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SM MEGAMALL: SEMIOTICS, PROXEMICS AND PHENOMENON

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"No matter what happens in the world of human beings, it happens in a spatial setting, and the design of that setting has a deep and persisting influence on the people in that setting."

-- Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*

Traditionally, architecture was viewed as a passive expression of a culture or society's beliefs, experiences and aspirations; as monuments of the Zeitgeist or spirit of the age; or testaments to a particular artist/architect's vision or genius. There is, however, a growing awareness of how architecture, particularly its space, signifies, organizes, and determines social structures and relations. This alternative view is called Proxemics, which the anthropologist Edward T. Hall defines as "the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture."¹

In this paper, SM Megamall is studied, not so much in its formal or stylistic aspects, but in its semiotic and proxemic aspects. Emphasis is placed on space, following Hall's assertion that "spatial experience is not just visual, but multisensory."² Furthermore, the building will also be studied as a phenomenon, in context of its larger socio-historical setting.

A. SEMIOTICS :

SM Megamall solves the problems in interior lay-out and in maximum use of space encountered in the earlier SM City (North Edsa). Megamall (opened June 28, 1990) is a long, enormous six-level structure pierced at the ground level by an auxiliary road. SM City also has a large area space, but it is composed of three separate buildings: the Main, the Carpark and the Annex. The Megamall, however, has greater visual impact because its two Buildings A and B are built in one long line and are actually connected in 5 of its 6 levels. Outside, the two buildings look like one big block because of the streamlined design that unifies them, emphasizing the sheer horizontality of the architecture.

Inside, the longitudinal plan maximizes space. With shops lined on both sides of long and narrow balustrated corridors, it gives the impression of a six-level "court" that looks out to the artificial trees and wrought-iron tables and chairs in the ground level aptly named **Gardens**. Each building is illuminated by a long skylight that nearly spans its entire length.

Lighting is one important factor which enhances spatial experience and helps create different moods. The sunnily lit corridors signify a more open, warm and relaxed atmosphere than the artificially lighted SM Department Store. In the same way, the dimness caused by soft, muted lighting in several small shops and restaurants has a different effect (coziness, quiet elegance) from the dimness one finds in the lower ground level which is lighted by sleek orange and red neon bulbs.

Probably the best examples of how space and lighting create the right ambience is the Silverscreen level (Bldg. A). This level has 12 cinemas in 2 groups of 6. From the warmly lit corridor one enters a smaller corridor, dimly lit by round clusters of tiny amber lights, has a dual function: it serves as a transition area that accustoms the eyes from the



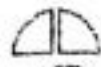

larger, brightly lit corridor outside, to the darkness of the cinema inside (and vice versa); at the same time, it psychologically prepares the moviegoer for the act of seeing a film. It is a "rite of passage" - in the literal sense - in the ritual of film-watching: from light to dimness to darkness, then from darkness to dimness to light once again.


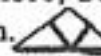
Names of spaces are also important signifiers of meaning. **Silverscreen** (Bldg. A) and **Boulevard** (Bldg. B), both found on the third level, bring to mind American pop culture: Hollywood, Broadway, Sunset Boulevard. In fact, the sign indicating **Silverscreen**, as well as the signs of each cinema are illuminated by lightbulbs all around them, reminding one of the marquees in America. **Promenade** (4th level) signifies a more leisurely way of life, as one slowly takes in the art galleries, old books, and cozy specialty restaurants. The implications here is that one must be rich to be able to afford these pleasures in the first place. On the other hand, the lower ground level is called **Festival**, and the varied sights, sounds and smells coming from the video games, rides and food court (fastfood stalls) evoke a typical Pinoy fiesta or market day.

Each level not only has a name, but a symbol or sign as well. Thus:

- 5th level: Summit 
- 4th level: Promenade 
- 3rd level: Bldg. A: Silverscreen 
 level: Bldg. B: Boulevard 
- 2nd level: Colonnade 
- Ground: Gardens 
- Lower Grounds: Festival 

These symbols indicate the particular levels: they can be found as lighted signs along the walls of

corridors and etched on the glass railing. Even the lighting designs of each level echo their symbols. For example, Colonnade has lights  that echo the three-columned symbol,  while the lights in Boulevard  are similar to its semi-circular window sign . Likewise, the lower-ground level is illuminated by wavy neon orange lights that evoke the fluttering pennant symbol of Festival.

Now if we read the "sign of the sign" we discover certain significations. The pentagram symbol  of Silverscreen alludes to the world of film with its "movie stars." The fluttering symbol of Festival recalls the bright and colorful bunting of celebrations, fiestas and carnivals, and where else can we find Gardens (with its leaf symbol) than on the ground level, and Summit at the topmost level? Furthermore, Summit is symbolized by a stylized mountain.  These significations are not arbitrary but are based on our psychophysical experiences of leaves, trees close to the earth, and mountains as high places: the top, apex, summit.

B. PROXEMICS:

This brings us to the next point to consider, that of space as definer of social relations. Thus, we do not only look at names and symbols but also at shops and units - the substance in space - located on these levels. Again, what they signify is based on our psychophysical experiences, what Robert David Sack calls "biological oppositions and asymmetries."³ One of the most persistent and important oppositions is that of up - down. According to Sack:

"We value 'up' differently from 'down'. Our normal erect posture allows us to see from above and is attained by pushing upward against the universal downward pull of gravity. This effort, and the vantage in the visual field that comes from verticality, makes

us feel differently about up than down... In general the front and up are positively evaluated. Up is heaven, down is hell; up is light, down is darkness."⁴

And what do we find on the "up" floors (4th-5th levels)? At the 4th level we find art galleries (Gallery Genesis, Finale, Pacheco Art Gallery, etc., along a corridor called the Artwalk); Fine Dining, most of which are specialty restaurants (Mother Sachi Vegetarian Restaurant, Saisaki, Vietnam Food House, Sukuothai, etc.) and Interiors (Phil Italia, A & B Lamps). Everything here connotes affluence, wealth, class: from the rich and expensive materials used (wood and cloth versus the cheaper plastic in fastfood restaurants at the lower levels), to the uniformed waiters and costumed hostesses, to the very names of the shops: Aristocrat Interiors, Heritage Art Gallery, Dana Nena's Restaurant.

In contrast, let us look at the "down" floors: the ground and lower ground levels. On the ground level we find the more "popular" names or labels like Esprit, Benetton, Giordano, Cinderella. While in the lower ground level we find not only video games, an ice-skating rink, amusement rides, but also shops or stores that cater to more practical, mundane concerns: fabrics, repair (Heel/Sew), photography (YKL, Island Photo), package delivery (Fax and Parcel), and hardware (SM Workshop).

Thus we begin to discern how these spaces, by their relative positions on the up-down hierarchy, signify different values, concepts, statuses. The "up" floors, with their art galleries, interior decor shops, exhibition spaces (5th level) and fancy restaurants connote "high" culture, class, affluence, breeding. On the other hand, the bottom or "down" levels signify low-brow, "mass culture," "intellectually light" pursuits and concerns. The question is: who determines these social structures? According to Engr. Emmanuel Maring, Building Administrator of Shoemart Megamall, it is Shoemart which

assigns store space, following certain zoning principles.⁵ Thus we find **Booksale** (second-hand books) at the lower ground level, **Goodwill Bookstore** (popular fiction, etc.) at the ground level and **Old Manila** (scholarly publications and old/rare books) at the 4th level. Likewise, **The Sale Club** and **Surplus Shop** are located at the lower ground level, and **#8 Saville Row** and **Silvia Santos** or **Vida Doria** are found on the 2nd level.

But levels are not only signifiers. As Sack puts it: "perception of space (is) based on a coordination of the senses, through sight, hearing, smelling, touch, and so on. Variations in the degree to which the senses participate create different experiences of space."⁶ The signifiers are therefore relational, and we must deal with the spatial experience as a totality that is not only visual but multisensory.

Thus, the lower levels are noisy, overcrowded and visually overwhelming - in fact, one is in danger of sensory overload in these levels. The contrast with the upper or top floors is stark: here silence reigns, and shops are less decorated, with just one or two items on display in their shop windows. These stores reflect the "high culture" snobbery of the levels by putting distance - an air or reserve, aloofness and even disdain - between the customer and the store: if one has no money or "class" one would think twice about walking into such intimidatingly formal structures. These levels are obviously the "reserves of the rich," and like an exclusive club, one must first claim a pedigreed membership in order to belong.

But what about the middle (2nd and 3rd) levels in this hierarchy? The establishments here are more diverse, and so they signify their social standing by the exterior and interior designs of their shops. Some shops are more friendly and casual with their open doors and loud, arresting window designs that seem to crowd and overwhelm. Other shops look like they would prefer the top levels: they have wood paneling, marble surfaces, glass

doors that are opened and closed by uniformed security guards. Their windows highlight only a few clothes or items, with symbols of wealth and breeding as decorations: bottles of wine, framed oil paintings.

Even the choice of names is significant. On the second level we find a row of shops with Italian-sounding names that evoke wealth, "high culture", and even Renaissance art: **Vincci**, **Portofina**, **Linea Uomo**, **Viva**. It is not surprising that two restaurants located on the same level are **Angelino's** and **Dulcinea**.

It is also significant how art galleries are located on the 4th level. Art here, therefore, is equated with wealth and "class". In John Berger's words, it is:

"a sign of affluence: it belongs to the good life; it is the furnishing which the world gives to the rich and beautiful...but a work of art also suggests a cultural authority, a form of dignity, even of wisdom, which is superior to any vulgar material interest: an oil painting belongs to the cultural heritage... (furthermore, it) says two almost contradictory things at the same: it denotes wealth and spirituality: it implies that the purchase being proposed is both a luxury and a cultural value."⁷

But what could be higher than art?

The few shops and already present in the still largely vacant 5th level (**Summit**) give us an idea of how rarefied the air that is breathed in there: there are large exhibition spaces that showcase the latest trends and innovations in the marketplace. There are also the exclusive shops that pander only to the richest of the rich, such as a salon exclusively for hair-straightening (**Freshaire**). One suspects that this will soon be joined by other salons offering to cure such life-threatening maladies as wrinkles,

varicose veins, baldness and eyebrow misalignments. At the Summit of Megamall, such vanities are, literally, the height of materialism.

So what does this highest level of SM Megamall reveal? It reiterates the central theme of the mall: capitalism and consumerist materialism. These two concepts, placed in the context of a third-world nation, has deeper implications, which will be discussed later in the paper.

C. PHENOMENON

The phenomena of malls as establishments that offer everything and anything, simultaneously affirm and negate the concepts of Post-Modernism. SM Megamall affirms the Post-Modern concept of pluralism and eclecticism⁸ by the presence of varied, hybrid styles in the shops and even in the building itself. Yet it negates the very idea by its function and claim as a "Center" of human activity. Megamall has everything: from the department stores, individual shops, supermarket, to amusements and entertainments, to the more "intellectual" activities and pursuits such as art exhibits, lecture-demonstrations, cultural shows. As such, the Mall can only exist in a capitalist culture that emphasizes and celebrates money and the power to acquire. The Megamall is a temple of "conspicuous consumption" where all come not so much as to buy, but to admire and imagine all varied delights money can buy.

In an illuminating study of West Edmonton Mall, Tracy Davis links the shopping center's antecedents not so much with architecture but with theater: from the theatrical entertainments of the fifteenth century to the urban arcades, trade fairs and expositions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whatever their actual forms were, these "suburban pleasure resorts" offered an almost unlimited number of products and services, and combined "commercial space with leisure pur-

suits" - all in the name of capitalist/consumerist materialism.⁹

Indeed, the very structure of the Mall is that of a large environmental theater, the "classic amusement environment design", a wraparound theater where the spectator is completely enveloped in a fantastic and illusionary atmosphere, and where the only escape is the usually difficult to find exit.¹⁰ SM Megamall is thus inward-oriented, with most of its shops and units facing the central court. Like the West Edmonton Mall, it is a land of fantasy and illusion: both offer a "tour around the world" through a sampling of various countries' cuisines. Moreover, in cold and wintry Alberta, West Edmonton Mall boasts of a Waterpark with 2 suntan decks, 20 waterslides and a wave pool. In hot and sunny Manila, SM Megamall has its fantasyland version in its ice-skating rink and snow-machined playground.

Art too, takes its place in this business of mass entertainment and illusion. Its role, however, is not new, since fine art exhibitions were already present in the urban arcades of the 1770's(?)¹¹ On the other hand, what is clearly a 20th century phenomenon is the dynamic influence of mass media and popular culture - both disseminated in the mall - on art. If, indeed, shopping centers are "theatrically interactive museums of the present," then museums are artistic theme parks, pleasure-domes of mass spectacle and entertainment. Like Department stores, museums reproduce art in every conceivable form and market it as another consumable commodity.¹²

Put in the context of a poor, third-world country, the implications of the mall as temple of capitalist/consumerist materialism turn insidious and ideological:

The first implication is the Mall as Grand Illusion or Fantasyland. While West Edmonton Mall and other first-world shopping centers serve as escapes into/from a dull, predictable suburban life outside,

SM Megamall provides a more insidious escape from harsher incongruities and contradictions of shanties, brown-outs and other manifestations of a third-world existence. Every weekend, provincial and tourist buses disgorge hundreds of tourists to pay homage to this "pilgrimage center where performances, goods, services and ideologies are displayed and exchanged."¹³

The second implication is the illusion, on one hand, of SM Megamall as a great equalizer - it appeals to all kinds of people from all walks of life. On the other hand it creates, defines, structures social distinctions and relationships, what Richard Schechner calls "behavioral strips,"¹⁴ through levels and space: a static hierarchy in an age when traditional social classes or distinctions are no longer exact or fixed, but blurred and fluid.¹⁵ Thus it struggles to keep its hierarchy by keeping the "mass culture" in their "proper low places" and making the traditional reserves of the rich as inaccessible as possible.

And it succeeds to some extent: although the top levels are, in principle, accessible to everyone, few people venture there. It is a constant reminder of the realities of Capitalism: you may only gawk at and admire what you cannot afford to buy. Davis calls this the peeping ritual: "it is mass recreation, but like the indoor-outdoor gardens of earlier centuries, participant-spectators are limited to those who can pay, encouraging socio-economic distinctions in the entertainments that parallel the shopping by-way's varying degrees of decoration and opulence of materials."¹⁶

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⁶ John Walker, *Art in the Age of Mass Media* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), p. 82.

⁹ Tracy Davis, "Theatrical Antecedents of the Mall that Ate Downtown" in *Journal of Popular Culture* (24: 4, Spring 1991), p. 12-13.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 7-8.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹² Louisa Buck and Philip Dodd, *Relative Values, of What's Art Worth?* (London: BBC Books, 1991), p. 145-153.

¹³ Tracy Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁵ Patrick D. Flores, "People, Popular Culture, Criticism: Reproducing the 'Popular' in Media" (1991), citing Jim Collins in *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (1988).

¹⁶ Tracy Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

NOTES

¹ Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 1.

² *ibid.*, preface.

³ Robert David Sack, *Conceptions of Space in Social Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), p. 129.

⁴ *ibid.*, preface.

⁵ Interview with Engr. Emmanuel Maring, Building Administrator, SM Megamall, October 10, 1992.

⁶ Robert David Sack, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972) p. 135.