



The new spaces of consumption

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Recent retail spaces are giving a new shape to our everyday environment. Kärrholm proposes new concepts to better understand these changes and how they affect our practices, for example by syncing our lives with the “rhythm of shopping.” Brief introduction to the discipline of “architectural territoriology.”

Retail spaces in Western cities have changed dramatically during the last half-century, both quantitatively and qualitatively, shaping new relations with the rest of the city space, and impacting upon the configuration of the public domain at large. Understanding the role of these “landscapes of consumption”, as Sharon Zukin has called them, is consequently a challenging and timely task. In *Retailising Space*, the Swedish architect Mattias Kärrholm, professor at Lund university and Malmö university, provides an innovative contribution to research on this topic.

This book is a theoretically ambitious work grounded in sound empirical investigation and historical and visual documentation focusing on the development of retail spaces in the Malmö region since the 1950s. Part of the empirical studies conducted by the author, already published in major international journals, are known to the scholarly community. However, their inclusion in a single book makes it easier to appreciate the coherence and insightfulness of the author’s overall proposal for architectural analysis and, more broadly, spatial and urban studies.

Kärrholm defines his own approach as an “architectural territoriology”, in that it aims to explore the role of architecture in the ongoing production of urban territories. To achieve this, he developed a set of original conceptual tools in a critical dialogue with a number of contemporary social theorists, writers and philosophers. In particular, beginning with the idea that “territories require constant work and expression” (p. 14) and that, therefore, territories are better conceived of as “territorialisations”, the author outlines a number of ways in which territories are produced and subsequently kept in shape (a process the author calls “stabilisation”). These modes are strategies, tactics, associations and appropriations. They can be distinguished according to two major criteria. Territorial production can be either personal (tactics and appropriations) or impersonal (strategies and associations), and it can be either explicitly planned (strategies and tactics) or emerging through uses (associations and appropriations). For instance, when planners design and develop a certain area as a retail space, they are acting strategically; but when shop owners display their goods at the entrance of their store, they are acting tactically. On the other hand, appropriations occur, for instance, when youngsters establish their regular spot inside a mall and, complementarily, associations emerge when certain locations come to be associated with a set of functions (e.g. informal shortcuts through a given space that have never been intended for that use and do not belong to anyone).

The book's chapters follow four major historical trends that, according to the author, have characterised retail environments during the last half-century in Sweden (yet, importantly, similar trends seem to be generalised across many Western countries): separation, stabilisation, synchronisation and singularisation.

Separation means that retail spaces have grown larger, more concentrated and more autonomous from their surroundings. The author points out that discontinuities between retail areas and their urban context (retail areas either move to car-accessible non-residential suburban zones or flourish in city-centre pedestrian precincts, which increasingly resemble malls) have proceeded through enhanced internal continuity (the shopping space no longer ends in the store, but forms a continuum in which the street and other traditional public spaces are embedded). Another important remark is that the retail dynamic has attained new spatial scales (regional rather than urban), which combine smaller micro-scales, producing a superposition and meshing of layered, stratified territorialities.

Stabilisation is best revealed in pedestrian precincts as an urban planning strategy aimed at developing retail in the city centre. Four major territorial topologies can be found in a pedestrian precinct. The first and probably most famous topology is the network connection, which functions as a stabilising territorial practice. Talk of networks is everywhere today, and fashionable hypotheses such as the “network society theory” and the “actor-network theory” have amply stressed the importance of networks. But networks, the author convincingly argues, are not the be-all and end-all: places and objects can be interlaced in more than one network, and material objects can always have effects beyond the network at hand. For instance, a bus stop works as a node in the transport system network, yet it is also a physical place, with a specific type of furniture, that also produces effects that are independent of the transportation network. What is more, the stabilisation of even a single network might require the work of “actants” (a term that derives from the semiotics of Algirdas Greimas, where it indicates the narrative function accomplished by an actor) that are located outside the network itself. In other words, while networks present themselves as self-reliant, they may in fact be parasitic on external material resources.

It is thus necessary to consider the functioning of further topologies. Kärrholm proposes the following: territorial *bodies* (such as design objects that facilitate the dynamic of movement and occupation within a territory), territorial *framings* (whereby the precinct functions as a frame that is characterised by a certain discontinuity with respect to its surroundings, concurrently determining what is perceived as in and out of place), and territorial *sorts* (spatial types or “involutes” associated, by family resemblances, with a constellation of actions, e.g. certain “sorts of environment” – and in recent years, Kärrholm notes, retail sorts have multiplied exponentially, including all kinds of hybrids mixing cafés, restaurants, bookshops and fashion stores).

Synchronisation is a trend that calls for a rhythmanalysis of shopping and retail activities. Here the author observes that retail has created new circadian and seasonal rhythms (e.g. Christmas time beginning in November), coupled with more intermittent rhythms in connection with cultural events, music festivals and other celebrations. Shopping rhythms are also increasingly adjusted to different groups of buyers according to their available time, as well as their bodily rhythms (hunger, thirst, etc. – thus creating a veritable form of biomarketing). Retail does not only dictate its rhythms, it also increasingly infiltrates and exploits everyday temporal interstices (e.g. waiting times at airports and stations). Yet while this seems to suggest a rhythmic palimpsest characterised by a sustained degree of polyrhythmia, the author warns us of the risk of reduced rhythmic diversity of urban life, since whatever urbanites can do, they increasingly do it “at the rhythm of shopping”.

Under the heading of singularisation, a dynamic tension between uniqueness and repetition of retail spaces can be observed. Since the 18th century, architectural typologies of retail buildings have coalesced in a sort of canon. Yet Kärrholm makes the case that these types are not fixed. The relation is not of the type/token kind (such as Bruno Latour’s “immutable mobiles”, indicating a set-up that can be transported from place to place retaining strong key features). In fact, building types can be better described as territorial sorts, which transform themselves and are constantly adapted

as they get replicated (rather “mutable mobiles”). A singular building stands as the polar opposite of a typified one. And insofar as it entails distinctiveness and uniqueness (the uniqueness of a “face”), the singularity of building is often sought after in the retail business. Yet, simultaneously, the stabilisation of a network – such as a branded retail chain – necessarily requires some form of desingularisation, which entails enhanced repeatability of features.

In the concluding chapter, the author adds a final conceptual tool: territorial complexity. Understood as “the co-existence of a large number of non-hierarchical and polyrhythmic territorial productions at one place” (p. 119), territorial complexity represents a positive quality to be preserved. The author asks how architecture might contribute to nurturing and preserving territorial complexity in the face of impoverishment and monodimensionality. Interestingly, territorial complexity is discussed through the notion of interstitiality, using a *détour* via Bruno Bettelheim’s pedagogy. Like the spaces created by Bettelheim’s child patients, interstitial spaces defy pre-existing classifications and, accordingly, they increase the complexity of a territory. Complexity can be taken as an index of co-presence and mutual visibility, which are also the fundamental characteristics of the public domain. Kärrholm thus suggests that a territorology of architecture should be able to reveal and critique the rules and associations that define strong territorial programmes, opening up the way towards new interstices. From this perspective, a nuanced critical take on the privatisation of public space emerges: the problem with contemporary retail forms, the author argues, is not so much the sheer privatisation of public space that comes with them, but rather the impoverishment of territorial complexity and the closing-down of creative interstices where strong territorial programmes could be sidestepped or at least bracketed.

While, in view of their economic and social impact, retail spaces represent an important field for social studies, and while the book’s theoretical frame is constructed to best capture the nuances and critical developments of such spaces, it is important to remark, in closing, that Kärrholm’s architectural territorology – the modes of territorial production and stabilisation, the analysis of material topologies, and the notion of territorial complexity as interstitiality – could be fruitfully applied beyond the case of retail. Because of the wealth of ideas and the clarity of discussion, his noteworthy contribution should be of interest to all those studying contemporary urban spaces.

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