

VISUAL MERCHANDISING AS A DETERMINANT OF “CATHERDALS OF COMMERCE” FORMING

Katarzyna JANICKA*

*MSc Arch.; Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Environmental Engineering, Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning, Lodz University of Technology, Politechniki 6, 90-924 Lodz, Poland
E-mail address: katarzyna.janicka@p.lodz.pl

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the role of visual merchandising in shaping the internal structures of the department stores and to determine the basic architectural trends in designing these types of buildings, initiated in the last century, and used and improved today. Comparative analyses regarded mainly submitted department stores from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, as buildings in which psychology of selling was used for the first time on a large scale. The author presents a number of commercial space organisation methods derived from that period of time and used today by architects and visual merchandisers. Considerations lead to the conclusion that the correctly and marketing effectively designed internal structures of commercial buildings are characterized by common stylistic and structural elements, which are often independent from the external architectural costume of a façade.

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest wykazanie roli wizualnego merchandisingu w formowaniu struktur wewnętrznych obiektów handlowych oraz określenie podstawowych tendencji architektonicznych w tym zakresie, zapoczątkowanych w ubiegłym stuleciu, a stosowanych i doskonalonych współcześnie. Analizie porównawczej poddano głównie domy towarowe z przełomu XIX i XX wieku, jako obiekty, w których po raz pierwszy na dużą skalę posłużono się psychologią sprzedaży. Autorka przedstawia szereg metod organizacji przestrzeni handlowych wywodzących się z tego okresu i wykorzystywanych obecnie przez architektów oraz wizualnych merchandiserów. Rozważania prowadzą do wniosku, że prawidłowe i efektywne marketingowo projektowanie wewnętrznych struktur budowli komercyjnych cechują wspólne elementy stylistyczne i strukturalne, które często są niezależne od kostiumu architektonicznego elewacji zewnętrznych.

Keywords: Visual Merchandising; Shopping; Department Store; Advertising; Commercial Buildings; Psychology of Selling.

1. INTRODUCTION

“We are the people behind the scenes, the directors and producers of shows, whose script is written by the buyers and fill it with content. We must put life into it”... [1] the excellent characteristics of the visual merchandiser ... But who is he exactly? A quiet seller? Or maybe a creator of a sophisticated contemporary marketing game who skillfully controls clients, who seemingly unconsciously reach for goods from the shelves?

Almost from the beginning the trade existence has tried to attract the customers' attention by exposing products on the stalls, signs, or slogans declared. It was

the most primitive form of promotion. Over hundreds of years, social change – research and the birth of a free market economy, the “marketing” activity was gradually increasing trans-units and improvements in the mid-19th century to give a solid framework for visual promotion, which accompanies us every day on the occasion of a visit to the shopping facilities. In marketing jargon it bears the title of visual merchandising and, interestingly, although its roots can be traced back about 150 years, it has been defined only in the 80s of the 20th century, and in Poland it was finally adopted for good at the end of the last century becoming synonymous with modern sales techniques.

2. VISUAL MERCHANDISING – HOW IT WORKS?

The etymology of the word merchandising is Latin and comes from the word *mercari* – to trade [2]. In English merchandise means a good, as well as trade, sell [3], and the definition of visual merchandising notes those are generally the techniques to increase sales efficiency through the use of topography of the store, the appropriate exposure of products and window display design. In addition, it also includes the use of advertising and measures of trade activation and promotional activities in the form of small gifts, free samples, coupons and bonus reduced prices [4]. All these activities are designed to inspire and to convince customers to make purchases and stay at the commercial as long as possible.

The main factors that influenced the forming of visual merchandising are the window displays and coming into life modern commercial structures – department stores in other second half of the 19th century. Early stores, existing during the modern ages had, as a rule, open fronts separated from the street by a counter where the goods were displayed, which resulted in the fact that the client had no reason to enter the shop. The situation changed with the arrival of glass surfaces filling window openings – counter was placed inside the store and there was trade. The first glazed shopfronts were since the late 17th century in the Netherlands and from the 1700 in France, but owing to the technological limitations the early glazed shopfronts were formed by a grid of small panes of glass [5]. A significant change occurred in 1840 when the industrial development allowed for the production of glass panes measuring 2.4 m by 1.2 m, which allowed a free view to the interior of the shop from the street [6].

Over the years the display windows have been a great advert-constructive tool, and the greatest impact on growth-decorator of window displays had department stores as mentioned before and named in the literature by *Emil Zola*: “temples of commerce” or “cathedrals of commerce” [7]. They, in turn, gave rise to the formation of today’s commercial buildings like arcades, or hybrid models combining a sale with widely comprehended entertainment (cinemas, restaurants, museums, etc.).

3. THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF DEPARTMENT STORES

3.1. The emerge of department stores

Department stores were built in the mid-19th century in France and concentrated within one form wide trade offer complemented with service. They characterised by common sales area with the extracted thematic departments connected by common cash register system. Models which can be used as patterns for their architectural form were, among others, the Parisian *magasines de nouveautés* (known as news magazines) which offered the fabrics, the haberdasher’s shop, clothing manufacture and elements of interior equipment, as well as the Crystal Palace by *Joseph Paxton*, which was erected in Hyde Park, London in the occasion of The World Great Exhibition in 1851. It was prefabricated in the form of a pane of glass in cast iron frames, which ensured perfect lit open-work construction with extraordinary aesthetic value. It was a huge “showroom” presenting a wide range of goods from a variety of industries, which attracted millions of visitors. According to a legend, among them were also the future founders of department stores, who now wanted to get a similar effect, but with a small difference: in Crystal Palace people could only “watch”, in department stores they should “watch and buy”.

Department stores have introduced revolutionary changes in the sale system, which we use today, such as: fixed prices, payment in cash, labeling products, low profit margin with simultaneous high turnover, return system and the exchange of goods, a wide variety of product range, or the sale by mail order and home delivery. In addition, for the first time self-service was used in them, which encouraged customers to spend time shopping, as well as to enable independent verification of quality through touch [8].

The first object of this type is considered to be *Au Bon Marché* (Fig. 1), founded in 1852 in Paris by *Aristide Boucicaut* [5], who introduced the above mentioned innovative rules for the trade organization and display of goods. Next department stores were *Le Printemps* and the *Grands Magasins du Louvre* (Fig. 2). In a short period of time they have reached an enormous success becoming the global standard for the functioning and designing of modern commercial buildings, gaining followers in other European countries, in Asia, the United States, and even in South Africa.

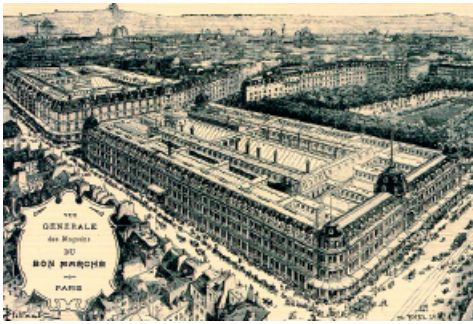


Figure 1.
Au Bon Marché in Paris, [8]



Figure 2.
Grands Magasins du Louvre in Paris, [8]

3.2. A wide range of architectural solutions

Most department stores built at the end of the 19th century had a main aim to dazzle customers with palatial luxury, which was supposed to attract the eye and encouraged to enter. The show windows revealed their identity, though the form of classical costume, whose façades were garnished, clearly blended them into the neighborhood of palaces and public buildings like theatres or museums. Some of them were crowned with a clock tower, similar to those found on town halls, or railway stations, others have double bastions on the front [8].

In France the corners of department stores were often ended with towers capped with domes (like in the castles, Fig. 3, Fig. 4). This motive had also *Whiteleys* in London and *Carson Pirie Scott Louis Sullivan* in Chicago. The Modernists of 1920s and 1930s adapted rounded corners by simplifying them and reaching almost to the level of the identification mark of modern department stores. For the first time applied them *Erich Mendelsohn* in the buildings of the German *Schocken* chain in Stuttgart (1926-28) and in Chemnitz (1928). He was also the author of an innovative solution of the façade in the form of horizontal stripes of windows, under which racks with goods could be set freely inside the building (Fig. 5).

The composition of the façade was repeated among others by *Hermann Dernburg* in the project of the *Renoma* in Wrocław (Fig. 6).



Figure 3.
Printemps in Paris ca. 1900, [8]



Figure 4.
Samaritaine in Paris ca. 1907, [8]



Figure 5.
Schocken in Stuttgart, [8]



Figure 7.
Wertheim, Berlin, Moritzplatz, [18]



Figure 6.
Wertheim in Wrocław (Renoma), [8]



Figure 8.
Wertheim, Berlin, Leipzigerplatz, [19]

The department stores in Germany at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries showed a fairly wide stylistic variety. Among them dominated a group of the national characteristics, often referencing to the Gothic, which largely reflected political issues, among others, ideological back to medieval rules during the period of the German Empire (Fig. 7). In this spirit, worked for example *Alfred Messel*, the main architect who designed for the *Wertheim* chain, who used in elevations, a dense, stone columns inter-windows and vertical repetitive spans (Fig. 8). These actions have set a new trend and were the inspiration for many architects. In literature even a term “*gemesselte Fassade*” was made because the pattern was so often imitated [9]. *Josef Maria Olbrich* used it in a *Leonhard Tietz* department store in Düsseldorf (1907-1909) and there is a belief that this building later became the inspiration for *Philipp Schäfer* who designed an object on *Hermannplatz* in Berlin for *Rudolph Karstadt* [10].

Department stores in the United States were deprived of excessive decoration, towers, or ornamental crowning of the building. Usually these objects were on a rectangle plan, and the elegance of

the façade was stressed by granite linings and repeating rhythms of supports. Only a few of them like *Marshall Field's* in Chicago and *Wanamaker* in Philadelphia adopted “*princely style*” of the years prior to the outbreak of World War I [8].

Impact on the architecture of the “*cathedrals of commerce*” had also legal restrictions. In Paris department stores could not be higher than the width of the street where they were located. In Germany stringent fire laws limited the height of these buildings to four or, on an exceptional basis, five floors. Similarly the situation developed in the UK, and only in the United States due to the high price of land and lack of legal restrictions, sky was the only limit as regards as for the planned number of floors [8].

3.3. Department stores today

What results from the above comparative analysis, exterior surface of selected department stores of the turn of the 19th and 20th century and the beginning of the 20th century characterized diverse form, which is a consequence of the national factors, legal restrictions, or the prevailing fashion. And what is it like today?

First of all, it should be noted that department stores are now very rarely designed. Their place has been taken over by shopping malls and so-called hybrid models, combining trade with the widely comprehended gastronomy and cultural elements such as museums of technology for children. The façades of historic department stores, that have survived the test of time, generally opposed to modernity while retaining the original look (eg. *KaDeWe*, *Alsterhaus*, *Au Bon Marché*, *Le Printemps*, *Harrods* etc.). The new buildings of this function have been designed according to the contemporary technologies such as in the form of “glass boxes” with lighting system introduced that provides changeability of elevation in the landscape of the city (Fig. 9), or as an organic structure finished with a facing which sparkles like exclusive evening gown (an example is *Selfridges* chain in Birmingham, in which architects from *Future Systems* used as an inspiration 1960s chain-mail-like gowns by *Paco Rabanne*, Fig. 10).



Figure 9.
Galeria *Kaufhof* in Chemnitz, proj. Helmut Jahn, 2002 [8]



Figure 10.
Selfridges in Birmingham, proj. Future Systems, 2003 [20]

4. THE MAGIC OF DEPARTMENT STORES' INTERIORS

Returning to the issue of historical department

stores, the interior design topic need to be taken into consideration, since they magnetized customers and ensured commercial success. Can there be found a common denominator systematizing the solution of problems and responding to the needs? And if so, whether we use today these principles when designing a contemporary commercial?

4.1. The “wow factor” – once and today

Framework construction was commonly used, initially made of iron, later as reinforced concrete construction, which ensured the openness of structure and freedom of design. The focal point of the object was a huge atrium with roof skylight which lightened the interior (Fig. 11, Fig. 12). It had usually a rectangle or a square shape, and in specific cases, the ellipse, cross, or octagon shape [10]. Sometimes they were also situated on the side of the plan close to the exterior wall, so that the window of the façade complemented or even replaced skylight [10]. The main disadvantage of the atrium was associated with its significant loss of the floor surface on different floors, while on the other hand, it allowed to estimate the enormity of the store and its organization of space-filling.



Figure 11.
Main atrium in *Wertheim* department store, Leipzigerplatz, Berlin [8]



Figure 12.
Main atrium in *Printemps* department store, Paris 1907 [8]

Inside the courtyard grand staircase was situated, often with very fancy shapes, many observation platforms and with richly decorated banisters. It was one of the most theatrical elements of equipment of the space:

“In this big, filled with individualism central hall and the main staircase functions as a prima donna among other staircases. For internal communication it is not necessary, but for the architectural expression of the object’s weight it is. (...) The audience who is familiar with this demonstration of vanity only in rulers’ buildings, can stroll through the courtyard, as once the kings did. Here, however, the customer is the king”. [10]

Over time, the grand staircases started to be replaced by the escalators (in Europe for the first time used in *Harrods* in London in 1898) and elevators, which were usually installed on the sidelines, as less elegant. This was probably due to tradition, because they originally served mainly the staff of the store [11].

Although nowadays an atrium is used extremely rare, it is still desired in the commercial building project, the element that is intended to impress the client, which is called the “wow factor”. It gives a unique atmosphere of shopping centres, even though just behind it would be a dead end – no one would notice it. In addition, the design process applies the pass-word: optimizing the flow of customers. That means planning the building to ensure best visibility of the tenants [12], which is relatively true to the original idea of the spatial, internal courtyards, demonstrating the magnitude of the buildings where you had to “see” and “to be seen”.

4.2. Temptation of selection diversity.

The functional arrangement of department stores was based on the departments with a diverse range of that assortment, which was arranged in such a way as to convince the client to involuntarily discover as many of the store’s surface in search of daily use articles (Fig. 13, Fig. 14). Women, as opposed to men, were much more patient, that is why the articles for men were available close to the entrance or on the first floor. Interestingly, today it is the same rule. At the same time, departments were thematically grouped (e.g. clothes next to the jewellery accessories), which today is called the product placement with the participation of appropriate equipment and installations to ensure effective exposure [1], and it was invented in the first half of the 20th century. As early as 1923, an observation of one seller was reported, it said “when accessories are presented with dress, with which they should be used, they begin to play a new role and represent the client in a new meaning-as something attractive, filling up the whole”. [15]



Figure 13.
Department with carpets in *Althoff* department store, Dortmund [8]



Figure 14. Department with cosmetics in *Au Bon Marché*, Paris [8]

Food departments offering delicacies were placed on the highest floor, in the form of separate rooms. In this way, efforts were made to protect the remaining commercial spaces from penetration of the smell of food. In their permanent facilities could be distinguished: skylights, which in addition to providing a favourable light allowed the incorporation of the cooling system and ventilation. The interiors were finished with ceramic tiles, marble, alabaster and glass in bright colours giving the impression of hygienic cleanliness [10]. Nowadays food departments in *KaDeWe* in Berlin or *Harrods* in London are must-see places for customers of these department stores. They provide the best food from all over the world, guaranteeing excellent quality and service at the highest level.

4.3. Innovative ways of attracting customers – using visual merchandising

The public zone of department store included also a number of services areas such as: a travel agency, a ticket-office, a library, a nursery, a hairdresser's etc. They were accompanied by relaxation zone and entertainment such as cafes, restaurants, halls of writing letters, reading rooms, winter gardens, playgrounds, or observation decks on the roofs [10]. On account of tactical policy they were situated away from the entrance and the main stairwell so that customers wishing to use them had to involuntarily

move by the maximum number of stands [13]. Today such hybridization of functions is no longer surprising to anyone, but at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries it was a *novum*, which also played a role in the emancipation of women, providing a meeting place outside home.

The goods were presented on the specially designed tables and shelves. On the basis of observations, it was found that the "view zone" of the product is between 60 cm and 210 cm above the floor and mainly in this field articles were placed. Items of clothing like: jackets, trousers, coats, etc. were hanged in cabinets with telescopic mechanism. Through the glass in the door a model of an article was seen and behind it the same were hanged on rails, but in different sizes [14]. Fabrics were presented on the racks with a base. Smaller goods were placed on podium as decoration, cases, boxes, consoles, etc., and clothes were presented on mannequins and various types of racks.

In trade mainly dressmaker dummies – without heads and limbs were used to the '90s of the 19th century. Over time, the production of ready-made clothes brought the need to produce human – like mannequins. Initially they had very static pose, and wax, with which they were made, melted under the heat lamp. So, they began to produce them with a mixture of wax and papier-mâché, giving a more authentic, human appearance [15]. In 1900 the company *Arnott & Co.* from Glasgow introduced even mannequins with moving heads and eyes, but soon it was decided that it was too long move which distracted the viewer's gaze from the presented goods [17].

Today one of the most famous companies producing mannequins is *Adel Rootstein Mannequins*, which dates back to the 1950s. Its founder – *Adel Rootstein*, distinguished with her great sense of trends, when at the beginning of 60s she produced mannequin based on body casting model *Twiggy*. Strong company's position was built by its creative director *Kevin Arpino*, responsible for the choice of models posing to sculptors who created prototypes and building and arrangement of the collection. The preliminary draft was a sculpture made in clay, next plaster model was casted in order to finally produce mannequins of fiberglass [1].

4.4. Catching customers' attention – window displays design

One of the most important elements of the visual merchandising was forming at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, window displays which were, and still

are presenting a wealth of trade buildings (Fig. 15, Fig. 16). *John Wanamaker* used to say: “Show windows are eyes to meet eyes”. Nowadays, they are treated as a common element – the variety of glass surfaces is almost invisible in the landscape of cities. However, in the early 20th century, many people were confused by images and the goods displayed behind glass, and even by the sheer brilliance of the glass [15].

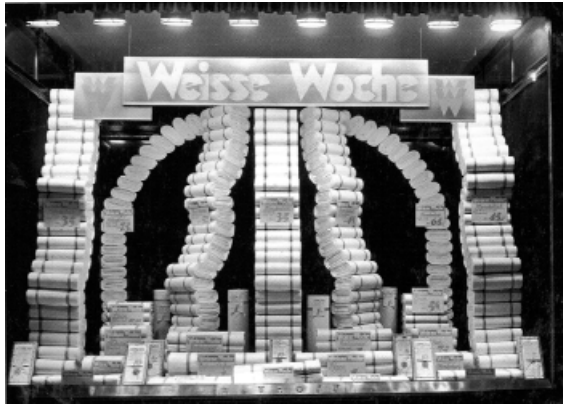


Figure 15.
Window display during “white weeks” in *Karstadt* department store, [8]



Figure 16.
Window display in *KaDeWe* department store, Berlin, 1954 [8]

Originally window dressing was relegated to sales-clerks with artistic sense and manual capabilities. They often acted intuitively, without the expertise of a range of plastic composition and proper lighting. They grouped goods in elaborate structures, often balancing on the edge of good taste. Initially customers approached rather distrustfully to expositions in windows. There was even an opinion that observing them is inelegant and improper for ladies, hence, when their full potential was discovered, part of the

French department stores hired elegantly dressed women, whose job was to look at the window displays, which had to familiarize the passers – by with a new “activity” [8].

The precursor of the introduction of design principles for window displays was an American author *Lyman Frank Baum*, mainly known as an author of children’s books, including “*The Wizard of Oz*”. Using his experience in trade and in the theatre, he founded in 1898, the *National Association of Window Trimmers* – the world’s first organization whose goal was “to raise the level of decorations in trade onto professional level”. In addition, he published a monthly magazine “*The Show Window*”, in which he presented tips for arranging window displays, as well as advertising companies engaged in the production of pieces of store’s equipment [15].

In Germany a significant role in forming rules of window display designing played the artist *Elisabeth von Stephani-Hahn*, who in 1919 in Berlin, published a handbook entitled “*Schaufensterkunst*”. It had a number of tips and guidelines for satisfactory operation, commercial space decorators, ranging from information about the necessary contents of their case with tools, ways of coping with the vaporization of windows, and ending with guidelines on composition: “The goods should recommend themselves, and allowing this is the artistic attitude of a decorator. First one should learn the characteristics of the product, that is to say, you should investigate what it consists of, then look for ways to build decorations raising the charm and interest of the audience. (...) The article captures the style of decorating the window display”. [14]

The creators of the window displays were often also young artists, who in this occupation looked for a possibility for public coming into being – for example this way *Andy Warhol* started his career in Pittsburgh and New York. In addition, among the creators of window displays you can find *Salvador Dali* and *Marchel Duchamp* who weaved into projects features of their rebellious, artistic nature, the arrangement of extremely widespread criticism and official opposition of customers.

5. CONCLUSION

Department stores have introduced a number of innovative solutions in the field of customer service and marketing strategies. They first began to commonly use advertising, whether in the form of advertisements in newspapers, posters, advertising and

logo label shopping bags, small gifts for customers, wrapping paper, etc. For cooperation they often employed artists who not only cared about the appropriate level of visual advertising, but also broadcasted the importance of the company which they worked for. In addition, the department stores have introduced "season openings", promotions, sales and the celebration of Christmas. To this day systems formed by them have been used, they are being improved, and sometimes directly refer to the past (Fig. 17, Fig. 18).



Figure 17.
Galeria Lafayette, Berlin – internal "atrium", proj. Jean Nouvel, 1995 [21]



Figure 18.
Quartier 206, Berlin – internal atrium with grand staircase, proj. Pei, Cobb, Freed & Partner, 1995, own photo

Contemporary architects and interior designers work together to form a space inspiring and commercial at the same time, which would be a background for the demonstration of the skills of visual merchandisers, whose needs and expectations are the main design guidelines. A key element remains the convenience of clients and their demographic profile, which, together with the layout of fixed elements of equipment such as: lighting, layout and signage of passages

are a basic background of creation [1], allowing to state confidently that, like 150 years ago and now, quote:

"*Bazaar* is a factory: it has taken unto itself the several phases of the economic circuit, and now contains all of them. And it is also a factory of smiles and visions, of faces and dreams of life, surrounding people with the commodities for which they live, holding out to them the goals for which they struggle. What factory is geared so deep and direct with what people want and what they are becoming? Measured by space or measured by money, it is the greatest emporium in the world: it is a world..." unquote [16].

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