

Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the semiotic relevance of architecture in building a bank's brand identity. It establishes architectural discourse as a sign-system that produces symbolic capital within the wider framework of the identity-building process. The shift from ethics to aesthetics, from functional, utilitarian retail venues, to glossy design interiors, has recently emerged in the financial community. New design concepts of retail banking are currently being tested to accompany innovative initiatives in the area of consumer marketing. In the finance sector, where symbolic capital ranks as a critical reputation asset, architecture increasingly conveys corporate values and takes part in institutional myth-making.

By presenting an analysis of architectural semiotics, the paper argues that the multi-sensory (visual-sonic-olfactory-tactile) congruity of architectural narratives generates denoted and connoted meaning. An empirical illustration of Société Générale's branch on the Champs-Élysées shows how architectural discourse establishes idiosyncratic brand identity. As the semiotic exploration of architecture remains significantly under-represented in the marketing semiotic literature, the paper seeks to open a new territory in this emerging field.

Keywords: architectural semiotics, financial communication, brand identity, marketing aesthetics.

0. Introduction

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, the banking sector has been affected by major image losses and client attrition. In addition, the rapid expansion of online banks and the provision of financial services by non-financial institutions have transformed profoundly this hyper-competitive marketplace. It has therefore become paramount for banking institutions to reconsider the priorities of their marketing strategy for the retail sector by creating new structures of client interfaces and innovative touch-points. Many institutions have completely overhauled their brick-and-mortar branches to project a more modern corporate image in conformity with contemporary urban lifestyles. In many cases, architecture is embedded in the larger scope of an integrated marketing discourse, including PR efforts, above-the-line advertising, and sponsorship.

In this new corporate discursive mode the strategic use of architecture engenders a "phenomenology of capital" (Martin, 2010, p. xvii), whereby the corporation transforms the use value of architecture into aesthetic and symbolic value. And yet, architecture is usually not part of the marketing practitioner's or scholar's toolbox (Schroeder, 2002, p. 91). Jons Messedat notes that "it is surprising that, despite significant investment and given the diverse possibilities of employing architecture as a central element of the communication of a company and brand contents, it is not used efficiently. The long-term cultural and emotional added value that can be achieved here is not appropriately reflected in economic calculations" (Messedat, 2005, p. 15). In marketing scholarship, architecture is mostly investigated as a sales tool based on Kotler's concept of "atmospherics" (Kotler, 1973, p. 50) or the concept of "servicescape" (Bitner, 1992), which both seek to maximize immediate impact on purchasing decisions. The "psychological, cultural and consumer values" (Schroeder, 2002, p. 91) of



space design rarely appear in the marketing literature, despite their persuasive branding power in the age of consumption as spectacle.

1. Literature review

Considered as a signifying entity, architectural discourse is semantically coded (Dreyer, 2009, 2008, 2003, Hammad, 2006, 2002, Larsen, 2002, Gottdiener, 1995, Bettetini, 1986, Jencks, 1977, Eco, 1968) and generates long-term cultural value in an integrated system (Dorfles, 1971, p. 94). Sonesson (1989, 2011, 2013) has shown that the iconic sign is essentially motivated. Eco (1988) interprets architectural language as a coded text that denotes a specific function and connotes symbolic meaning. He emphasizes the functional and social contents of architecture, while arguing that architecture cannot be decoded as a simple sign. The decoding process of architectural expression encompasses various facets of semiotic production and therefore implies a multi-layered sign-network. Eco identifies three main architectural codes: the technical codes (concerning the structural components of architectural forms), the syntactic codes (covering the typological codes and the spatial articulation of forms) and the semantic codes (linking the sign-vehicles in architecture to their denotative and connotative meanings) (Eco, 1988, p. 181).

The intertwined articulation of these codes calls for a poly-semiosis of architectural discourse, as “the specificity of a signifying system is not [...] defined solely by the specificity of the codes, but also by the form in which those codes are articulated; that is to say, the combination of codes may be specific, although the codes themselves may or may not be specific to the system in question” (Metz, 1969). With intrinsic variables such as symmetry or asymmetry, scale, rhythm, proportion, chromatic and formal properties, contrast, dimension, horizontality and verticality, open and closed space, materials, topography, style, functionality, etc. providing interpretive cues (Eco, 1972), the performance of architectural discourse dynamically results from the relationship between the variables and the actors who occupy these spaces (Semprini, 1996, p. 19).

Visual semiotics imply the subject’s physical presence in space by exploring the interaction between the body and the environment, the spatial effects on movement, perception and overall *Raumempfindung* (Larsen, 2002, 1991, Certeau, 1990, Johnson, 1987, Gibson, 1968). Architectural semiosis therefore is twofold: perceived as the surface plane of a building’s façade, it is decoded as a visual sign that Sonesson considers to have greater rhetorical power than verbal language: “[...] rhetoric is more immediately present in pictures and other iconic signs than in verbal language. It is the nature of the iconic sign to posit at the same time its own resemblance and dissimilitude with respect to its object [...] the sign creates an expectation of identity [...]” (Sonesson, 2013, p. 10). If buildings express meaning and give certain messages (Conway and Roenisch, 1994, p. 21), their functioning as semiotic sign systems is profoundly humane within the context of urban culture.

However, architecture also generates a spatiotemporal symbiosis, in which the sentient subject experiences space from within, as “we experience [...] architecture through our embodied existence and identification” (Pallasmaa, 2009). This sensory perception of four dimensions provides a unique

space/time experience that fully engages the subject with the brand. Zevi sums up this “moment of architecture” as “the moment in which we, with everything in us that is physical and spiritual, and, above all, human, enter and experience the spaces [...]” (Zevi, 1974, p. 60). Architecture delivers a dynamic field of direct physical involvement that operates on all four dimensions: “There is a physical and dynamic element in grasping and evoking the fourth dimension through one’s own movement through space. Not even motion pictures [...] possess that mainspring of complete and voluntary participation, that consciousness of free movement, which we feel in the direct experience of space. Whenever a complete experience of space is to be realized, we must be included, we must feel ourselves part and measure of the architectural organism [...]” (Zevi, 1974, pp. 59-60).

The taxonomy of architectural discourse within the realm of the visual arts therefore does not adequately reflect the entire communicative potential of topological properties. The sensory, phenomenological access to the medium transcends the purely optical apprehension. The generation of a specific atmosphere through shape, colour, materials, structure, but also sound, light, ergonomics, and smell, afford architecture a holistic status. Contrary to other forms of visual marketing, such as packaging, product design, and advertising layout, architecture captures consumers as sentient beings, as it is a kinetic art that is perceived by movement (Vasarely quoted in Heidingsfelder, 2009). The architectural object of semiotics constitutes a sign system that functions within a specific corporate and social culture (Nadin, 1990, p. 423).

The synthetic space perception of a bank branch rests on the projection of legible signs that identify the venue: security equipment, ATM walls, bank-tellers, safe deposit boxes, cheque deposit machines, etc. They constitute the denotative cues of the traditional narrative model of retail banking and form the cognitive map in this autopoietic ecosystem. The typified architectural discourse locates the institution within a culturally recognized referent system (Nisbet, 1990, p. 8).

Moreover, the iconic and spatial plasticity of architecture serve as a privileged means of image-building, catering to the contemporary propensity for individualism, immateriality and the imaginary (Semprini, 2005, p. 42), while setting the stage for social interaction. This ‘aesthetic reflexivity’ (Lash and Urry, 1994, p. 5) of multimodal space perception situates architectural discourse at the core of the new consumer experience in an aesthetic economy. Norberg-Schulz points out: “How then is this stability compatible with the dynamics of change? First of all we may point out that any place ought to have the *capacity* of receiving different ‘contents’, naturally within certain limits. A place which is only fitted for one purpose would soon become useless [...] To protect and conserve the *genius loci* in fact means to concretize its essence in ever new historical contexts” (Norberg-Schulz, 1996, p. 422).

Thus, to avert the obsolescence of traditional brick-and-mortar venues, retail banking needs to be reconceptualised and filled with new content. The sole purpose of providing financial services no longer suffices to establish competitive value in a hypercompetitive marketing environment. Aesthetic space experience contributes to building symbolic and cultural value while accruing long-term reputation capital and goodwill for stakeholders (Bargenda, 2013, 2014). Banks seek to obtain cultural legitimacy in addition to commercial legitimacy (Ries and Ries, 2002) in order to meet the expectations of consumers. As metaphorical expressions of “brand culture” (Schroeder, 2007; Schroeder & Salzer-



Mörling, 2006), architectural narratives represent the “metaphoric image of the dominant powers” (Rykwert, 2008, p. 374), and therefore must be adapted to a changing historical context.

2. Main findings of the semiotic analysis

The performance of a semiotic analysis seeks to demonstrate how the new aesthetic elements generate identity-building values in the “kitchen of meaning” (Barthes, 1988). Plastic signs are based on lines, colours and texture (Klinkenberg, 1996, p. 379). The architecture of Société Générale’s branch in Paris, substantially redesigned in 2014, exemplifies the attempt to build symbolic capital, while creating an integrated network of branches by means of a unified graphic design pattern.

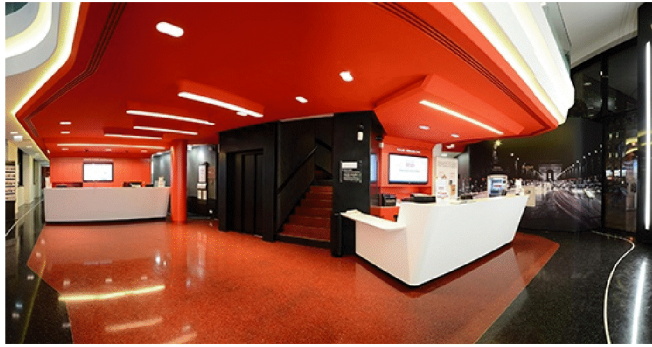
Conceived by architects Philippe Roux and Piotr Paciorek in 2012, and considered as an experimental pilot-project for future space strategies, the overhaul of the flagship branch on 91, Champs-Élysées, which opened in 1880, paradigmatically aligns the bank with previous architectural projects. In fact, throughout its institutional history, the bank has positioned itself at the forefront of innovation by readily adopting technological progress to ensure the optimal equipment of its facilities. The bank’s historic headquarters, as well as its high-rise buildings at La Défense create differentiated architectural value with regard to its competitors. Similarly, the latest innovations in experiential marketing are tested for their communicative relevance at the Champs-Élysées branch.

2.1 *Smell*

Upon entering the building, a delicate smell of cut grass conveys a sense of freshness to the client. However, rather than functioning merely as a pleasant air freshener, this olfactory sign also connotes the candour and innocence of country life, thus seeking to re-establish a down-to-earth, trustworthy and solid identity.

2.2 *Ergonomics*

The trust-building factor also prevails in the ergonomics of space design. In fact, the almost organic, sinuous fluidity of the space conception creates a perfect harmony with natural body movements, thereby greatly facilitating orientation. In the main lobby, the entire space unfolds in a 180 degree perspective, affording the client control over the entire venue. The intense orange-coloured, futuristic, asymmetrical space design is made accessible by a new and clear signage system.



Entrance hall. ©Société Générale. Reprinted with permission.

2.3 Views

The new transparent glass façade, connecting the bank with the city, contrasts starkly with the original stone building. If architecture can be interpreted metaphorically, the opacity and secrecy of the past transform into transparency and openness of the present and future. The waiting room on the mezzanine offers a spectacular view on the Champs-Élysées, while an adjacent Japanese garden allows for meditative relaxation. The diffusion of natural light and LED lamps reinforces the impression of a genuine place.



View from the mezzanine on the Champs-Élysées. Photograph by author, 2014.



Japanese garden. Photograph by author, 2014.

2.4 Sound

In the waiting area, smooth lounge music invites visitors to unwind and to socialize in a coffee-shop like atmosphere.

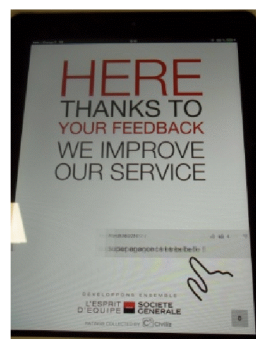


Waiting area for private clients on the mezzanine. Photograph by author, 2014.

2.5 Taste

A coffee machine is available to clients and their customer representatives to share a personal warm-up moment.

2.6 Tactile participation



Ipad terminal for client comments. Photograph by author, 2014.

Before leaving the branch, clients are invited to give satisfaction ratings, make comments on the waiting time and their representative's availability, etc., on an ipad application.

The overhauled bank branch features an idiosyncratically-coded environment of baroque theatrics. The utilitarian function of financial services is mediated through an institutional setting that transfers human values and experiences to a transactional environment. The venue epitomizes a new branding model that brokers highly prized values of aesthetic pleasure and community-building (Pederngana, Schneider & Vogler, 2003, p. 27). The syntagmatic enrichment of sign-driven consumption with a more all-encompassing aesthetic spatial orientation enacts new forms of brand/client interface, where the environment becomes a sign in itself as “symbolic space that connotes something other than its principal function – the realization of capital through the stimulation of consumer desires [...]”

(Gottdiener, 2001, p. 73). Synesthetic atmospheric criteria have become paramount in the architectural expression of meaning, identity, and desire.

2.7 *Synesthetic architectonic concept*

The synesthetically connected olfactory, spatial, optical, auditory, gustative and tactile signs engender a multi-sensory brand universe that establishes a very distinct corporate personality. Architectural branding consists in linking the spatial experience to the larger socioeconomic and cultural goals that communicate shared values, so that “it becomes almost inevitable that the architecture will transcend its material value to engage in a dialogue with its audience” (Klingmann, 2007, p. 65). The threefold nature of architecture, as defined by Vitruvius, includes *firmitas* (solidity), *utilitas* (function), *venustas* (beauty). It is the area of *venustas* that was long neglected in retail banking architecture, foregrounding the principles of *utilitas*. However, architecture is a potent communicator of a myth or a narrative and therefore holds significant persuasive force. The new model of banking architecture therefore places particular emphasis on *venustas*, while articulating ideology, values, and symbolism in an aesthetically pleasing way. Thus, the denotative, functional aspect is being superseded by the connotative dimension of symbolic associations, enhancing the emotional appeal of the venue. Substance and depth of structure disappear behind the glossy surface that primarily exudes a sense of seduction. The holistic, multi-sensory spatial experience dissociates the financial core business of the institution from the experiential transformation of the subject through sensual stimuli. The dynamic interplay between depth and surface, rational/financial and emotional impact creates an oscillation in the subject, transforming the sensual and cognitive levels into two coexistent realities. “SENSE architecture”, which “appeals to the senses, with the objective of creating sensory experiences through sight, sound, touch, and smell” (Schmitt, 1999, p. 64) is combined with the functional imperatives of a banking venue to institute a new architectural model. Böhme (2013a) notes that the communicative character of a synesthetic atmosphere does not result from a hierarchy of senses or a special exposure to one sensory modality. On the contrary, the phenomenological perception results from “mutually substitutable generators” creating characters of atmospheres. The emergence of a new regime of signification, where utilitarian venues are imbued with utopian, imaginary, culturally-coded sign effects, institutes a permeable, fluid connector between *utilitas* and *venustas*. The corporate brand identity construct takes place in the interstices of this hybridisation and functions simultaneously on all three types of signs, as defined by Peirce.

2.8 *Semio-narrative architectural codes*

The architectural sign system of Société Générale synthesises functional, utilitarian banking space and experiential, spectacular event architecture, against the three sign types of icon, index and symbol.

The *icon*

It represents an *icon* through its resemblance with organic, futuristic spaces reminiscent of 1970s aesthetics, both through space morphology and colour (predominantly orange). The fashionable vintage atmosphere that is thus implemented meets the cultural preferences of the core target¹, instituting a link with collective memory and generational cultural heritage.

The *index*

As an *index*, the renovated branch establishes a causal relationship with the formal and functional space requirements and the aesthetic demands of lifestyle branding. The revitalised branch creates meaningful brand relationships where function and form coincide in a homogeneous unity. The conjunction of commercial and communal interests opens up new architectural perspectives, as multi-sensory design elements not only serve a decorative purpose, but also assume strategic importance as an “art of the ensemble” (Scruton, 1979, p. 11).

The *symbol*

It is the symbolic dimension that clearly transforms the entire environment into a signifier. This “universal semantization of the environment” (Baudrillard, 1972, p. 230) leads to the semio-demonstration of power through space design and place-making, a preponderant trait of contemporary aesthetic economy.

By reframing architecture as a tool for evoking the socio-psychological dimension of the corporate message, it is established as a signifying “expressive system” (Bonta, 1979). As an identity-building device of brand culture, it metaphorically transcribes the passage from a brand with market-value to a brand with symbolic and cultural value, thus effecting a transition from the aesthetically designed *servicescape* to the symbolically connoted *brandscape*.

The very location of the branch on the Champs-Élysées carries symbolic capital, in that the prime retail location embodies power, but also consolidates the bank’s urban presence on the historical axis of the urban development of Paris. The Champs-Élysées have both spatial and temporal, syntagmatic and diachronic relevance. By opening up the branch to the entire street frontage, the bank connects with the urban fabric of the past and present, while concurrently shaping the future public space of its environment: “With the rise of capitalism [...], the symbolism of public and ceremonial architecture became more varied. The purpose of the symbolism, nevertheless, was the same: to legitimize a particular ideology or power system by providing a physical focus to which sentiments could be attached” (Knox, 1982, p. 110).

¹ According to branch director Idris Hederally, 90% of clients express the highest satisfaction rate in the category “atmosphere and design” on the ipad evaluation form (interview with the author, 2 July 2014).

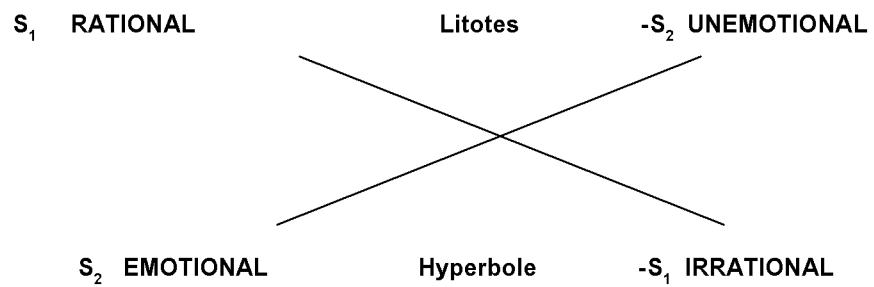
2.9 Rhetorical persuasion

If the purpose of rhetoric is to produce *adherence* to the proposed arguments (Perelman, 1977), it is legitimate to consider architectural expression as an argumentative device. The valorisation of a particular discursive style generates persuasive relevance to a specific target audience through meaning-generating mechanisms of a particular signifying structure. The rhetorical mechanisms of architectural discourse lend themselves to interpretation, as visual rhetoric is encoded through tropes (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005). According to Hattenhauer, “architecture not only communicates, but also communicates rhetorically [...] architectural items not only tell us their meaning and function, but also influence our behavior. Architecture is rhetorical because it induces us to do what others would have us to do. Architecture, then, is a persuasive phenomenon, and therefore deserves to be studied by rhetorical critics” (Hattenhauer, 1984, p. 71).

In this architectural discourse, the salient properties of Société Générale’s branch may be articulated by recourse to the following four main tropes (cf. Rossolatos, 2013):

HYPERBOLE	“Quantitative augmentation of one of the properties of an object state-of-affairs; may be encountered purely verbally or visually or as the employment of a visual that augments the importance or the argumentative force [...]”
LITOTES	“Quantitative diminution of a property of an object, the significance of an event of a state-of-affairs [...]”
RESHAPTION	“Repetition of the same shape in the majority of visuals in a syntagm or across syntagms.”
PARADOX	“The syntactical co-occurrence in the same syntagm of two words or phrases or visual that appear to be contradictory, but contains a truism or topos.”

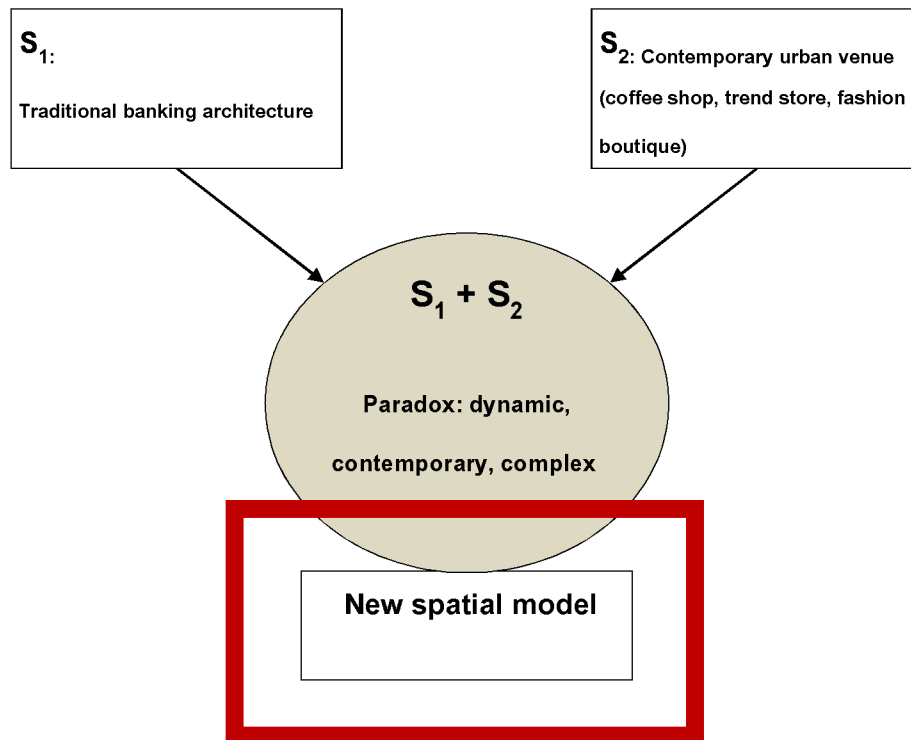
Hyperbolic properties, such as the predominant orange color and the vast expanse of the entrance hall are offset against the discreet confidentiality of private meeting rooms. Furthermore, the branch features no ostentatious ATM-wall, but just one cash machine. The understated, functional aspects are typical of traditional banking architecture. The concept of re-shapton lends itself particularly well to the interpretation of architectural syntagms in the wider sense. In fact, olfaction acts as such a connector, as the pervasive smell of fresh grass permeates the entire branch, thus acting like an olfactory identifier. In addition, the furniture design, the lighting fixtures and the color code are recurrent in the building and establish one unified sign network. Finally, the combination of the operative rationality of bank architecture and the dramatic computer-generated morphogenesis of interior design converge into a synchronically contiguous space concept. The dissimilar, antithetical realms of practical, functional architecture and neo-plastic, exuberant design production, fuse into a final synthesis. Thus, continuity and discontinuity, thesis and antithesis, rational and emotional variables are associated in a dynamic experiential field that can be represented as a semiotic square:



The following rational and emotional elements may be identified:

S₁ RATIONAL	-S₂ UNEMOTIONAL
Kinetic efficiency (180° view) Functional space ergonomics Project-oriented customer service Clear signage	Natural and LED lighting Spacious, airy reception area Customer satisfaction survey on ipad Welcome desk Modular walls and furniture
S₂ EMOTIONAL	-S₁ IRRATIONAL
Predominant orange colour Futuristic layout Design furniture View on Champs-Élysées Direct human contact Dramatic stage set	Absence of ATM walls (only one ATM) Relaxing waiting area Lounge music Japanese garden

The paradoxical complexity of Société Générale's space design results from the contrasting articulations of utilitarian architecture and spectacular design elements:



3. Discussion

The architectural features embody the bank's corporate values of team spirit and community building that are prominently articulated in the most recent advertising campaign. A transactional space is transformed into a place of culture and social exchange. The politics of the image revitalise a traditional banking venue as an artsy, dynamic place that can be modelled according to *ad hoc* contingencies. To the operative functions of financial services, the bank added a socio-cultural dimension to reinvent its identity along human-centred identifiers. Architect Bernard Tschumi argues that "there is no space without event, no architecture without program" (Tschumi, 1990, 89). Thus, the formal and ideological settings catalyse cultural and social exchange, while establishing a sensory atmosphere, where architecture itself becomes marketing. The triumphant smooth and glossy surface, the symbolic dramatisation and the swirling spectacle of colors, shapes, fragrances and panoramic views on the Champs-Élysées illustrate the bank's new identity. Thus, architecture serves to stage institutional power (Böhme, 2013b, p. 54). In the financial sector, this "phenomenology of capital" implements a new sign-system of complex topologies where form and function are synthesised into one congruent symbolic expression. This eclectic architecture draws on a variety of vernaculars, including overblown, euphoric design patterns, as much as traditional understated elements of bank architecture. The iconic interplay of signs creates a mythic spatial plasticity that could have a schizoid effect, were it not perfectly controlled as a balanced combination of permanence and difference (Floch,

1994, p. 7). The poetic choreography of space sets up a dialectic synesthesia emblematic of the new multifaceted brand signifiers.

The increasing economic importance of aesthetics in the context of a financial institution creates symbolic capital. Paradoxically, the financial business almost disappears behind the exuberant design initiatives. Even though the transparent glass walls open up the branch to the streetscape, efforts have been made to erase any explicit reference to the financial transactions behind a spectacular stage-set of light, color, sound and smell. Thus, the apparent transparency of design elements in fact conceals the core business, making the surface more important than the depth, the play more attractive than the reality, the emotional response more pleasing than the cognitive reflection. Entertainment, differentiation, and seduction are the components of this new approach to architecture and “the criteria that make up personality – by shifting attention away from the identity of the object to the experience of the subject” (Klingmann, 2007, p. 19). In a consumer-driven retail environment, brands seek to build strong customer relationships by providing dazzling stimuli and by touching consumers’ hearts. In this new visual grammar, the design patterns create a motion that draws the visitors in from the street, orients them directly to the welcome desk, and dispatches them in a centrifugal movement to their respective offices. Through this dynamic field of perpetual motion, the subject experiences the movement, dynamism, and action of a fast-paced corporate environment. The signifying space design is concomitant with the signified corporate values of hardwork and effective guidance, thus instituting a direct link between architectural principles and managerial priorities.

4. Conclusion

Analysed through the lenses of semiotics, architectural space conception functions as a persuasive medium of representation. The semiotic codes of this signifying system formulate institutional poetics of authentic sensory experience. The salient properties of this venue combine the iconic signs of traditional bank architecture with new design components. Extrinsic to the conventional taxonomy of bank architecture, these signs build differentiated brand value, while experimenting with the architectural expression of various lifestyles. The ideological relationship thus established builds long-term reputation and cultural capital.

If Sonesson argues that the capital of the 21st century is located on the internet (Sonesson, 2004, p. 15), it is interesting to note that, to counteract precisely the competition from online banks and the increasing number of virtual financial transaction, traditional banks are seeking to re-emphasise the human communications systems of the boulevard and the café in an extended version. The new bank branch is open to sight, but also incorporates other senses that typically are not part of this system (such as smell, hearing and touch). The internet, on the contrary, is open to dialogue, but otherwise it is not as multi-sensory a medium as the described retail space. In the case of a globally-operating banking institution, the regained interest in original territories, both topological and ideological, testifies to the return to local cultural referents. In view of the bank’s high proportion of international clientele (40% are non-locals), this focus holds particular importance. In fact, French cultural heritage constitutes

in itself a prime branding device and by valorising its more than 100-year-old institution, the bank draws heavily on the positive connotations of French architecture.

5. Further research areas

Research could be extended into the exploration of diachronic axes to include a historical perspective of corporate architectural branding. A relevant approach would be to examine the evolution of iconic identifiers in their evolving sociocultural and economic context. Another research approach could be centered on a more complete account of the rhetorical figures present in architectural discourse that were omitted in this paper (expletion, anaphora, etc.). An alternative route to the semiotic exploration of architectural discourse would address the interrelatedness between aesthetics and ethics, i.e., between the politics of the image and managerial techniques. Finally, a semiotic exploration of workplace design could discuss the impact of space and the relationship between design structures and employee motivation.

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