Sustainable practice in retail design: new functions between matter and space

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses a case study of retail design, Libreria Coop Ambasciatori, a project of interior design created in Bologna (Italy) in 2008 by RetailDesign Studio (Venice). The purpose of the paper is to examine a project of retail exhibition design, its components, and the design choices as an example of sustainability and social responsibility in what is called 'design practice'. In particular, this paper points out the relevance of the choice of the materials as conceptual practice for design; indeed, the considered case study aims to contribute to a preliminary discussion about relevant issues for the exploitation of the conceptual materiality of design, in both defining sustainable spaces and new directions in exhibition and interior design.

In today's society the constant acceleration of technology impacts on the aesthetics of interior design. In particular, interior design has to face the issue of the innovation of space included in a broader context of economic development, as the French philosopher and urbanist, Paul Virilio, points out:

La vitesse c'est la vieillesse du monde emportés par sa violence nous n'allons nulle part, nous nous contentons de partir et de nous départir du vif au profit du vide de la rapidité. Après avoir longtemps signifié la suppression des distances, la négation de l'espace, la vitesse équivaut soudain à l'anéantissement du Temps: c'est l'état d'urgence.[1]

Besides aesthetic and economic factors, the current global context also considers among its priorities the constant quest for social responsibility as an instrument of environmental protection. Priorities which ask for a renewed architecture for public and private exhibition spaces and a renewed philosophy of interior design, informed by the two main elements cited above: aesthetic design and social responsibility.

The factors of aesthetics and social responsibility form what we can define as relational aesthetics of design, borrowing a concept from contemporary art that is a 'theory consisting in judging artwork which respond(s) to interpersonal relationships that represent, produce and raise'[2]. Indeed, interior design must exhibit a new philosophy and aesthetics where projects and the resulting space must be judged not only on its aesthetic value, but rather on its ability to produce social relations between places, things and people.

In this paper, I aim to discuss these issues by considering exhibit design, a specific discipline within the interior design field, and a specific area within it: namely bookshops in hypermarkets and commercial spaces, whose characteristics make them a typical example of global spaces challenging interior design in the areas of sustainability and cultural stratification. This stratification requires renewed consideration of the evolution of so-called 'Non-Places'[3] and their capability to promote, through interior design, the cultural appropriation of 'non-place-communities'.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, I describe and briefly discuss the multiple facets of the practice of exhibition design, which unlike other fields of architecture, 'as a discipline, is universally and traditionally considered a part of interior design, 'enhancing' its communication skills in the practice of exhibition in expositions, retail, museums, fairs, events, etc. Next, I discuss the effects on exhibition design frontiers in relation to current sustainability requirements, and I point out the relevant role played by materials both at a conceptual (design) and physical (built) level. I then describe the case of an Italian hypermarket bookstore, Libreria Coop Ambasciatori, where I highlight its contribution to a material-oriented approach and an example of sustainable exhibit design. Lastly, a discussion of the case study and future work concludes the paper.

THE MULTIPLE FACETS OF EXHIBITION DESIGN

Exhibition design is rooted in the culture of image and visual communication, two liberal art forms from which exhibition design draws on symbols and metaphors. As a starting point we can set the age of the Great Exhibition in the mid nineteenth century, when for the first time there was the need to give recognition to the culture of merchandise, to institutionalise, and build even better world events where companies and states exhibited their great discoveries and technological innovations[4]. Furthermore, it was a time when the scénographes[5], began to experience difficulties in communicating an object (tangible or intangible) in a space in which the event should happen.

Currently, the culture of exhibition design is increasing[6], and we understand the need by many disciplines, including architecture and design, for perspectives that can meet the demand for innovative solutions through the professional ability to confer the sense of things, places and spaces through the composition of communication elements. The scenario unfolding before our eyes also raises questions to the practice of exhibiting. The continuous renewal of technology in exhibitions and major technological revolutions in retail, such as the escalator, air-conditioning, the scanner at the cash desk, multimedia exhibition areas and more[7], all produce new, increasingly persuasive communication strategies, and involve the experience of people acting or living in exhibit spaces.

Within this scenario, exhibition design – and its primary function of displaying and communicating – must be able to update its key factors and components such as social and economic issues by understanding how all the devices exploited in the design take shape, work, and relate to the new 'interiors'. Exhibition design produces a sort of 'lash-up': 'an unexpected synergy created between various economic, technical and cultural factors that combine to create an object, but also, more generally, to any new entity'[8].

The term lash-up assumes an interesting architectural semantic dimension in the Italian language: according to the sociologist Guido Martinotti, lash-up is found in translation of the term 'composizione', i.e. the layout/placement of components within a space[9]. The 'composizione' is the material support of the emergence of sustainability in exhibition design which we look at further in the following sections.

THE FRONTIER OF A SUSTAINABLE EXHIBIT

The term 'sustainable design' was coined in 1973 by E.F. Schumacher in his book *Small Is Beautiful*, where he defines what sustainability is in architecture, building the concept into an integrated design process that requires minimal environmental impact and is mainly concerned with the relationship between humans and the natural environment. It is a philosophy that can be applied in architecture and interior design along with ethics, innovation, and basic considerations of human and environmental factors. Indeed, the designer needs to understand the issues and problems surrounding the practice of sustainability. To these ends, institutions and organisations responsible for ensuring the changes underway in architecture are ready to support new design practice, combining the principles of sustainability, waste reduction, seeking new words and ways to design new sustainable spaces[10] even though the logic of the market has not been fully implemented (for example, bio-architecture in interior design is opening up a discussion about the importance and effectiveness of the practice of sustainability). Thus, the objective is to lay the foundations for a new and continuing design ethos aimed at updating training and the potential of the experts; a project that can make a valuable contribution to the culture of environmentally sustainable interior design while satisfying the wellbeing of the user that will live spaces and environmental needs. Designers have a direct role in the industry as service providers. They therefore may play a larger role recognising how their profession can contribute to 'physical' imaging in society and thus the decision to reduce industrial impact on the environment. Strong support and encouragement for the designer comes from protocols, shared by most countries.

Indeed, protocols support the identification and outline 'best practice' for architects and engineers in the industry, aiming to become guidelines in final certification by establishing a market value for the 'green building' by encouraging competition between companies on the environmental performance of buildings and consumer awareness among end users. For example, the standard protocol 'Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design' (LEED) (http://www.usgbc.org/), provides parameters for sustainable construction developed in the United States and applied in over 100 countries worldwide. Addressing the whole process (from design through construction and employment) and all parts of building, LEED opts for a holistic view of sustainability, using every opportunity to reduce environmental impact and emissions of various kinds of buildings under construction. At the cutting edge, LEED has become a universal design language, a system accepted and understood worldwide which in Italy, unlike other countries, has become the first example of a protocol adapted to the local cultural context, according to Italian and European regulations. Furthermore, LEED is a green building certification system, providing third-party verification that a building was designed and built using strategies aimed at improving a building's performance. LEED certification is based on seven credit categories, including sustainable sites, water efficiency, energy and atmosphere, materials and resources, indoor environmental quality, and innovation in Design/Regional Priority (http://www.gbcitalia.org/index.php). There are both environmental and financial benefits to earning LEED certification, including lowering operating costs and increasing asset value, reducing waste sent to landfills, conserving energy and water, developing healthier and safer buildings for occupants, creating compact and walkable communities with good access to neighbourhood amenities and transit, protecting natural resources and farmland by encouraging growth in areas with existing infrastructure, and reducing harmful greenhouse gas emissions.

Nevertheless, the standard representation offered by protocols allows for infrastructural sustainability mainly in relation to environment impacts, whereas protocols usually do not consider sustainability in terms of impacts on heritage and history of the context of intervention (cultural sustainability). In this sense, they are more suitable at producing sustainable 'non-places', where identity, relationships, and history are superceded by anonymous, generalised infrastructures characterised by measurable qualities and performances. Thus, the designer has to embed protocols in 'places' by re-using the existing cultural heritage to create an emotional involvement in the 'local' context[11]. The dialectics between protocols (as non-places components) and cultural heritage exhibited, e.g. in building materials (as places components) produces a lash-up allowing emergence of a sustainable space where the identity between past and present creates a background for new functions mediated by the mixed materiality of protocols and heritage buildings. These issues ask for a multidisciplinary approach in order to compose in a conceptual materiality the material instances (protocols, heritage, history, etc.) of the different facets of sustainability; these facets can be provisionally clustered in the above-mentioned dimensions (infrastructural and cultural sustainability). Moreover, this approach requires training, knowledge-sharing, and active collaboration between designers and the different parties: architects, engineers and clients must interact in all phases of the project, from site selection, an in-house, the choice of materials, to the completion of the project.

The adoption of such a multidisciplinary approach allows, on the one hand, the opening of a way of assessing much broader and complex issues, such as quality of life[12]. On the other hand, it exploits the quality of interior design as an instrument to re-think the relationship between the human being and its environment in terms of functioning and capabilities[13]. In the following section, I discuss design Libreria Coop Ambasciatori in Italy (a LEED, Commercial Interiors certified building) via a case study considering the different facets of sustainability in exhibition design.

LIBRERIA COOP AMBASCIATORI: A CASE STUDY

Librerie Coop is a company in the Coop group (http://www.e-coop.it/portalWeb/portale/index.jsp), one of the largest Italian retail corporations in Italy. Librerie Coop is the first branded chain of Coop bookstores. Coop, Consumer Cooperatives was founded in 1947 as the Italian Association of Consumer Cooperatives, aiming to initiate bulk purchasing to provide consumers with better conditions and purchase guarantees. Coop evolved from a consortium to Coop Italia as a 'cooperative company' between 1968 and 1974 and was consolidated through a continuous evolution up to today, with the merger of its food sector with non-food areas in 1980. The basic idea stems from the need for cooperation and solidarity as a response to the traditional market approach in the retail sector.

From the early pioneering experiences in more than a century and a half of history, Coop has become the first Italian distribution organisation closely linked with Italian political and social affairs. The original values are still the basis of the Coop, namely the centrality of people, their needs and their rights. It is in this spirit that the Libreria Coop Ambasciatori project has been designed. The aim is to promote a sustainable and innovative perspective in Italian distribution, mainly combining food and non-food, i.e. food and books, within a context of cultural events. On this subject, the project is a collaboration between Libreria Coop, a bookshop, and Eataly (http://www.eataly.it/index.php), a brand that brings together a group of small businesses operating in different sectors of the food and wine industry and devoted to distributing high quality products. It sees in the sale of books a way to make consumers of food well-informed and educated regarding sustainability. Retail brand bookstores are becoming more widespread in Italian as well as international department stores; e.g. La Feltrinelli (http://www.lafeltrinelli.it/), one of the major Italian publisher and bookstore chains, with its 98 Italian retail locations in different formats with medium and large centres in cities, in shopping malls and in 'non-places'[14,] such as railway stations, airports etc. Indeed, the first aspect we investigate is the peculiarity of the Libreria Coop. The format of the building is oriented towards the re-use of existing cultural heritage to create an emotional involvement in the customer experience by offering a consumer-qualified experience. By not allowing the creation of 'junkspaces'[15], it provides a 'local' context[16] where the identity between past and present creates a background and life. The concept of Libreria Coop Ambasciatori has been designed by Paolo Lucchetta as a project built around man and his relationships, 'a: ... multiple-function building, combining many genetic codes ... once there was a street, which then became a market and later a cinema (at one stage, showing adult movies) ... this space seemed a great opportunity to propose a significant project ... in line with the new collective imagination. The project will give priority to the theme of ecology, conforming to LEED protocols' [17].

Thus Lucchetta considers the Libreria Ambasciatori as 'a place of books', where the books are the central characters of the space and the concept is inspired by a set of key factors: accessibility, both physical and cultural, ease of use and orientation, and finally information access to persons with disabilities. These factors aim to allow permanent learning through the complex network of materials and the concept of the Libreria Coop Ambasciatori.

My point is that this experience points out a specific (and quite new) path for a sustainable exhibition design, which emphasises the conceptual materiality of design itself.

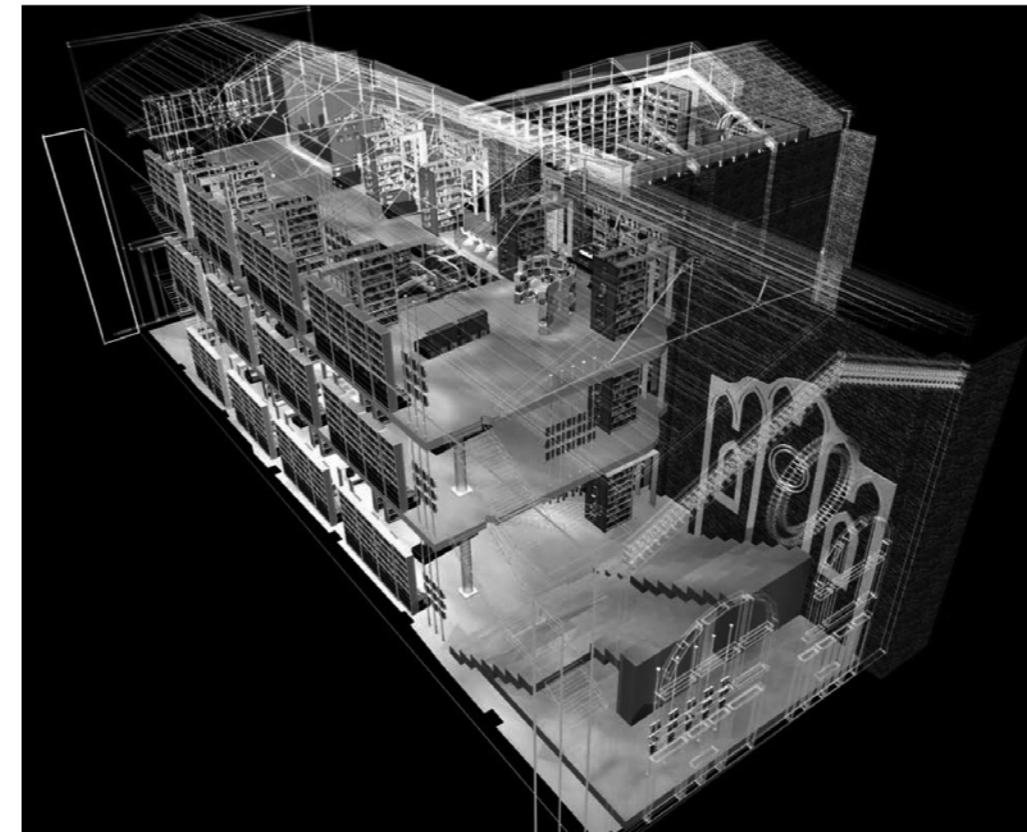EX CINEMA AMBASCIATORI: THE BUILDING

During the Eighties, the interior layout of the Ambasciatori (the building which hosts the Libreria Coop project) was radically changed. It is a nineteenth-century building, which was first used as a covered market that incorporates the facade of the medieval church of St. Matteo degli Accarisi

(restored and visible from inside the structure) and later in the Forties became a movie theatre. The building was closed around 1985, and it remained closed despite various efforts to partially restore it.

The designers have sought and found the right balance between action and non-action[18], trying to free as much exhibition space as possible (nearly 1,450 sqm: 70% Librerie Coop and 30% Eataly), thus allowing the installation of food–related activities, events and culture. As pointed out by Paolo Lucchetta: 'We decided to complete this work and at the same time removed all the modern additions, returning the outer building to its original historic shell'[19].

The project has been able to hold together the strong historical character of the pre-existing building with the contemporary life of the new building and its fittings, embodying the idea of a new mixed-function. The following images show how the project has developed. As shown in Figure.1, the space is divided into three levels where brick perimeter walls have been preserved and are visible from inside the building: in the past the walls supporting the roof were the volume of the covered market. Here we find the first material instance of the conceptual design, with the heritage walls allowing the scaffolding for potential cultural actions of potential users (e.g. actions of a movie theatre integrated with actions of a covered market, affording new types of integrated action).

The size, colour, shades and morphological characteristics of the bricks allow one to read the way the bricks have been baked and therefore the dating of the building[20]. New additions have been kept independent of the original structure, even where it is more damaged but structurally

in good condition, with the designer using light-grey cement to give the appearance of 'alive' matter. This solution was also accepted by the city cultural heritage authorities and walking space: 'The physical gap left between the historic architecture and the concrete addition underlines how new architectural programmes can blend to great advantage with vestiges from the past[21]. Furthermore, this solution is a second material instance of the conceptual design, acting at design practice level instead of the user level.

Concepts such as sustainability and social responsibility, deal with and have been exploited in the choice of the displays and in the choice of each single material used for the shelves, such as MDF, a mixture of recycled wood that respects nature. As shown in Figure. 2, shades of natural wood combined with 'red-Coop' (a red used in the Coop logo) and metal are the elements that frame the books, which are the lead characters of the space.

The lighting system consists of spotlights mounted on halogen rails providing diffused lighting which highlights the architecture, stressing the continuity of the brick walls and the light, which, depending on the space, varies from hanging lamps in the restaurant to stem elements for the book desks[22]. The library also consists of exhibitors, isolated from furniture and free-standing elements that allow management flexibility in offering the numerous library activities. The containers for books and shelves are devoid of their backs in order to make the brickwork of the building visible, while the

blue escalator (Figure. 3), is a symbol of the market function of the building, used for the key vertical circulation route and devoid of exterior cladding in order to display its essential function of distributing things and people[23].

The customer, besides being the centre of the bookstore, also takes a lead role in the forum space, a zone of physical and social (not virtual) social interaction, an agora which becomes a place of exchange and an area to host events and books, including a space dedicated to children, the customers of tomorrow.

Opposite
Figure. 2 Libreria.Coop Ambasciatori. internal view. © by RetailDesign, 2008.

Above
Figure. 3 Libreria.Coop Ambasciatori. internal view. © by RetailDesign, 2008

Furniture and antique displays take place inside the library on the first floor, which contains 700 books from the historic antique bookstore Palmaverde of Roberto Roversi, bought in 2006 by Coop, while the furniture can be considered as the third material instance of the conceptual design, giving an antiquarian function to the exhibit space. While the lighting of the library becomes a primary element of the project, it is seen as a desire to consider the ecological theme not only as an element of aesthetics, but as part of the design. The material used for the flooring is resin cement, which is soft and soundproofed.

It is a space that reflects and reproduces the typical small libraries of Italian historic centers. The Eataly space, though, with three dining areas spread over three floors — caffè, trattoria and osteria or tavern — corresponds to three areas of the library bookstore sections: current affairs; literature; plus territory and local cultures. The places are 'conceived like a cultural map of changing taste, fashion and ideas in a huge interplay with customer-readers'[24].

CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the issues of sustainability in exhibition design by means of a case study which describes a design experience carried out on a multifunctional bookshop space in Italy. While the case study is limited to the European context, the aim of the conceptual model is to provide an interpretative instrument suitable to support the adaptation and harmonisation of standard protocols in non-European countries. In particular, it aims to support the preservation of core cultural issues and heritage. Indeed, the paper points out the relevance of both protocols and heritage in the choice of the materials as components of a conceptual practice for the design of sustainable (multi-)functional spaces. In particular, materials have to embed a conceptual representation of what sustainability is for the parties involved and the social world implied and impacted upon, and how their relationship can be supported in a sustainable way. As Harvey Molotch points out 'The nature of the place affects the appearance of a product because it contains those elements, often subtle, taking part in its implementation[25]. Thus interior design must re-consider the critical central role of materials to

be used and the definition of the project priorities as values of sustainability. To these ends exhibition design has to embed social and economic input into a multidisciplinary design practice that will recognise the changes taking place, allowing functional development that supports customer awareness. The retail part of interior design is the application point for the improvement and continuous development of innovative devices and practices for sustainable living spaces. As explained previously, the considered case study is an example of how to exploit the conceptual materiality of design both for the definition of sustainable spaces and new directions in exhibition and interior design.

AKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

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