products is reminiscent of the presentation of artifacts in museums, and they are framed by a permeable wall of stainless steel which recreates countless multiples of the signature monogram. The atmosphere is influenced by the density and materiality of expensive fabrics, stimulating the imagination of potential customers and their perception of the commodity’s material. Architecture and fashion, two sisters in the art world, reaffirm and reinforce each other, symbolically communicating messages of status and taste, in a three-dimensional total work of art, a commercial *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

As in many museums, the setting is educational and influential. Museums such as Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York have at times explicitly set about this schooling of taste and style (see Staniszewski 1998). One could argue that the commercial “education” received in luxury stores shapes people’s perceptions and understanding of the value of things, which is then embodied through behavior and items purchased with staging values (Böhme 2003). This consumer knowledge is then communicated and spread socially.

The Louis Vuitton marketing strategy also involves cooperations with famous artists for the decoration of its shop window. This includes theater director Robert Wilson’s colorful outlet in 2002 and the 2006 Danish Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson’s installation of light bulbs, steel, and aluminum in the form of a massive eye, called “Eye See You,” which attracted the gaze of shoppers. Many of the strategies observed here situate themselves in a long history of a creative circuit

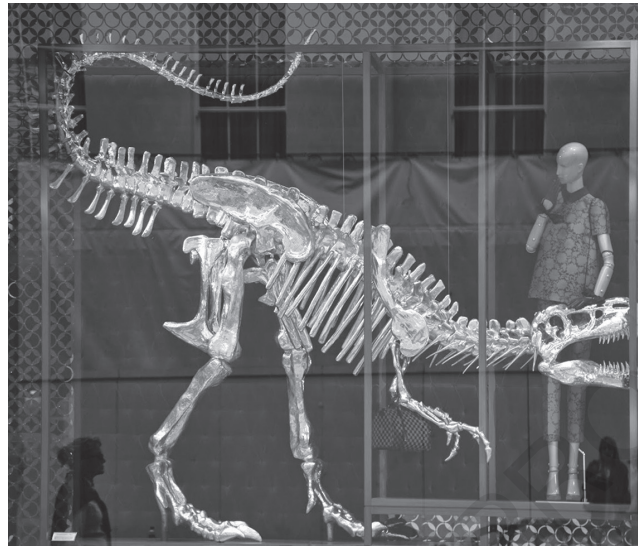


FIGURE 11.1 Louis Vuitton shop window, Paris.

Photo: Georgina Mascolo.

between museums and department stores where the distanced presentation of objects, often behind glass and windows, and the touchable presentation of sensual materials helped to turn goods into a desirable fetish (Henning 2006, 31). In museums, certain display techniques such as, for example, the habitat diorama with taxidermy in naturalistic scenes, closely resemble shop windows and create illusions of a different world (Henning 2006, 44). This creative circuit becomes strikingly obvious when considering a Louis Vuitton shop window design that uses carefully built and spectacularly arranged massive models of dinosaur fossils as a backdrop for its leather products (Figure 11.1).

In a local Paris context, this setting mirrors the history and grandeur of the French Natural History Museum in the city's Les Jardins des Plantes, which may have inspired the design team, although the dinosaurs later appeared at Louis Vuitton's Fifth Avenue store in Manhattan. By evoking the museum, Louis Vuitton stores emphasize the quality of the products. The Cherry Blossom handbag range designed by the artist Takashi Murakami for Louis Vuitton was eventually exhibited in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, turning the museum itself into an impressive space for the display of luxury consumer goods.

These aesthetic qualities of retail environments have indirect implications for strengthened brand identity, and help to embody the essence and experience that is for sale. Other examples are jewelry stores with imposing doors which create an exclusive atmosphere, discouraging nonserious shoppers from entering and potentially selling the exclusive "fantasy" of the jewelry purchase to women. Other locations, such as Nike stores, try to recreate an atmosphere loaded with

sport via imagery, architecture, and features, for example, tartan tracks recreated on the floor.

In the marketing literature, not only the general and brand implications have been analyzed, but research on “atmospherics” (Kotler 1973) has a tradition of four decades, analyzing in detail factors such as interior and exterior elements, layout and decoration, which influence buying behavior (Turley and Milliman 2000). Attention has also been paid to the careful arrangement of window displays (Soto 2002). Stronger competition between retail and consumption settings has led to the development of ever new creative strategies to provide attractive experiences through store design, events, and entertainment (Fiore and Kim 2007). Researchers find that the constitution of consumer experiences seems to be directly affected by sensory and emotional stimuli from the retail environment to the extent that “where shoppers go, what they see, and how they respond determines the very nature of the shopping experience” (Underhill 1999, 44). In order to create elaborate atmospheres for shopping, marketers employ a diverse range of lighting techniques, staging, and decorating (Dennis and King 2007), which also includes the use of background music that functions as acoustic wallpaper. This genre of music, often referred to as elevator music, easy listening, or Muzak, is intended to be inoffensive but often is received critically by people who bemoan its pervasiveness and insipid content (Lanza 2004). A range of factors is considered to be stimuli which may affect consumers’ responses, such as ambient cues (e.g., music, lighting, scent, temperature), design cues (e.g., parking, wall color, size of space), and social cues (e.g., crowding, staff appearance) (Fiore and Kim 2007). An “effective” retail environment has an impact on consumers who approach merchandise more directly and stay longer in the store (Stoel, Wickliffe, and Lee 2004).

These perspectives have led to explicit critique, for example of contemporary shopping malls that appropriate ideas of utopia and harmony for purely commercial purposes. For instance, Anna-Maria Murtola asserts that people are rendered apathetic and numb, like on the lotus drug which she uses as a comparison: “As long as you stay within this world and keep on shopping, you can feel happy. But the happiness is ephemeral” (2010, 47). In this view, atmospheres in consumption contexts are deemed manipulative and rather restricting to the experience and imagination, while Böhme (2003) at least accords some aesthetic pleasure besides pervasive aesthetic manipulation.

Further analyses have studied exterior and interior design and architecture and its role of creating visual stimuli to affect the customer in a way that is often described as “seduction” (Soto 2002, 24). Experience-oriented strategies have been found to affect fashion shoppers who reported a positive mood and referred to their shopping as more pleasurable (Michon et al. 2007). In order to achieve effective consumer seduction, retail environments must be free of distraction and complications, and unpleasant or disturbing emotions must be avoided, so that the shopper feels “comfortable yet excited” (Jones 1999, 137). Factors such as a restraining layout, unattractive decoration, and badly informed staff have to be avoided as

they distract from the shopping experience by creating “negative” atmospheres and emotions. In addition to architectural layout, design cues, and the point of purchase and decoration displays, so-called human variables have been identified as relevant for atmospheric cues in retail settings (Turley and Milliman 2000). In this vein, marketing settings have been likened to a theater where scripted behavior and performances take place to create superior services (Grove and Fisk 1992). Similar observations have been made with regard to museum spaces, as we will discuss below.

A critical marketing approach

The idea of pleasant atmospheres may be appropriate for corporate museums, which often have a strong emphasis on a positive message. However, many art and history museums emphasize the controversial potential of their artifacts and the generally challenging potential of art, which allows for unexpected and unpleasant experiences. With regard to this difference, Böhme emphasizes that being in marketing atmospheres differs in several ways from encountering atmospheres in environments devoted to art (Böhme 2003, 79). Art is understood as a special form of aesthetic work, which has its own social function, namely the mediation of the encounter and response to atmospheres in situations such as theaters, museums, and exhibitions *set apart from* action contexts (Böhme 1993, 116). Böhme suggests that the function of art is to develop human sensuality in such atmospheres which he defines as not “seductive” or “obliging,” but “liberating” (*handlungsentlastend*) (1995, 16). The purpose in this sense is to provide a space for aesthetic experience, enabling people to dwell on the atmosphere and to emotionally and imaginatively explore and feel moods and moments without being influenced with regard to a specific purpose such as consumption. In this vein, philosopher and museum theorist Hilde Hein suggests that stimulated experiences

may excite visitors to further inquiry ... Alternatively, the discovery might terminate simply with pleasurable aesthetic enjoyment of the experience as an end in itself – a “wow effect,” not unlike that stimulated by the theme park or joy ride. If the experience is complex and transformative, it may even resemble a religious epiphany or the rapture of enjoying art. (2000, 86)

However, museums have been critiqued as fundamentally ideological institutions (Kaplan 1994; Bennett 1995), and atmosphere as a means of manufacturing experience becomes – as in the shopping center – an ideological tool. Hence it seems worth taking a look at critical research on atmospheres in marketing, part of a broader field of “critical marketing,” which does not aim to increase marketing efficiency, but rather often draws on critical theory and radical approaches (Saren et al. 2007). A critical marketing approach argues that these atmospheres may provide opportunities for aesthetic pleasure but function as opportunities for

aesthetic manipulation as well; they hide a reality of exploitation whereby people's desire to consume is intensified, and thus constitute a real social power (Biehl-Missal and Saren 2012, 168).

Studies of "servicescapes" address the totality of the physical environment in which a service process takes place and also refer to the reactions of people present (Bitner 1992; Grove and Fisk 1992; Turley and Milliman 2000). Researchers have described how people resist, renegotiate, or challenge the atmosphere in servicescapes, in case studies including Nike Town Chicago and the Starbucks coffee chain (Sherry 1998; Kozinets et al. 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004).

Biehl-Missal and Saren (2012) have used Böhme's concept of atmosphere to critique marketing practices, to explain how they work and why they may be challenged and opposed by activists and consumers. Starbucks is a prominent example because atmosphere is a key strategic tool for the company and its branding, which largely extends beyond the actual coffee products it sells to encompass the overall ambience of its coffee shops. In Starbucks coffee shops, all the elements work together to create the desired atmosphere. The space is framed by high columns, square cut forms, and wide windows which constitute a modern frame, suggesting openness and helping to create the appearance of an accessible, inviting, and friendly place. The space is tinged with a "warm" materiality by the soft furnishings, yellow light, pleasant coffee aroma, discreet rippling of musical sound, and an airy and emotionally relaxing arrangement. These elements are all perceived sensually via synaesthesia, the combination of, for example, the visual and the tactile in the soft sofas and warm light. Behind this aesthetic pleasure there is aesthetic manipulation whereby consumption is encouraged. In addition, the transnational company has also been accused of other actions behind the scenes that are belied by the peaceful atmosphere: Starbucks has been criticized for destroying neighborhoods and offering fake communities in place of locally owned spaces (Thompson and Arsel 2004). Numerous human rights and environmental violations, including the exploitation of workers and rejection of fair trade agreements, have come to public attention. Biehl-Missal and Saren conclude: "Rather than being a truly alternative public sphere open to community and democracy, the atmosphere in the stores veils the reality outside and creates a substitute of peacefulness and any related disturbing and political actions are rapidly ended" (2012, 175).

There is a broad spectrum of consumer resistance that includes approaches that more or less publicly reject certain products for ethical, environmental, or financial reasons. It also includes forms of rebellious activism. The latter, more extreme, actions include, for example, the work of William Talen and the Church of Stop Shopping. Talen has been arrested for his satiric performances as the preacher "Reverend Billy" at Starbucks and other slick retail spaces such as Victoria's Secret, Disney Stores, and several global banks which are involved in unsustainable and unethical business behavior. Resistance can also include tactical, artful techniques of "poaching" (de Certeau 1984). Researchers have studied consumers' use of Starbucks for the production of personally significant

experiences that do not correspond to what marketers had envisioned. In Starbucks coffee shops in China, for example, it has been found that consumers who are exposed to spatial arrangements, colors, decoration, and Western cultural elements in the setting create their own personally meaningful aesthetic experiences, for example, using the setting for lengthy private and even romantic meetings or birthday celebrations away from their parents (Venkatraman and Nelson 2008).

In the case of museums, Mark Rectanus (2002) has framed the Western museum as a contested site of commercial branding and privatized cultural funding, where artists collaborate with corporations, merging art, business, and museums, but also challenge and resist these developments. For example, the aforementioned Reverend Billy and the gospel choir Church of Earthalujah, who rally in retail stores, also staged a protest in the sleek, dark Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London at the oil giant BP's sponsorship of the art gallery. Other practices of resistance in museum spaces, for example the three collectives of artists known as Platform, Art Not Oil, and Liberate, who seized the occasion of the Tate's 2010 Summer Party to mark 20 years of BP support to challenge this partnership (Chong 2013). They contended that the ethics of arts sponsorship is compromised by outcomes of multinational capitalism such as the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. Less explicitly political appropriation of the museum space goes back to the nineteenth century when, as Charlotte Klonk (2009) pointed out, mothers visited the National Gallery in London solely to teach their children to walk, while others used the space for quiet naps, flirtatious encounters, or picnics.

Museums, commerce and atmosphere

In today's aesthetic economy, the creative circuit between commercial and museum settings seems to run even faster and many other parallels have become obvious. Increasing efforts are being made not to sterilize art by presenting it in a museum, but to realize it. Whereas many nineteenth-century museums were crowded, chaotic, and dark, and remained incomprehensible to many visitors, museums have increasingly become more people-centered, emphasizing visitors' experiences (Henning 2006, 91). Just as marketing and consumption processes have been compared to a theater performance in order to emphasize the emotional and aesthetic experience they create (Pine and Gilmore 1999), museums are now understood as providing a setting for performance, more often in the sense of postmodern or postdramatic theater, where spectators are integrated into a situation of materiality, movement, sound, and atmosphere rather than being exposed to an illusory dramatic story (Lehmann 2006; Biehl-Missal 2011a). The creative processes that come into play here are historically related to theater scenography, a term increasingly being applied to museums which designates the totality of spatial and material elements including light and also the invisible odor of the space.¹

Museums can be seen as part of the experience economy in that they not only serve to display art, history, technology, nature, and so on, but also often mimic ubiquitous commercial sites that “mass produce and retail ‘unique experiences’ that are phenomenologically real” (Hein 2000, 80). It is increasingly difficult to determine what is a museum and what is not. As mentioned earlier, marketing research has provided many examples of museum-like atmospheres from Nike Town Chicago (Sherry 1998) to the Louis Vuitton flagship store (Biehl-Missal 2011b, 62). Economic spaces like the Frankfurt Stock Exchange have been completely refurbished to reflect a dynamic and futuristic face of the financial markets so that they appear attractive and reliable to private investors, and the trading floor also provides a revamped additional exhibition space for visitors where they can soak up the digital-technological atmosphere of contemporary stock market trading (Biehl-Missal 2013).

In many cases, the professionals who design corporate spaces and retail stores also work for museums. Disney is not the only operator which deploys marketing and educational research and uses theatrical action to produce aesthetically gratifying experiences in its theme parks (Hein 2000, 82). Another is Atelier Brückner in Germany, which was involved in the refurbishment of the Frankfurt Stock Exchange, the BMW Museum, and many other corporate museums; has designed technology and nature museums; and has provided scenography for the theater and opera as well. In the United Kingdom, Land Design Studio also creates museum and commercial spaces, integrating architecture and scenography.²

These theatrical developments connect to other elements in museums, for example the hybrid consumption that Bryman describes as part of a “Disneyization” or “Disneyfication” of society (2004, 72). An example of hybrid consumption can be found in the way museum restaurant and shopping opportunities for visitors have become major sources of revenue in larger museums, and are often framed by remarkable architectonic spaces. Museums are also part of general hybrid consumption settings; for example, Manchester United Football Club and Spanish football clubs FC Barcelona and Real Madrid include a museum alongside themed restaurants and shops in their stadiums (Bryman 2004, 72). The pressure to consume by taking the “exit through the gift shop” has been highlighted by artists as well, for example in Banksy’s film *Exit through the Gift Shop* (2010).

When discussing museums designed along commercial lines, it needs to be pointed out that the interior atmosphere of the traditional didactic museum space is influenced by the external form and context which are strongly related to retail and consumption culture: cities themselves are being marketed in a competition to attract visitors. While the grandeur of the Louvre situated nineteenth-century Paris in a symbolic context of cultural progress and democracy (Duncan 1999, 306, 307), many of the recent twenty-first-century buildings by “star” architects welcome citizens and tourists in a commercial setting that speaks to the capitalist aesthetic economy. For example, Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain, is one expression of the municipal government’s effort to attract creative workers, and Daniel Libeskind’s Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada,



FIGURE 11.2 Atelier Brückner, BMW Museum, Munich.
Photo: Marcus Meyer. Reproduced by permission of Atelier Brückner.

enhances the attractiveness of the adjacent retail strip. In this sense, the commercial retail landscape and museums are not two fundamentally different things.

For corporate museums, architects create atmospheres that tell stories and invite visitors to experience the story. An example is the BMW Museum in Munich, Germany, designed by the company, which is a landmark in the city of Munich and materially symbolizes the roots of the Bavarian car company (Figure 11.2).³

The BMW Museum brings to life the overarching experience of movement, dynamics, and the pleasure of driving (Biehl-Missal 2011b, 57). The concept is based on theme-specific spaces accessed via connecting ramps that create an experience of mobility and movement: thus the theme is not only symbolized but made accessible, bodily and architectonically. Within the exhibitions, the sleek and polished automobiles are not only rationally perceived as special and valuable, but sensually experienced; this combines with the multimedia-enhanced exhibition architecture to present a joyful, idealized experience of driving.

In other words, according to our aesthetic approach in this chapter, the encounter with artifacts in such museum spaces is understood not primarily as a mental, rational activity, but as including the embodied and lived experiencing of the situation. The concept of atmosphere reflects this emphasis on the interaction between viewer and visual artifact, and supports the argument that aesthetically designed

spaces have an affective power which is experienced bodily by the visitor. An artifact does not need to refer to some meaning as a sign, as a BMW model might semiotically refer to “luxury” and “wealth,” but in the first instance it has its own presence, reality, and atmosphere. From a marketing and organization studies perspective, it has been acknowledged that artifacts not only are perceived in reaction to signs with reference to semiotic theory, but they also have an effect via the atmosphere they create and the moods which are induced in the perceiver (Gagliardi 1996; Biehl-Missal 2013). This is an idea that also appears in art history and aesthetics, whereby pictures are perceived to have a relatively autonomous reality and presence, “appearing” to people and touching their inner feelings (Schmitz 1964; Klages 1972; Gombrich 1982). Böhme states that, for example, paintings which depict a melancholy scene “are not just signs for this scene but produce this scene itself” (Böhme 1993, 124; 2006, 74). They emanate a specific atmosphere. The technological devices in the example used here also make an impact via the carefully styled aesthetic situation.

This aesthetic perception may be felt but, as we have suggested, it is not ideologically neutral, and extends to history itself, for example at the Volkswagen Autostadt in Wolfsburg, Germany. On 28 hectares of hills and lakes in a carefully designed park, landscape visitors encounter numerous attractions, including exhibition of classic cars and innovative cars, artworks and films, and interactive stations, and experience the company’s view of its brands and values such as safety, sustainability, and service, and its history. In this museum the development of technology very much suggests, in an almost teleological line, the development of the automobile, not illustrating possible alternatives to this form of individual transportation and, in a green setting, not providing space for representation of destructive ecological consequences. The embodied experience promotes acceptance of this belief.

Challenging atmospheres

Aesthetic work in museum architecture can further an embodied historical understanding for quite different purposes. Museums may generate different atmospheres that are not “positive,” as they are in marketing environments, and do not stand in any obvious relation to consumption and the industry; rather, they achieve an experience of history that encourages further interpretation in the visitor. An example of this is the building by Daniel Libeskind which forms part of the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Five empty spaces or voids run vertically all the way through from the ground floor of the building up to the roof. They have walls of bare concrete, without heat or air conditioning and largely without artificial light. Libeskind explained that they refer to “that which can never be exhibited when it comes to Jewish Berlin history: Humanity reduced to ashes” (Stiftung Jüdisches Museum Berlin 2013). These spaces are not just symbolically meaningful but create a strong atmosphere that affects visitors.

This approach of affecting people's values and understanding rather than presenting historic objects that tell their story goes along with an increasing appeal to sensory responses, emotions, and feelings in museums. With regard to visual displays and three-dimensional "walk-in" environments, Hein describes how knowledge flows from emotional intensity and subjective feeling:

If seeing is believing, seeing forcefully may foster a still stronger belief, and a timid or weak presentation can undermine an idea's credibility. Theatricality makes a story more compelling emotively, and so design and the art of spectacle compete with logic and evidence in the inducement of belief. ... The production of shared, powerful experiences becomes a means to create a public reality that passes for knowledge. (2000, 80)

Similarly, the Washington United States Holocaust Memorial Museum does not aim only at rational explanation but uses an exhibit architecture which makes visitors undergo and discover a range of "disorienting feelings" that reveal the architecture's strong didactic function (Hein 2000, 84). Emphasizing the *impression* rather than the *expression* of artifacts and spaces (Böhme 1995, 54), the social character of elements (when, for example, concrete is linked to a certain building tradition, or when the "void" is only symbolically equated with the absence of the deported and murdered Jews) becomes less important. Böhme (2006, 107) emphasizes that architecture is perceived through sensing rather than seeing: space, with its dimensions and perspective, is fundamentally aesthetic. In this perspective what is valued is the synesthetic character of perception, the combined contribution of several different senses, which differs from mechanistic views in which elements are perceived through separate channels: seeing by eye, hearing by ear, and so on (Biehl-Missal 2013, 360). Because of its synaesthetic character, one can describe the atmospheric "coolness" and "emptiness" of both materials and spaces. For example, the visual impression people get from a material results in an atmospheric sensing that is different from the results of a tactile examination (Böhme 1995, 55). When touching a material, iron for example, one does not perceive its actual temperature but its thermal conductivity. Cross-sensory metaphors are indicative of this process, such as when referring to a "warm" material or a "high" tone (Biehl-Missal 2013, 360). The synaesthetic character of a museum space is produced through several factors: coolness in this example via sleek, massive surfaces and the absence of warm light. This perception also derives from earlier bodily encounters with the material. The perception of a material and its imagery depends on the atmosphere. For example, the installation by Menashe Kadishman, *Shalechet* (Fallen leaves) filled one of the voids at the Jewish Museum in Berlin with countless small "screaming" faces made of iron which, via synaesthetic perception, produce a doubly mute situation because of the absence of sound mimetically connotated by open mouths; this produces a solely material echo of the past laments that is as cold and metallic as the iron is for us (Figure 11.3).

When visitors walk on the faces, an extraordinary resonant auditory effect is produced as the void fills with the resulting clanging. The chilly air, the concrete, and the heavy materiality of the iron aesthetically reproduce the weight and misery in history.

Through their acoustic experience, the voids also allow for a synaesthetic perception that in many ways accounts for Jewish history in Germany. They make visitors and the ancestors of victims and assassins experience the nonreversible loss in German society of moral and values in a Christian-humanist ideal and the loss of emancipatory power (Bendt 1992, 25). An additional empty tower (“voided Void”) situated in the building essentially manifests the void and absence that is continuous in history, the solid built remains of a voided void that can also be aesthetically perceived.

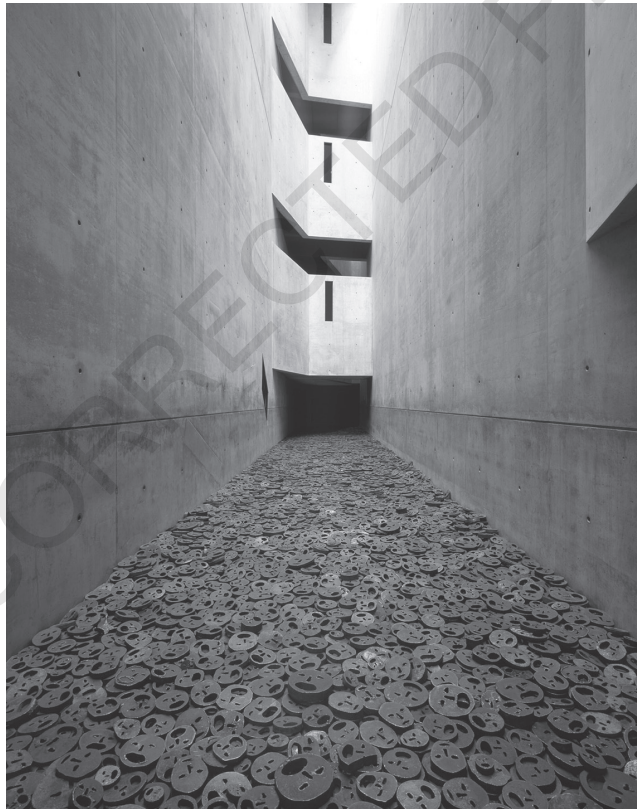


FIGURE 11.3 Menashe Kadishman, *Shalechet*, Libeskind Building, Jewish Museum, Berlin. Donation Dieter and Si Rosenkranz. (For a color version of this figure, please see the color plate section)

Photo: Jens Ziehe.

The pragmatic aesthetics of museum visiting

Using an atmospheric perspective to make sense of museum exhibitions. Böhme (2006) offers us an interesting starting point for exploring how people co-create atmosphere in response to the aesthetic influence of space, objects, and, more importantly, other visitors. Exhibitions are not only populated by museal objects arranged by curators and museum designers, but they are also explored and examined by museum visitors, and often in very different ways than anticipated by the curators (Baker 1999).

When social theorists and historians describe the museum as ritual (Duncan 1995), they consider the “interaction order” (Goffman 1983) in the galleries as institutionally predefined by the museum, its architecture and layout, as well as by the social conventions and rules that govern behavior in the gallery. The museum visit is considered to be organized by a normative order imposed by the physical and visual environment and enforced by museum wardens and all those visitors present in the gallery who monitor each other’s conduct and create an environment of mutual observation and observability (Trondsen 1976; Bennett 1995). In art museums this ritualistic organization has been described by Hirschauer (2006) as “museum discipline,” characterized as silent shuffling along the gallery walls. This relatively undisturbed viewing of art in a public place, however, is the product of an aesthetic organization of the actions of visitors who explore and experience exhibits in interaction with companions and other people who are in the galleries at the same time (Jafari, Taheri, and vom Lehn 2013).

Detailed video-based studies of interaction in art museums reveal that people accomplish their exploration of an exhibition moment by moment and in interaction with all those who are present. While the action and interaction in art museums are contingently organized, people’s actions are not randomly produced but in a systematic manner, resulting in what Garfinkel (1967) described as a “familiar scene.” Two visitors standing next to each other looking at a work of art move to the next exhibit by slowly and progressively transforming their bodily configuration, a side-by-side arrangement, into a configuration that allows them to jointly move on and take a standpoint at the next exhibit (vom Lehn 2013). Visitors manage to accomplish their concerted onward movement without, or with only little, talk by reacting to their aesthetic perception of the situation. They monitor, often from the corner of the eye, other visitors’ “state of involvement” with the exhibit and notice changes, for example in posture, that suggest they might be ready to move on. When, as in Figures 11.4a–c, a visitor turns to the right and moves away from the exhibit she is looking at with a friend, the latter may treat that bodily turn as an invitation to leave and align with that invitation by taking a step backward and turning his upper body to the right. In other cases, visitors feel encouraged to bring their engagement with the exhibit to a close when other people arrive in the locale. Following an aesthetic perspective, these cues are not only perceived visually, but are a corporeal reaction to the alterations of the atmosphere co-created

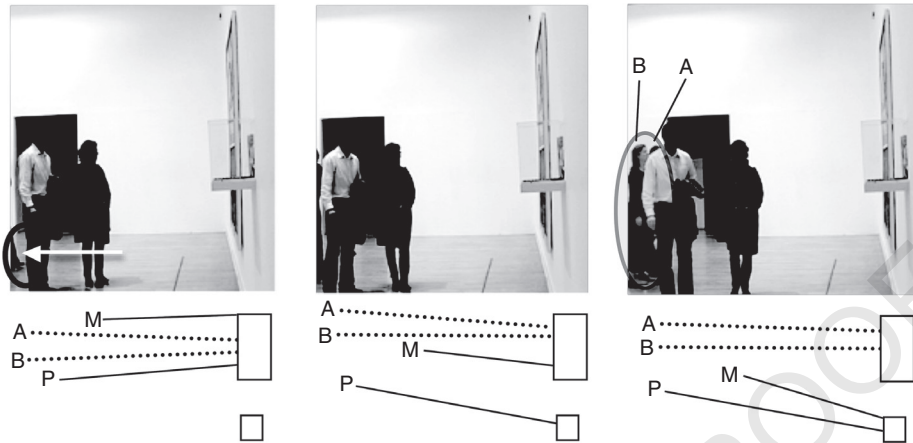


FIGURE 11.4a–c Interactional organization of a museum visit (vom Lehn 2013). A, B, M, and P refer to the four visitors visible in the picture. A and B arrive from behind and become visible in (c). P is the man nearest to the reader, M the woman to his left.

between people present and in relationship to the material, corporeal, and visual environment around them.

These interactions, which arise between friends and strangers, can be described as forming a “pragmatic aesthetics” (Knoblauch 1998) in the museum, that is, an aesthetic organization produced for the pragmatic purposes of accomplishing the museum visit. The interaction that facilitates the concerted withdrawal and onward movement is embedded within a material and visual environment that the participants orient to bodily and visually while at the same time being aware of other people and their actions.

Despite all efforts to design and curate museums, visitors explore exhibitions in different ways. Baker emphasizes that:

the meanings that the single individual might read into the objects encountered along the way – will only rarely coincide with the strategic thinking of museum planners. How a visitor interacts with artworks and their settings is determined by personal needs, associations, biases, and fantasies rather than by institutional recommendations. (Baker 1999, 18–19)

Moreover, the route visitors take through an exhibition – where they stop, what they look at and for how long, and how they see it emerges in and through social interaction and talk at and around exhibits (Heath and vom Lehn 2004). The aesthetic experience of people in museums cannot be understood independently from their action and interaction. The experience is not a cognitive process but a practical achievement produced in interaction with and around the works of art. In this sense, visitors too are creators of the aesthetic work that produces the

atmosphere in museums, complementing and altering the product of the aesthetic work of museum managers, designers, and curators.

The atmosphere is also influenced by unexpected factors, for example, families visiting with noisy children, construction work, or a fire alarm that may disturb the museum experience. These events correspond with negative elements that marketing research commonly tries to avoid in retail atmospheres (Jones 1999). Other elements that can counter visitors' expectancies are the deployment of modern technology, such as hand-held computers or information kiosks in traditional art galleries. Curators and designers take particular care in the design and placement of such systems and devices and strive to have the technology accompany the original works without drawing undue attention to itself. Thus, they hope to avoid disturbing the aura of the original works of art and to maintain the museum atmosphere. However, when people encounter a traditional art exhibition where information systems stand next to paintings and sculptures, they often spend relatively more time with the technology and struggle to embed the technology within their interactional and collaborative examination of the exhibits. As Heath and vom Lehn found in their research of stationary and mobile systems in art museums, pairs and groups of visitors often separate and continue their visit individually, if only for the duration of their engagement with a piece of art or furniture, or they become frustrated with the systems and abandon them (vom Lehn and Heath 2005; Heath and vom Lehn 2008). An art museum atmosphere that differs from the expected or hoped-for encounter with works of art can also be observed in blockbuster exhibitions. For the practical purpose of gaining access to the works, visitors may deploy strategies such as waiting for a gap to open into which they then sprint, or using a stroller to get close to paintings. While "normally" they would deploy a pragmatic aesthetics, such a co-created atmosphere perceived perhaps as tense or unpleasant, impacts the visitor's behavior and aesthetic experience of the exhibition.

Conclusion

We have discussed some of the ways in which museums today construct atmospheres similar to those found in consumption contexts. These include art museums and the broad range of museal institutions that provide experiences of science and nature, of technology, culture, and history, and of corporate artifacts. Some corporate museums do not present artworks but actual products, many of which can be consumed, thus reducing the differences between marketing spaces and a "museum." This blurring of the boundaries can also be found in design museums and galleries associated with financial institutions and corporations, where products are put on display not for purchase, but for appreciation (Waidacher 1996).

As we have argued, the interplay of marketing and museums goes beyond advertising, the website, media coverage, and the museum shop, infusing the

history of the museum and contemporary practice that shapes its atmospheric and aesthetic form. Marketing pervades the entire institution of the museum, both the front-of-house contact with the public and the backstage activities conducted to develop exhibitions. Marketing research can help understand how these front- and backstage activities contribute but are not limited to the creation of a museum atmosphere. Strategies of aesthetic work and techniques used in retail settings produce atmospheres, but we need to recognize people's role in co-creation of the experience, by theorizing the interplay between the visual and material resources that museums offer visitors and the concrete ways in which visitors make sense of exhibitions in and through their interaction with each other.

From our interdisciplinary critical marketing perspective, the question arises regarding the relationship between, on the one hand, the renewal of traditional museums as an attempt to address the increased consumerism in many Western countries and, on the other hand, the maintenance of the art museum as a space for art appreciation and aesthetic experiences. On the one hand, there is an increasing interest in communicating art and culture to the wider public whereby museum managers and marketers try to attract visitors to their institutions by hosting blockbuster exhibitions and deploying novel interactive technologies that are attractive to younger audiences. On the other hand, museums are criticized for blockbuster exhibitions and for deploying interactive technologies in traditional settings because they are seen as a technique to feed consumerism in the disguise of widening access.

The atmosphere in museums may fulfill a special social function, namely the mediation of an encounter set apart from action contexts that we typically find in "seductive" marketing atmospheres (Böhme 1993, 116). It may enable people to emotionally and imaginatively explore and experience moods and moments without being influenced to a specific purpose such as consumption. In the light of the similarities between museums and consumption spaces, museums have a broader range of opportunities to aesthetically communicate with consumers, providing spaces that do not necessarily lure and numb people (Murtola 2010), but may contribute to, for example, a critical and embodied understanding of history.

Our perspective emphasizes that these architectures are not only symbolic and representational, and may be used for place marketing or to make material and manifest a certain political aesthetics and ideological thought. These architectures are vehicles for aesthetic experience and constitute a real social power because they influence people via bodily and sensual perception. Museum studies already recognizes that architecture and exhibition design in museums is part and parcel of the educational dimension, relating to national identity construction, influencing the values and beliefs of the visiting public, and expressing political power and status (Hooper-Greenhill 1994; Kaplan 1994; Bennett 1995; Hein 2000). Atmospheres touch, invade, and permeate people's bodies, subtly influencing and manipulating their emotions and moods, their sensual and mental states (Böhme 2003). Via their subtle impact on people at bodily and emotional levels, they can

“influence our perception of reality, to the point of subtly shaping beliefs, norms and cultural values” (Gagliardi 1996, 575). When consumption artifacts are presented in museums or when consumption settings are presented in a luxury museum style, we can see how museums produce not only a certain kind of citizen, as writers like Tony Bennett (1995) have shown, but also, by educating taste and participating in constructing marketing atmospheres, a consumer.

Notes

- 1 On scenography see also Chapter 16 by Beat Hächler and Chapter 15 by Bettina Habsburg-Lothringen in this volume.
- 2 See Chapter 14 by Peter Higgins in this volume.
- 3 On the BMW Building in Leipzig, Germany, see Chapter 23 by Mark W. Rectanus.

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