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# Resource rather than seduction. A praxeological conception of shopping atmospheres

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**Abstract.** *This paper presents a praxeological conception of shopping atmospheres. It looks at the significance of shopping atmospheres for the development of preferences for shopping locations. What is in the foreground here is the idea that the suitability of the atmospheres for successful completion of shopping activities is consciously perceived, and influences the development of long-term preferences for the choice of shopping locations. In addition to the conceptual framework, this paper also presents the results of an exploratory investigation: here, three forms of atmospheres have been identified (atmospheres for strolling, for rummaging, and atmospheres with a cultural resonance), which are taken into account in the choice of shopping locations.*

**Keywords:** *shopping atmosphere, praxeology, everyday aesthetics*

## Introduction

The discussion about shopping atmospheres can now look back on a tradition of almost 40 years. Following the seminal article by Kotler (1973), the examination of shopping atmospheres has become established as a subject in environmental psychology and marketing research. In their review of the research on shopping atmospheres in 2000, Turley and Milliman (2000) already identified 60 published empirical articles in this field. Since then, the number of contributions has increased further, without any signs of saturation in the research field. Rather, new forms of retailing and new techniques for shaping retail premises give rise to ever new papers (Maganari, Siomkos & Vrechopoulos, 2009; Morrison, Gan & Dubelaar, 2011).

Since the work by Donovan and Rossiter (1982), which has made the *stimulus-organism-response* (S-O-R) model developed by Russel and Mehrabian (1974) a fruitful tool for research on shopping atmospheres, research has overwhelmingly built on this background theory. It assumes that the ambient qualities that can be experienced through the senses have a direct, short-term effect on shopping behaviour (Lam, 2001). In this research tradition, the assumption is thus of an image of a consumer who can be seduced, who can ultimately be enticed to spend more by the “right” stimuli from the environment. The contribution of this research perspective from environmental psychology has more recently been questioned with reference to the partly contradictory results, or results that cannot be generalised, on the influence of atmospheric elements on shopping behaviour (Grandclément, 2004). The contradictions that have been uncovered between the results of different research projects are not surprising from the perspective of human geography, in which there was much criticism that the behavioural approaches, with the underlying response model of human behaviour, provide only an inadequate representation of the complexity of human activities (Weichhart, 2008, p. 243).

However, the significance of atmospheres for shopping behaviour is not to be questioned in principle on account of this criticism. Rather, it is taken here as a starting point for formulat-

ing an alternative proposal for the conceptualisation of shopping atmospheres. It starts out from a fundamentally different understanding of the relation between atmospheres and shopping behaviour: here, the focus is directed not at the immediate and short-term responses of customers to the shopping environments, but at their significance in the long-term choice of shopping locations. Shopping atmospheres are thus viewed as a criterion that is taken into account in the choice of shopping locations. This perspective certainly links to existing work in retail research. Thus for example Kagermeier (1991, p. 68) was able to show that the shopping atmosphere represents a relevant criterion in the evaluation of the attractiveness of the provision and the choice of shopping location. Apart from establishing this connection, however, to date here has been no explicit examination of the relationship between shopping atmospheres and choice of shopping locations. This deficit is to be remedied here, first of all with a conceptual examination of the relationship of shopping atmospheres and choice of shopping location. Following on from this, on the basis of an exploratory analysis, we shall show how shopping atmospheres, as a phenomenon of the aesthetics of everyday life, can actually be considered in the choice of places to shop.

## **Shopping practice and shopping atmospheres**

As the basis for the relationship between shopping atmospheres and choice of shopping location, we start from a praxeological understanding of shopping. Here, shopping is understood as practice, or as a chain of practices. The concept of praxis is directed fundamentally at the physicality of activities, and thus at how they are completed (Kazig & Weichhart, 2009). This way, different facets of shopping come under scrutiny. In this sense, shopping appears as a sequence of practices that can be realised in diverse ways, in that for example shops are visited, goods are found, appraised, paid for, and finally transported home. In accordance with the understanding of Bourdieu (2001, p. 180), a concept of praxis is assumed here in which the actual understanding of the body as the instrumental and expressive entity is integrated with the conception of the body as the sensing entity (Alkemeyer, 2006, p. 266).

It is also at precisely this point that atmospheres become apparent. The concept of atmosphere emphasises that the subjective mood of a person can change depending on the surroundings (Kazig, 2007). This change in mood can be expressed in the mode of attention, motor behaviour, or emotionality. Since the surroundings in which shopping takes place are characterised by different environmental qualities, they affect the mood of the shopper, and thus the completion of the act of shopping, to varying degrees. The different shopping atmospheres can also be perceived consciously. As a conscious dimension of shopping activities, they can be placed in relation to personal preferences regarding shopping atmospheres, and evaluated, so that they can take effect as a criterion in the choice of shopping locations.

The connection described here can be viewed as a correspondence phenomenon, for which Seel (1996, pp. 89) has presented seminal thoughts under the concept of aesthetic correspondence. Aesthetic correspondence represents a specific type of aesthetic perception, which relates to atmospheres (Seel, 2000, p. 152). It is based on the fact that human life can assume specific forms, or can express itself in specific forms, and can also be perceived aesthetically in this way. The atmosphere of a street of shops can, for example, appear to be elegant, or the atmosphere of a shop can seem bourgeois. In this type of aesthetic attention, a correspondence or lack of correspondence arises in that an aesthetically experienced situation is set in relation to one's own requirements of a corresponding situation. A situation that is experienced when shopping is thus related to one's own requirements regarding the appearance of a corresponding shopping situation. The precondition for the creation of situations of aesthetic correspondence in connection with shopping activities thus consists in requirements or expectations existing in respect of the form in which particular shopping

practices should take place. These requirements can be realised more or less well in the given shopping situations, giving rise to the sense of a more or less strong aesthetic correspondence. The aesthetic correspondence can to a certain extent be viewed as a form of correspondence of habitus and habitat. The aesthetic experience of shopping atmospheres also includes an ethical dimension, in that these are evaluated as good or bad for the successful completion of shopping activities (Kleimann, 2002, p. 115). Finally, building on this, preferences for particular shopping locations can form. Here, the shopping locations are selected such that they correspond to the personal ideas of successful shopping. The focus of the everyday aesthetic or praxeological research perspective on shopping atmospheres thus becomes directed at the question in which shopping practices atmospheres become apparent as a criterion for the choice of shopping location. Linked to this is the task of capturing the material dimension of the corresponding atmospheres. Fundamentally however, the question also arises as to how shopping atmospheres, compared with other criteria in the choice of shopping location – such as for example prices or accessibility – are weighted. On the basis of the considerations by Löw (2001, p. 197), following on from Bourdieu, on the habituated character of perceptions, one must assume that the dispositions for the perception of atmospheres are unequally pronounced in society. If in the following section, three manifestations of shopping atmospheres are presented which are relevant in the choice of shopping locations, this does not necessarily mean that these are equally effective for everyone. We merely describe how shopping atmospheres and the choice of shopping location *can* interact, and which environmental elements have a relevant influence on the evaluation of atmospheres.

## Forms of shopping atmospheres

On the basis of an exploratory empirical investigation, the intention now is to clarify to what empirical results this alternative research perspective can lead. To this end, problem-centred interviews were conducted with 20 people in two German cities (Regensburg and Bonn), either in individual or group conversations. In the conversations, the participants were asked to describe how they do their shopping for different product groups (food, clothing, media, entertainment electronics, furniture), and which shopping locations they prefer for these. The transcribed conversations were evaluated using the method of thematic coding (Reuber & Pfaffenbach, 2005, p. 163). What came into focus here were descriptions in which qualities of the surrounding, or subjective states, were addressed as reasons for the choice of shopping locations. As a result of the investigation, it was possible to identify different forms of shopping atmospheres, three of which are presented below. In each case, they relate to specific shopping practices, and become apparent in the choice of shopping location.

### *Atmospheres for strolling*

Atmospheres for strolling relate to public spaces of retail agglomerations. Here, strolling means passing through a retail agglomeration without any fixed purchasing objective, but certainly with a latent need to buy. Strolling is therefore engaged in above all with a view to medium and long-term goods, such as clothing, accessories or books. In this sense, in the conversations it was for example described that predominantly clothing shops are targeted when the fundamental need is for a new pair of trousers. A central characteristic feature of strolling lies in the fact that the paths between the shops are not seen solely as distances to be overcome but that they are accorded their own value. Strolling is often linked to visiting a café. In this respect, strolling also has the character of a leisure activity, wherein with the latent need for particular goods, the function of supplying one's needs however forms the starting point. This confirms the ideas expressed by Schröder (2003), that shopping activities

would seldom take place solely as an activity of supplying one's needs, or a leisure activity, but are more accurately to be seen as a combination of the two, shaped specifically in each case. The particular character of strolling furthermore consists in the fact that the time spent in a retail agglomeration is seen as a type of overall experience.

In the conversations, on several occasions a clear distinction was made between the artificial atmospheres of shopping centres and the atmospheres in the classic centres of city centres. A preference for city centre atmospheres was justified with the perceived naturalness, which also enables one to experience the city. However, in the classic centres, the weather and seasons have a great influence on the atmosphere for strolling. In poor weather or in the cold season, the attractiveness of shopping centres also increases for people who, in principle, prefer the atmosphere of the classic city centres for strolling. The density of passersby became apparent as a further relevant variable in the evaluation of atmospheres for strolling. Times of day with too great a density of passersby are avoided, because they make unimpeded progress more difficult. But times of day with too few passersby can also be perceived negatively, and avoided for strolling. In this case, a sense of loneliness arises, which has a negative effect on the overall experience.

### *Atmospheres for rummaging*

Atmospheres for rummaging relate to the shop premises. Rummaging becomes apparent as a shopping practice when customers initially do not have a precise idea of what they want to buy. Rummaging is thus predominantly related to non-standardised goods that exist in various designs. In the conversations, for example clothing, books, accessories or household goods were mentioned. Rummaging aims at reconnoitring the available goods, seeking out those that are of interest for one's own needs from the diversity of goods available, and checking them thoroughly before purchase. As far as possible, customers also want to have contact with the goods. Rummaging can also supplement more targeted shopping activities if, in addition to the planned purchase of already known products, other products on offer in the shops are considered.

In order for it to be possible to rummage in a shop, first of all there must be a self-service situation in terms of design. Atmospheres for rummaging are fundamentally evaluated according to how one's own access to the goods in a shop is enabled. Here one can distinguish between social and design-related influencing variables. The social dimension of atmospheres for rummaging links to the fact that the accessibility of the goods is also mediated socially. In various conversations a clear distinction was made between the atmosphere of smaller shops, in which there is unavoidable contact with the sales staff, and larger shops or department stores that can be entered without such contact. Smaller shops are avoided for rummaging, because contact with the sales staff is perceived to result to a certain extent in an obligation to buy, which is detrimental to rummaging without obligation. With regard to the physical dimension of atmospheres for rummaging, throughout the conversations a preference was expressed for easy and convenient access to the goods. Regardless of the type of goods on offer, people said that the shops must not be over-full so that customers block each other's access to the goods. It became clear, particularly with the example of book shops, that for each group of goods, specific requirements furthermore affect a good atmosphere for rummaging. In the case of book shops, seating was mentioned positively, to enable customers to take a longer look at books in comfort.

### *Atmospheres with a cultural resonance*

Atmospheres with a cultural resonance also relate to shop premises. However, they stand in a fundamentally different relation to shopping than is the case with rummaging. They are not limited to a specific activity like rummaging, but relate to the whole time spent in a shop. In the case of atmospheres with a cultural resonance, a certain degree of unexpressed

familiarity is sought in the shopping situation. The special nature of atmospheres with a cultural resonance can be made clear by differentiating service relationships into *encounters* as anonymous situations and *relationships* as situations with existing relationships between retailers and customers (Guttek, 2005). Atmospheres with a cultural resonance characterise a situation in which, in spite of an anonymous situation in the shop, a sense of familiarity arises. They arise when the personal style achieves a positively perceived correspondence with the environment in the shop. This sense of familiarity is particularly apparent in the choice of clothing shops, because it facilitates the sometimes very private moments of selecting and trying on clothes.

## Summary and outlook

Starting out from the critique of the dominant environmental psychological conception of research on shopping atmospheres, an alternative approach has been presented here, on the basis of a praxeological understanding of shopping. It is based on the idea that shopping atmospheres influence the way in which shopping activities are carried out, and facilitate them in positive cases. They are consciously perceived by shoppers, and are evaluated according to personal preferences. Using the example of three forms of shopping atmospheres, it was shown how they are ultimately taken into account in the long-term choice of shopping locations.

With the question concerning the utilisation of atmospheres as a resource for carrying out activities, a perspective was adopted that has been rarely pursued in atmosphere research to date. It should be accorded greater attention beyond the investigation of shopping atmospheres, in order to extend the understanding of the social use of atmospheres.

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