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Investigation concerning the evolution of the term "comfort" in contemporary Alpine consumer architecture

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Abstract

The increase in the human conception of comfort is a central moment for any progressive process of civilisation. On the assumption that our society requires structural and ecological corrections – an ethical approach to comfort can provide possibilities to influence the system towards a more sustainable society. The aim of the current investigation is the definition of interdependencies between space and comfort. Under investigation are the needs of consumers as a functional aspect of the spatial, social and cultural context. With the aid of field studies, consumption areas are recorded and examined regarding their comfort offer. The aim of the research is to create a catalogue that documents the mechanisation degree, the contextual integration, the social environment, the scale, the global interdependence and finally the comfort offers of the compared alpine areas.

Keywords: comfort, consume, regional planning, sustainability

1 Background – if you pray, move your feet (African saving)

Every person develops a so-called comfort hierarchy. The more of our desires for comfort have been fulfilled, the more demanding the needs become. The needs that have already been fulfilled are taken for granted and are no longer recognized. The most comfortable situation is a limit that – although unattainable – is aspired to by mankind with incredible determination. The results of this attitude, aside from the incredible achievements of technological history, also include peculiar inventions such as leaf blowers, talking blood pressure meters – with the original German voice of the „health pope" Hademar Bankhofer, or robotic sheeps that tend to my lawn while I sip lemonade on the terrace.

The backdrop of pending global climate and economic collapse fundamentally challenges this unsustainable attitude. The question arises if and how comfort or discomfort need to be prioritized. Progress – or an increase of comfort – can only be legitimate and good, as long as no negative consequences occur for other population groups or future generations. A change of paradigm is unavoidable.

In the year 2004 the authors Donella and Denis L. Meadows released a 30-year update to their study published by MIT in 1972 entitled „The Limits to Growth" on the future of the world economy. In this edition the data was updated, slight modifications to the World3 computer model, which simulates resource consumption, were undertaken, and various scenarios were used to calculate possible developments from the year 2002 through 2100. The majority of the scenarios resulted in an

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excess of growth limits and collapse by the year 2100 at the latest. The continuation of business as usual as it has been conducted over the past 30 years would result in a collapse by the year 2030.

Even given the vigorous implementation of environmental protection and efficiency standards, this tendency can often only be lessened, but by no means prevented. Only using a simulation with a highly ambitious mixture of restriction of consumption, control of pollution emissions, and numerous additional measures it is possible to obtain a sustainable society with almost 8 billion people.

The terminologies used in the MIT study – „restriction" and „reduction" – contrast considerably to the generally accepted ideology of progress in modern society. According to the definition from Richard Sennett, all human progress is equivalent to a gain in comfort (Sennett 1996). The converse argument would be: every restriction or reduction of human comfort is synonymous to regression. In order to make this paradigm shift tangible it will be necessary to examine the environment surrounding the fulfillment of human comfort more closely.

2 Terms – origins and societal relevance of comfort

Human beings are able to mold their immediate surroundings according to their own ideas and needs. This phenomenon has occurred at an accelerated rate since the onsets of modern age, accompanied by a growing conception of material comfort. The spirituality of the medieval European society – largely produced by the church through „reverence" or strict hierarchies – has declined progressively into the background.

Climate change retrieves the forgotten spirits of measure, reverence, and morality from their dusty asylum and provokes the question whether an ethical society can also be obtained without religious conditioning. Are the rules governing the coexistence between man and nature that we thought to be outdated, more up-to-date than the rules of our enlightened society could ever be? The eternal laws that lie at the heart of the circle of life and have popularly been attributed to a cyclical self-sufficient human culture are experiencing a renaissance through the influence of global change.

In this context, the original literary meaning of the word „comfort" is significant. The original Latin roots from the term *fortis* can be translated with consolidation. But moreover the term comfort was already used within the English language in the 13th century meaning to provide consolation. While according to today's understanding comfort principally describes material amenities, consolation at that time had a primarily spiritual component. The fact that the term has been stretched to fit the modern era and our current comprehension of the world is provocative but logical at the same time. Like the belief in God, material joys can also console the soul.

Capitalism, which was established in the course of industrialization, fundamentally expands the economy from being non-profitable – as viewed by the national economy and by those who ascribed to physiocracy, as well as partially by the mercantilism of the Baroque Age – to being seemingly unlimited. The rapid economic

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growth generated vast wealth and prosperity of a growing middle class, which is expressed through an increase in free time. New leisure pursuits evolve as well as a society with a strong affinity towards comfort.

Prosperity developed new types of comfort, which produced new desires for even more prosperity and consequently an increased need for capitalism. Comfort – or in other words – consolation through material joys is the raw material of capitalism and the best argument for growth, as comfort – per definition – is a continually evolving term. What was considered comfortable yesterday is according to today's point of view under developed and antiquated.

3 Diagnoses – on the relationship between comfort and consumption

In the search for criteria evoking a shift of paradigm towards a sustainable society, the research examines the interfaces between the sales person and the consumer – the locations for the distribution of goods and services, the locations where modern individuals buy and sell. The term comfort is used as a framework for the evaluation of the chosen architectural typologies according to their potential sustainability.

Consumer spaces are places full of dynamics – places that constantly reinvent themselves as human life itself is constantly changing. Places that wish and have to surprise; consumer spaces are subject to strong pressure from competition. They are places that have had and will continue to have short half-lives as the process driving change, distribution, and renewal is being accelerated by digital trade platforms. These places are not necessarily appreciated, but they need to be sought out by the participants of the system, as they are the basis of the system. Only those places that reinvent themselves survive. For this reason consumer spaces are places with a magnetic attraction. One can speak of an evolutionary process of industrialized human beings or of an instinctive search, rejection, and rediscovery of these places. Our society rises and falls, grows and retracts, ages and reinvents itself within these places. The future of our species is decided here, but also the future of all fruits, grains, meats, furs, fossil fuels, fluids, perfumes – at large the future of everything we use and need for our lives and for our survival, sustainable or finite.

The capitalistic ideology of growth is personified in these places and is characterized by unlimited spatial expansion. Places of consumption are high, wide, fast, loud, and colorful. They seek presence in the city and, at the same time, confrontation with the city. They are everywhere – real and virtual. They are in our heads and influence our thinking and our actions. Consumption spaces interfere with everything and are stronger than all other manifestations of the city. The only thing they cannot withstand is stagnation, much like a static monetary market is equiv to standstill and collapse. Economics in its current form is depending inevitably on the flow of money – the blood in the veins of capitalism. Only then these places continue to move. Perhaps "economy" is just another term for life? The question arises what kind of life?

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In the following, several diagnoses will be presented to prove the substantive interdependence between comfort, consumption, and the economization of resources:

Diagnosis 1: Needs were and are created artificially (Anders 1956). Günther Anders describes this phenomenon as the second industrial revolution. This type of change is based on Anders' initial thesis that man – in contrast to other animals – possesses the structural historical ability to change and to differentiate ontologically. This freedom allows man to not always be identical with himself as the identity of human beings can change over time. According to Anders, this is the prerequisite for freedom and for the creation of our own world, that is, our environment, science, art, etc.

Conclusion: The second industrial revolution has not come to an end yet. The process of creation and reformulation of the needs of civilization is ebbing. The question occurs, which types of needs will be created in the future? Due to the structural and historical ability of human beings to change, we have in no way arrived at the end of this story. It will be crucial which paradigm is determining our future actions.

Human beings are constantly questioning the ecological relations, generally in order to control them. As sustainable ecological behavior demands the opposite, thus the implementation of the proclaimed paradigm shift occurs to be rather difficult.

Referring to spatial conditions one could claim that the human capability to change is utterly unecological as every context can be adapted accordingly. Evidence is given in two ways:

1. Human beings manipulate every context according to their personal needs.
2. Mobility upsets the ecosystem balance.

Evidently two positions are defined:

1. The city conceived as an ecosystem serving sorely the needs of human beings is unecological.
2. Mobility, which is anti-cyclical and non-territorial, is unecological, as existing systems are not taken into consideration.

Evidence is given, that the degree of needs is linked proportional to the size and complexity of the system itself. The larger and more complex a system is, the more complex are the consumer needs in order to act accordingly to the system. When the system inflates new dependencies are created, which in turn generate new desires. These are interrelated to the system itself, they disappear or change in relation to changes within the system. According to this thesis each human being incorporates the capacity to adapt any desire immediately, as most of them are imposed by the system itself. Nevertheless this attitude requires the separation from the system, or at least its reduction in size and complexity. I will respond to this particular issue in Chapter 4, discussing local supply and regional closed circle economy.

Diagnosis 2: Shopping architecture = an innovation factory.

Escalators, elevators, artificial light, showcases, music, or air conditioning are important prerequisites for the metamorphosis of consumer architecture into a mere

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shopping experience. Comfort and luxury have actively been used as a means to increase attractiveness and to emotionalize shopping. Shopping has become the most influential cultural phenomenon of modern societies through the utilization of comfort and luxury.

Diagnosis 3: Typologies in the shopping sector have shorter half-lives compared to other architectural typologies. A circumstance, to a certain degree caused by competitiveness and the tremendous race between businesses in order to supply their customers with comfort. Current tendencies toward restructuring originate from developments such as e-commerce and its propensity to increase scale and the mobility of consumers. Therefore, the changes in this sector are basically a competition between different business and sales concepts as well as their spatial implementation. Economic success or failure is – among other things – a spatial problem. This means that the future of our society is fundamentally based on the spaces in which we reside. At the moment, new resource priorities also imply a new space utilization model.

Diagnosis 4: Every inhabitant of an industrialized state has the opportunity to participate in economic circulation at each supply location and thereby to influence or to manipulate the chain of events. Again, here a positivist approach provides an alternative to the artificial production of "needs". Consumers have the choice and power to marginalize the importance of anticipated needs through unexpected consumption behavior.

4 Places – comparative studies in an Alpine consumption space

Spatial development and underlying economic growth are traced back to the rural exodus of the 19th century using selected typological and contextually representative architectural spaces, including both formal and informal spaces for consumption. In the following the focus is set on the influence of this phenomenon regarding the development of typologies in the inner-alpine area. At stake is the identification of interdependencies and connections between spaces for consumption and consumption behavior. Which role does comfort or technological conveniences of a building or setting play and in which way do they contribute to the creation of people's needs? How must or can shopping architecture look like when subjected to severe paradigm changes? In order to narrow the scope of this issue urban and rural spaces as well as the rapidly growing segment of e-commerce will be addressed.

Generally speaking two categories of comfort generated spatial settings are identified: places of intention and places of reaction and mediation. The first are places of production, of living, of entertainment, the latter are places of exchange, of traffic and of communication. Within recent years the focus of attention has notably turned towards places of reaction and mediation. In his essay "Großstadt Schweiz" Andrè Corboz constitutes a general shift from a static approach towards a more dy-

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namic approach. Urban settlements are conceived as places of exchange, traffic and communication – as places of infrastructure – rather than places of people, goods, real estates and services.

Assessing this thesis in reference to the area of examination – the inner-alpine region – a first assumption is that similar problems occur as in other European regions. Historic spaces suffer from severe structural problems, whereas situations, which can be described as "in-between", determine our scope of action. At the same time both types merge. Places of commerce become places of leisure, places of traffic become places of commerce, and places of leisure become places of infrastructure, serving both, mobility and consumption. For example motorway service areas mutate into Tyrolean entertainment centers, whereas shopping centers are transformed into places of leisure.

If it comes to a valuation of the sustainability of either types, from an architectural point of view places of intention are given preference to places of reaction and mediation – certainly dining room, sleeping room or places of production in general are prioritized over shopping malls or airports. A thought which seams to be obvious and simple at first, but I believe it is more complex in the end.

Within the pre-industrialized self-containing society, the described differentiation didn't exist, as places of production, of communication and of leisure were congruent. Change occurred only due to the division of labor and the increase of comfort. Consequently future actions should aim to reconnect the differently programmed places. Here, I am not referring to structures, which due to its simple size can provide everything, but rather to specific places, which serve the needs of a small target group. These local conditions should require a low level of communication and infrastructures as well as a moderate number of carefully implemented programs in order to create a more sustainable society.

Of course future concepts of supply can refer to models of self-containment, but nevertheless it is inevitable to develop new concepts, as 8 million people won't be able to survive purely on the basis of regional self-containment. New types of landscape need to be invented, which are not mono-functional, nor anachronistic, but small, nearby and are developed carefully in relation to the existing environment. Here the current notion of recycling – well established within the commodity market – could also inform future spatial negotiations. This intended transformation of the landscape can be achieved in two different ways:

1. Reactive – the ecological, social and economic crisis provokes re-allocations on many levels.
2. Active – the interplay of numerous different measures, as for example real costing in the transport sector, cradle to cradle, local added-value, the principle of subsidiarity, reduction of mono-functional settlements, avoidance of infrastructural redundancies, consolidation of local supply, development of high quality public spaces within rural and urban neighborhoods, education measures, energy turnaround and most important stringent legislative framework conditions.

How could now spaces of consumption and specifically spaces of local supply – shopping architectures – look like being subjected to the proclaimed paradigm shift?

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To which degree is the envisaged aim of securing basic human needs while considering the ecological necessities an architectural and spatial problem?

Accordingly the research is focusing on the identification of spatial qualities creating personal needs. The examination of spaces of consumption within the inner-alpine region offers two advantages:

1. Due to the specific typography of the alpine region, with its narrow valleys, relations between center and periphery can be examined as a linear and thus less complex system. Interdependencies and interrelations can be identified more clearly.
2. Within the inner-alpine regions (Typ 3-region according to Werner Bätzing) (Bätzing 2005) – specifically within the Southern Alps – transformations of the consumer sector occurred delayed; a consequence of the regional development policy, as for example in South Tyrol, as well as of the geographical conditions, hence its economic peripheral position. Accordingly findings towards transformation processes at different stages can be deducted and compared from the current situation.

Furthermore a peculiar phenomenon occurs in villages located within regions of alpine tourism, the additional target group of temporary consumers can be activated. Thus tourism communities are functionally connected to larger agglomerations outside the alpine regions, which positively affects the local supply market but evokes negative ecological effects. Referring to the differentiation of the alpine economy introduced by Werner Bätzing, the following five case studies were identified:

1. Local supply of goods and services: rural consumption within a grown village center – downtown Mals/Vinschgau. The village of Mals on the one hand serves as a representative example for rural supply – which can be transferred to urban neighbourhoods as well – and on the other hand as projection surface for all expected outcomes of the intended cases studies. Which influences are unfolded by interregional shopping malls, urban agglomerations and the e-commerce sector upon the build fabric of Mals?
2. Consumption of the "homo automobilis": mass consumption in a regional/interregional shopping center – DEZ/Innsbruck;
3. Consumption of free space: influence of agglomerations outside the alpine region on recreational alpine landscapes – relation between metropolitan area of Munich and the Alps;
4. Synergetic or parasitic consumption: mobile consumption in highway rest areas, airports, train stations, museums, etc. – rest areas along the Brenner highway;
5. Electronic consumption: e-commerce. This new platform for consumption no longer permits a clear differentiation through superimposition as – parallel to the virtual space – every conceivable physical space can be expanded upon. Economic interests are able to reach and engage consumers through technology and the persuasive argument for an increase in comfort. They can do this at every given time in people's everyday lives making the consumer available at all times and everywhere.

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All chosen cases studies are examined according to the general assumption that any spaces and forms of consumption inform each other and thus tend to generate overcapacities.

Different methodological approaches are conducted within the case studies: The existing conditions are documented, mapped, and evaluated with local actors within a participatory process. Parallel a survey was conducted to explore the consumption behavior of the local population in Mals. For example organizational diagrams were used to evaluate purchasing decisions in relation to the existing consumer environments. Maps are produced showing the distribution of programs as well as specific local phenomena aiming to inform future planning decisions. Montages conceiving the main street in the village as a "grown shopping mall" are analyzed, following the aim to detect potential zones of architectural intervention in order to generate high quality public spaces.

Consequently the position of the local supply will be strengthened strategically in comparison to interregional suppliers – commercial shopping malls – which referring to their precisely orchestrated spatial arrangements leave nothing to chance.

Nevertheless the promoted local conditions are not to be misinterpreted as an unprogressive position against any technological, cultural and economical external influence, nor solely to be considered according to issues of sustainability, but moreover suggest to (re)-discover the potential qualities and comforts related to asymmetric, autistic and surprising local conditions. Similar to complex global systems innovation is essential to these local conditions in order to enfold its various unique and specific qualities.

5 Results – a short story for the shopping developer in the post-global era

Referring to the diagnoses in Chapter 3 different models of supply with goods and services are designed and simulated or in the best case implemented within the case studies. The results of this research project will serve as the basis for a "short story for the shopping developer in the post-global era". It will address the "expected" or desired half-lives of the consumption forms compared as well as the topics of morality and excess, farewell performances, strange building materials, and beauty.

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