WINDOWS AT AN EXHIBITION: THE FLATTENED COMMERCIAL SPACE AS PUBLIC INTERFACE

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The Flattened Commercial Space as Public Interface

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ABSTRACT

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This project aims to translate our present cultural condition of saturation, flatness, and simultaneity (a condition found both in our screens and in our surroundings) into a new kind of public and commercial space. In order to produce such architecture, this project develops “windows” that serve as an interface—that is, a platform where one can actually find, access, or interact with different layers and worlds. The main components of the project are a series of in-transit shops, connected to a metro station, and a public plaza where windows allow pedestrians to access the transit infrastructure below.
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INTRODUCTION: Emulating Our Screen-Saturated Culture

We are constantly skinning through surfaces, navigating and accessing different worlds and layers of information in our screens. Although our present cultural condition is that of flat, overlaid images unhinging before us, the public spaces that parallel such aesthetics—places like Times Square in New York, or Shibuya in Tokyo—arguably do so only superficially and with this sense, two-dimensional elements that the virtual world deploys. This project’s ambition is to translate the conditions mentioned, which are in essence two-dimensional, into a new kind of public and commercial space—that is, a new synthesis between them.

The project consists of two main components. On the one hand, there is a subterranean platform, the up which current in-transit shopping models of such cities like Seoul or New York (see Figures 2, 4 and 5) would be connected to the public transportation system, in specific, to the metro stations. On the other, a public plaza that serves both as an interval for access and exit to the subway and as a platform for consumption. In such plaza, commuters would buy through screens that compressed traditional stores into a single, flattened image—a technology already available and in place. This project works as a provocation, claiming that, when traditional public spaces, like transportation platforms, receive a new program (that is, shopping), they should produce some new, distinctive spatial manifestation of it.

In this case, such spatial manifestation come in the form of a public plaza. In it, is a series of “windows”—that is, flattened elements of different sizes and functions—perfor in three distinctive ways. Some are programmatic, containing narrow bars, coffee houses, showrooms, or similar programs; others compress within them circulation elements like escalators, elevators, or service platforms that connect the plaza with the metro station below. Thirdly, some are narrow operational screens which virtually contain many different programs within their surfaces, effectively collapsing physical space in flat images (Figure 3).
PROGRAM: An Interface for Consumption

In order to create an architecture where different images and worlds could be accessed simultaneously, simulating the conditions found in contemporary multimedia scenes, the project focused on shopping as a process to work with. The architectural model for shopping, which evolved from the traditional market type (market) into the malllike dumbbell model by Victor Gruen, can be understood as an interface for consumption. The mall, in other words, is a container of many worlds and possibilities that unifies its content so any user can access them within a single architecture (Figure 3).

But the dumbbell shopping mall model is no longer contemporary. Shopping is, in fact, migrating to in-transit spaces, such as subway stations (Figures 2 and 5), where they can attract the attention of large crowds and benefit from constant flows. This migration of the isolated model into crowded, dynamic environments has, of course, spatial implications. Narrow choreographies with little or no inventory, embedded in large transportation hubs, are currently substituting traditional department stores with large inventory (Figure 4). Narrow display spaces and in-transit shopping, or micro-display as attraction is now becoming a real, viable alternative that seems to suggest the future of consumption. This shift is particularly important when considering the value attention has in times of incessant visual stimuli and distraction.

The new connection between shopping and public transportation has been embraced by screens that no longer perform as mere advertisements, but rather as functional shopping devices that collapse space into a single surface. Seoul’s subway stations, for instance, feature a panopticon screen that divides time and commodities, displaying in a single surface an army of products that can be bought and shipped without their physical presence (Figure 6). In other words, a single surface contains what used to be a whole physical store. The main manufacturer of those screens is JCDecaux, a company that produces interactive surfaces where one can, among other things, shop, scroll through products, try them on, and order them.

FIG. 03 Shopping as Interface
The traditional dumbbell shopping model.

FIG. 04 Contemporary Model Shift in Shopping
From big and isolated malls to integrated and dynamic (Seoul: Subway). (Jin Hyeon and Hyeong Sun Kim, Hong Kong).

FIG. 05 In-Transit Shopping Screens in Seoul’s Subway
Seoul’s subway station features a panopticon screen that divides time and commodities, displaying in a single surface an army of products that can be bought and shipped without their physical presence. A single surface contains what used to be a whole physical store.
SITE: Cuauhtemoc Borough, Mexico City, Mexico

In order to determine a location and site, the project focused on establishing the distinctive parts of such an emerging, new shopping model. The project needed a connection to large, crowded public transportation platforms, where constant flows and captive attention could be seized and maximized. It was also important to consider a site where subway lines and other modes of transportation could benefit from a large platform that consolidated flows in a single public space.

Although the current shopping model, with its distinctive elements, has been mostly tested in Asia and the UK, I selected as its location one of the most populated and intense cities in the world—Mexico City. The site selection was based on the fact that the public transportation system is just as intense as any of the ones currently supporting in-transaction shopping, but has yet to follow the trend of those cities to embed shopping into its public platform (Figure 9).

The project aims to consolidate all transit flows in the area, which ranged from pedestrian activity along the lateral commercial streets, on transit through the central avenue (El Central Axis), bus stops on the lateral streets, and the subway stations below ground (Figures 6 and 7).

FIG. 06 - 08 Site and Proposed
The site of the Cuauhtemoc Borough is located in one of the most populated cities in the world, Mexico City, and in particular in one of its most traveled boroughs—Cuauhtemoc. The project aims to consolidate all transit flows in the area.

FIG. 09 Present Condition in Mexico City’s Metro Stations
Currently, metro stations in Mexico City have yet to follow the trend of cities like Hong Kong or London, where shopping has been embedded in public platforms to attract crowds.
In order to consolidate the transit flows found in the area, the project’s initial strategy was to reach the subway lines below ground, creating an underground extension (Figure 10). A network of in-transit shops were then laid out in each platform to re-establish a system of exits and entries that connected the transportation level underground with the street level above. In other words, instead of centralized points of access and exit, the subway platforms were connected to the ground floor plazas through a series of narrow stores that funneled commuters (Figure 11). By doing so, the project aimed to multiply the opportunities for display and in-transit shopping.

FIG. 10 Connecting the Subway Lines

FIG. 11 Bending of In-Transit Store Model

The second strategy for the project had to do with creating a plaza (Figure 12) filled with flattened elements that worked as “windows”—that is, as flattened layers embodying the multiple-access, image-related world of our screens (Figure 13). These windows had three distinct objectives. Firstly, many of them were narrow structural elements that held within them circulation elements like escalators, elevators, service platforms, emergency stairs, and loading docks. Others were programmatic, containing programs like bars, cafes, or showrooms that could be accessed at plaza level. Lastly, some were a series of the flattened JC Decaux screen-stones shown below.

FIG. 12 A Public Plaza with Flattened Windows

FIG. 13 A Roof That Appropriates the Plaza Below

FIG. 14 Physical Model: The Project’s Three Layers

There were two main components in the project. On the one hand, a subsurface extension where the current in-transit shopping model was connected to the public transportation system (G). On the other, a public plaza (G2) that served both as an interface for access and exit to the subway and as a platform for consumption, where commuters found through access that compressed traditional open space into single, flattened images. Covering the plaza to guarantee and maximize pedestrian activity, a roof (G3) appropriated the space below.
FIG 15 Main Access to Plaza (Exterior View)

From the street, the plaza depicts a concept of messages and images simultaneously and performs as an entrance to access and visit the subway station below. The plaza is covered by a roof that appropriates the place and covers the commemorate screening.

While some of the “wanderers” in this place are programmatic (they hold cells, smartphones, bans, etc.), others bear vertical circular devices, like elevators, escalators, or benches/chairs within them. A third kind of wander is a screen where virtual images replace physical space (Figure 15).

In terms of representation, the project aims to create a tension between commercial feasibility and critical irony. The core use, for instance, is that of real comic books, where black and white, highly contrasted drawings make a periodontal world that is unclearly understood. Even the images presented in the project coincide with real, commercial, and art Jenny Holzer’s installations, for example, parallel with advertisements, and commute flows are compressed among different spaces.
FIG. 16 & 17 Underground Transit Platform (Plan and Interior View)

The readings of in-scale shape continuous to the metro platform by a row of "tunnel-sponsored" ends and links that tunnel continues out of the underground station and up into the ground floor plate above.
FIG. 18 Ground Floor Plan
The ground floor is used as a series of fashioned windows, some holding circulation elements like escalators, elevators, or trading docks, others are programmatic, with offices, showrooms, or bars inside them. A third kind of windows are fashioned, situating where any kind of program can interact with window, seeing flows and capturing attention to maximize consumption (Figure 18 and 19).

FIG. 19 Plaza (Interior View)
Once consumers reach the ground floor, they move through narrow windows that allow them to access different spaces through them.
FIG. 20 Plaza (Interior View)
A circulation “window” with an escalator that connects the plaza level to the roof above.

21:32
Monday, December 14

FIG. 21 Ground Floor Plaza (Interior View of Programmatic Window)
A live to interact with users, “programmatic window” in the background, encourages walk around the plaza, which serves as a semi-enclosed, free-flowing public space where programs, points of entry to the metro, and events are found.
FIG. 22 & 23 Cross Section and Physical Model

The cross section shows the basic structural logic of the project, where many windows containing restrooms or elevators inside also serve as structural walls that support the roof above. This model, on the other hand, shows the space created among the neighborhood, which simultaneously works as a transportation hub and a new type of commercial model.
FIG. 24 Longitudinal Section
The longitudinal section can immediately be referenced to the design resolution of the project, creating a platform that produces multiple simultaneous images that allow many alternatives to access the varied, diverse evokes within them.
A NEW TYPE OF COMMERCIAL SPACE: Final Thoughts

In an age in which online shopping and immediate delivery seem to be the norm rather than the exception, the first question to ask on a project like this one would be, "Why build something like this when its objective can be achieved on many digital devices?" It is important to clarify this point since this project did not intend to substitute or ignore online shopping, but rather enhance the conditions the Internet allows. Marketing and advertising targets of high transit and capture attention to expose products and augment purchasing possibilities. This example is in Seoul, New York, or Hong Kong show how the Internet of retail companies to transitions advertising from a static medium that merely transmits a message, into a dynamic, virtual medium that maximizes notoriety and sales. Positioning physical products for display, instead of images, also increases the visibility of the product shown, as the Mac Store in Grand Central Station exemplifies. This last point was adopted into the underground platform plan of the project, where narrow stores with physical and virtual products were deployed while commuters exited the platform.

But I wasn’t particularly interested in marketing, sales, and transit issues. On the contrary, the project’s non-like representation and explicitly ironic tone pointed at the fact that commercial interests are mercilessly permeating public spaces. Its not an absurdism proposition—that in which commercial space has overtaken public space—created a scenario where narrow stores and devices were consistently placed in what used to be traditional transit spaces (like subway stations, which are, in themselves, a public space, and public places (the quintessential public space). In order to emphasize this position, the project’s representation mixed commercial imagery and advertisements with critical art and movie stills. Giant surfaces that advertised and sold NIBA furniture as commuters went down towards the subway were juxtaposed with Joni Hutton’s and at the world littering "PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT".

This tone sets up the project for a broad reflection in terms of its political implications. How much agency, for instance, can private retail companies have over public space? Since circulation elements connecting the places along the underground subway walkway below were previously owned (that is, since one would access and exit the subway station through stores, the connection between private interests and their influence in public space becomes immediately apparent and relevant. While it is true that structures like Pacific One Mall in Hong Kong or others do have entry points and exits to the subway stations, the mall itself is a private entity with little agency to alter or modify public space. In contrast, this project aimed to exacerbate the tension between public and commercial space by leaving the ground floor open at a pace entrenched by commercial devices.

Lastly, in terms of representation, the project deployed a style that amalgamated noir comic books, suggesting the idea of a “Sin City” where consumption desires and screen-absorption were once the traditional enjoyment of public space. The representational style also aimed to erase the idea that the flattened elements or “windows” deployed in the project could be read as images or “frames” that consumers would experience throughout the week in the ground floor places. From the title of the project (“Windows at an Exhibition”), which worked as a reference to Musser’sky's “Pictures at an Exhibition” — a musical piece depicting a stroll inside a museum and the different paintings within it—to a few carrousel of paintings and movie-screen in the renderings (please Hopper’s Nightshifts can be seen on Figure 21), for example, the project suggested through representation the idea that images, not spaces, were juxtaposed over a single surface, creating a saturated, overlaid composition not unlike those found in our screens.
IMAGE CREDIT:

FIG. 01
Produced by Pablo Ruiz Otaola Uruchi

FIG. 02
Found at www.supertuture.com
Copyright: Apple Inc.

FIG. 03
Houston’s The Galleria - Ground Floor Plan
Found at www.colam.com
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Plan editing by Pablo Ruiz Otaola Uruchi

FIG. 04
Produced by Pablo Ruiz Otaola Uruchi

FIG. 05
Found at www.designboom.com
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FIGS. 06 - 08
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FIG. 09
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FIGS. 10 - 24
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