Aspects of Identity in Contemporary Architectural Space

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Abstract: Starting with a theoretical approach, the presentation will focus on the new environment which we shape in order to respond to our newly born needs. Buildings do not focus anymore on cultural or local identity, instead they become an interactive environment that can be controlled and reshaped through a touchscreen; it is a sophisticated environment, but at the same time, it lacks identity – in the traditional sense of the word. We are designing intelligent buildings, which are more likely to focus on inventing their own fictional identity, rather than on the context. These multifunctional buildings, which host a wide range of functions – starting from coffee shops up to airports – are designed in such a way that from the moment that you set foot in them, they take over the control. The building actually decides for you.

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Introduction

Identities, cultures, nations are the unique product of a historical, geographical and political context, with strong roots which define their people. Or do they? How strong are in fact these roots? Globalisation has proved that they might be more fragile than we thought. Today we are more flexible, we go where our job tells us to and we come to realise that we are spending more time on planes than at home. We are shaping a new environment, which will allow us to be better connected and more efficient, but, without realising it, this new environment is changing us as well. We are re-becoming nomads, global nomads without roots – thus the concept of identity is changing, too.

Identity is a word which we hear very frequently today, especially in the context of *global versus local*. Identity is in fact a multi-layered concept, it has many "faces"; for example, we can talk about a personal identity, about identity theft, about *changing* an identity, a social identity, national identity, or cultural identity. Each of these layers implies a unique set of rules, restrictions and liberties, of symbols and meanings, which define the concept of *identity* and its specific language – a coding system that is unique for each and everyone of them. Identity is an abstract concept that unifies and reinforces a community, acting as a web made of common values, thoughts and meanings. The members of a community assume their own *identitary* way in which they relate to the environment, to the context they live in and, as well, a particular manner in which they relate to the others. Thus, when talking about space, context or environment, we cannot assert that they have an identity of their own (not besides a geographical or geological one, or one that has to do with shape), but that the identity is *projected* onto them. By

assimilating a particular space, the community imprints messages and codified meanings into the environment – it is the process through which a space identifies itself with the culture that inhabits it. Thus, identity is rather a *quality* of the space and it lacks a physical form. Its survival depends on the existence of a group of people that are willing to assume all the restrictions and liberties which define an identity, as well as the symbols and meanings that define the particular environment associated with their identity. When this community disappears or when its members decide that their need for such a structure does not exist anymore, the identity loses its purpose and it simply ceases to exist or it is forced to change, to transform itself. This is why *identity* presupposes a certain fragility. Today, in the multicultural context of globalisation, we sense even stronger how fragile the concept of identity really is. Cultures are no longer restricted to a particular space, which means that more cultures can overlap or even collide in a single space. Thus, unprecedented situations emerge, when such sets of values, symbols and meanings, which define a culture, are amazingly easily set aside, transformed or replaced by stronger ones – which are insensitive and even aggressive to *otherness*.[1]

There is, of course, a more cynical, postmodern viewpoint, which states that *all* identities are mere constructions, theoretical structures. Moreover, this is in fact true, if we were to look at the issue objectively: one could argue that, in a multi-cultural context, place-based, unidimensional and uniform identities are outdated and they struggle to survive. Therefore our society needs to "invent" another type of identity or – if we were to borrow Doreen Massey's[2] succession of thoughts and apply it to identities – we could conclude that identities might be seen as *processes*. If we were to define the concept of identity as being a network of social relationships, experiences and meanings, we could see it as an evolving entity, developing into something new each time one of its parameters changes. It is a new image – one much more adapted to our postmodern condition. Consequently, identities are not bound anymore to territories or withheld within certain limits, instead they manifest themselves each time their corresponding parameters intersect themselves in a situation which displays *the need* for such an identity to manifest itself.

Identity and its Fragility

In order to exemplify[3] how fragile identity is or, to put it more bluntly, to show the fictional character of this construct we call *identity*, we will examine the town of Júzcar, in Spain. Júzcar is a small community known for the fact that it is one of the "White Towns of Andalusia", and whose identitary characteristic is the fact that all the buildings

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[1] Amos Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment – A nonverbal Communication Approach* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), 11−34.

[2] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 154−155.

[3] Alasdair Fotheringham, "Spanish village happy to be left feeling blue by Smurf – Residents in Juzcar vote to keep paint job after tourist boom", *The Independent*, 19 December 2011, accessed September 13, 2012, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/spanish-village-happy-to-be-left-feeling-blue-by-smurfs-6279106.html; Katy Perry, "Smurf movie stunt sees Spanish town of Juzcar covered entirely in blue – A Spanish village has been painted blue for the launch of The Smurf movie", *Metro*, 10 June 2011, accessed September 13, 2012, http://www.metro.co.uk/weird/865896-smurf-movie-stunt-sees-spanish-town-of-juzcar-covered-entirely-in-blue

are whitewashed. Júzcar is one of those small secluded pueblos, which conserved a very specific type of atmosphere – that of calm, lazy days with a warm light, which casts sharp shadows on its white walls. However, during the summer of 2011, all the buildings in this little town of 220 souls, including the church and the grave stones (!), were painted blue, as part of the advertising campaign of the film "The Smurfs"[1]. At that time the film company was looking at the "White Towns of Andalusia" to choose one of its pueblos in order to turn it into a life-size Smurf village. Júzcar was the one chosen and, even though the film company claimed that, the impact would be minimal and only temporary –namely six months – the consequences were actually much greater.[2] In fact a true Smurf rush started. The residents, seizing the opportunity, took advantage of the spotlight and embraced the new *imported* identity: they even started dressing up as the characters in the film, while Mayor David Fernandez Tirado stated that people starting calling him "Papa Smurf".[3] Eventually, they started organising Smurf painting competitions, a Smurf market – which ran six days a week – and much more. Even the church got involved as it started organising Smurf theme weddings. Although the film company promised to repaint the buildings to their original state, the community voted 141 in favour and only 33 against keeping the colour blue.[4] It should be noted that six months after painting the houses blue, 80,000 tourists visited the town, while prior to this event the town registered an average of 300 tourists *per year*.[5]

When analysing the example of Júzcar, the first word that comes to mind, is *fragility*: the fragility of its former identity, the fragility of a particular type of life, the fragility of the built environment. However, more important is the fact that in this case we are dealing with a peculiar situation: the town of Júzcar, because of its isolation, its secludedness, managed to function as a homogenous, uniform community inhabiting a more or less well-defined territory; thus succeeding in preserving its identity. This identity was taken for granted – implying a certain type of behaviour, a certain type of social contact and a certain way of relating to the environment. Thus, the film company's intervention shook the balance of this fragile micro-culture. Changing the colour of the buildings triggered a chain reaction, culminating with a *replacement* of identity – a new, fictional, imagined identity. There are two interesting features about this particular case. The first is the fact that the initial identity had an introverted, inward-looking character, and its isolation prevented it from a natural or organic development. Consequently, in time, its balance became more and more fragile. Then, the second and more striking aspect is the fact that the "new" identity was not a choice, it was more or less artificially imposed upon the inhabitants. Of course, one could argue that all identities are basically fictional. And if we were to look at things from this perspective, it is true: an identity can be defined as being an artificial or even random set of values that guide a particular community. The big difference between such an identity and what happened in the case of Júzcar, is the fact that even if identities can be

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[1] *The Smurfs*, director: Raja Gosnell, writers: J. David Stem, David N. Weiss, Jay Scherick, David Ronn, production: Columbia Pictures, Sony Pictures Animation, Kerner Entertainment, 2011
[2] "Juzcar- The Spanish Village that Voted itself Blue", *Kuriositas*, 19 December 2011, accessed October 18, 2012, http://www.kuriositas.com/2011/12/juzcar-spanish-village-that-voted.html
[3] Perry, "Smurf movie stunt sees Spanish town of Juzcar covered entirely in blue"
[4] Fotheringham, "Spanish village happy to be left feeling blue by Smurf"
[5] Ibid.

considered to be artificially manufactured, they are answering to a certain need – a particular need of a well-defined community. Therefore, even if we accept that all identities are manufactured, we also have to accept that they are custom-made for a specific context. In Júzcar, on the other hand, the blue identity was not *the* answer, but *an* answer – an artificial and fictional one, which was actually the reason behind the behavioural change of the residents. They ended up living a fairy-tale life in which they are characters of the Smurf village. This is maybe the most alarming aspect, namely the fact that the residents traded their own lives for the ones of the characters in the motion picture. The choice is even more meaningful from a psychological and architectural point of view. Thus, in the light of these facts, where do we stand? we, as members of *a* community; we, as designers of spaces and places. In any case, the only thing that can be proven is that identity is extremely fragile.

Identity in the Global Context

Globalisation does not necessarily imply cancelling (local) identities, but rather it involves a shift in the *concept* of identity, a change in its structure. Life in a multicultural environment involves juxtaposing several cultural contexts into a single space. We can draw a parallel, for example, with a market hall where everyone speaks at once in different languages.[1] This does not mean that the functional identity of the market disappeared; it is still in place, just that everyone uses it differently; they have a different way of relating to its space, while the meaning of the concept of *market* is more important or less important depending on its role in each of the cultures. The same principle applies for any (global) space: all cultures claim their *space*, their meanings, and their symbols. Adapting the designing process to this way of viewing space, meant shifting the paradigm; and instead of designing an identitary space for a certain community or culture, the designers are creating spaces which can become the background for any type of activity or cultural behaviour. In fact, this implies the transformation of the physical space into a *virtual* one, in which, through *technology*, it is possible to overlap multiple cultural environments. The most basic example of this paradigm shift is the small visual, cultural, intellectual or musical bubble, which we create around us every time we connect through an mp3 player, a mobile phone, a camera, etc. to "our world".[2] Because of technology, which was introduced on a large scale in architecture, we actually encourage the isolation of each individual in such a bubble, at the expense of the socialising act. Cultural identity, community identity loses its importance or shifts to an individual set of values, now part of a global system. The spatial paradigm shift is also obvious in the way in which we conceive our design themes: libraries become hybrid libraries, museums and exhibition halls become cultural malls, airports become transit lounges; buildings are becoming interactive blobs,[3] while architects do not design anymore in a cultural or local system, but they are part of a global one. Architects are not designing place anymore, instead they are designing *processes* – to use Massey's term.

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[1] Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment*, 85
[2] Marc Augé, *Non-Places – an Introduction to Supermodernity* (London, Broklyn: Verso, 2006), viii.
[3] Tooraj Sadeghi and Fereshteh Bijandi, "The Effect of Shopping Mall Environment on Shopping Behavior under a Model", *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Reserch* 8 (2011), accessed September 13, 2012, http://www.idosi.org/mejsr/mejsr8(3)11/4.pdf

Therefore, space – the actual built environment – *changes*. We can find an almost tangible link between the transformation of the concept of identity and its effects upon the physical space. The new multicultural context gives birth to the space of the "nomad" man – the phrase Rem Koolhaas[1] uses when talking about people who are always on the move, actual real life globetrotters – which is no longer a *place* in the phenomenological sense defined by Christian Norberg Schulz[2] or Martin Heidegger.[3] We no longer invest the place with *character* through the process of dwelling; we no longer assimilate a place nor do we *identify* with it; but, we rather *pass* through spaces – this is the type of environment which Rem Koolhaas calls "the generic city".[4] Still, the postmodern space is probably the most heterogeneous space yet: it can be condensed or diluted; it can fold more *places* into one *space* – as is the case of Michel Foucault's "heterotopias*"*[5]; and it can range from Koolhaas's "generic city" to Kenneth Frampton's "critical regionalism".[6]

In this very colourful mix, Marc Augé distinguishes a particular kind of places, namely transit spaces, or, as he calls them, *non-places*, precisely because he defines them as being the opposite of the *place*: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place".[7] The buildings which fit best this description are airports, hotels, railway stations, fast-food restaurants, or, as Krakauer[8] remarks, a space of an anonymous life. This means that the traditional idea of a place has become questionable. In this context, Martin Drenthen's remark is very pertinent: "We use cultures of place – like (reinvented?) folklore […], local history, and 'information pavilions, signposting, treasure hunts along tree species and ponds with half domesticated otters' […] – to provide us with a temporary feeling of meaning, but in the end most of us will indeed remain (to some degree at least) strangers, visitors, aliens to the landscape. […] *If* Augé's diagnosis has some credibility, then clinging to the ideal of 'good old' place attachment could eventually only result in the creation of artificial 'landscapes of memory', that is: museum pieces, ironical look-alikes of places long gone. Instead of 'grounding' our identity in place, we would actually draw back into a would-be identity and as a result project our desires onto a landscape and thus create non-places ourselves"[9].

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[1] Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S.M.L.XL. – Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large* (New York: Monacelli Press,1995), 1252.

[2] Christian Norberg – Schulz, *Genius Loci – Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publication, 1980), 5.

[3] Martin Heidegger, "…Poetically Man Dwells..." in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 221-229.

[4] Koolhaas and Mau, *S.M.L.XL.*, 1252

[5] Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias,* in Foucault.info, http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html (accesed June 28, 2012)

[6] Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsen: Bay Press, 1983), 16-30.

[7] Augé, *Non-Places,* 63

[8] Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space – Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000), 72

[9] Martin Drenthen, "Ecological restoration and place attachement: Emplacing non-places?", in *Environmental Values* 18 (2009): 285-312

Hence, not only do we design non-places, but, furthermore, by "clinging" to place attachment we turn existing places into non-places, too!

In such a continuous space – an endless chain of *non-places* -, which crosses numerous time zones, the nomad man needs an anchoring point. He needs a *coping mechanism*. In fact, *identity*, in its original form, can be seen as a coping mechanism, namely a way in which each member can be assured that when communicating with others or with the environment, he will receive a message, which makes sense and has meaning. In the global context, *similarity* is another type of coping mechanism. Similarity can be seen, in fact, as another dimension of identity, which helps the individual fight against the stress provoked by the never-ending need to adapt to a new set of rules. *Cultural shock* is precisely this state of anxiety, which we exhibit when we react or behave in a certain way specific to our own culture, and the answer we receive does not correspond to the action-reaction pattern we are used to. This fact produces confusion and the incapacity to make a decision. In such a context similarity, the warranty of obtaining the expected response to which we are used to, can actually be a moment of psychological relaxation. The architectural translation of similarity is the environment of *chain businesses*. For example it has been noted[1] that fast-food restaurants impose an almost ritual type of behaviour with an astonishing degree of behavioural uniformity, that implies indeed a minimum effort in establishing a relationship with this type of environment. Thus, similarity becomes a new layer when defining the concept of identity.

One of the goals of these multinational companies or chain businesses is to establish for themselves *an identity*. However, this identity – or brand – unlike community-based identities, is not the product of a necessity, it is an advertising tool focused on selling the product, on selling the experience. People feel the need to *belong*, to be part of a group, and share an idea or an ideal – basically, to have an identity. Therefore, this is what multinational companies sell: *they respond to this need of belonging*. Nevertheless, these identities have a completely different structure compared to what we would call a cultural, national or social identity. The latter type of identity springs out of *a necessity*; it has very specific cultural and social characteristics; it acts like an anchor defining a certain group of people – although usually aware of its relativity and fragility. The former type, the brand, is *invented*; it is *a fictional identity* or a *brand*. If we were to follow Marc Augé's chain of thoughts, we could call this type of identity a *non-identity* because it has no cultural or social anchor and it does not define a particular group of people. Nevertheless, these non-identities do fit in very well with our postmodern context. They are defining themselves as a new type of culture, the culture of consumerism, a truly – and maybe even the only – global culture. The consumers end up identifying themselves with the product and, by buying it, the product becomes their *identity*.

What Does Disneyland Teach Us

A similar theoretical path can be applied to the type of *space* or *environment* these chain businesses use. Their identity is also imprinted into the spaces they generate. The certainty of always finding the same type of environment, each time we cross their

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[1] Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment,* 78

threshold, is triggering a certain type of behaviour on behalf of the buyer – who comes to identify himself with the brand, with the identity of the company.

Among these spaces, theme parks and shopping centres are a special category, because they have a very well defined enclosure and they are easily monitored, too. Such spaces are the perfect setting for analysing the cause-effect relationships regarding the behaviour of the visitors, thus enabling the designers always to readjust their concept and the *identity* of the place to fit better *the desires* of (potential) buyers. This ensures the success of these types of environments – they always give you "what you desire" (not to be confused with "what you need"!). While at the same time, designers are developing ways to control or induce a certain type of response.

In an amusement park, the social norms are not as restrictive, the visitors are more inclined to accept, adopt or try out new behaviours or situations. Because of their playful character, because they bring fantasy into the real world, people are more inclined to experience a different type of event, other than their daily routine. Precisely because of this, theme parks can be considered experimental environments scale 1:1, for testing and analysing different hypotheses about the way in which behaviour can be influenced through design. Esther Sternberg[1] presents a case study on Walt Disney, considered a visionary in this field. His aim was to create an environment in which people could plunge into a fantasy world, which could take them back to their childhood – a time of hope and happiness – as an alternative to the daily stress and anxiety. Disney worked for the "Disneyland" project together with some of his animation and film specialists, who tried to apply their knowledge from animation to this project. The whole concept is based on a rather simple assumption, namely that fairy-tales and classical mythology derive from some fundamental, ancestral associations, which are placed at the basis of our species and are related to our *survival instinct*. For example, fear of the anxiety caused by disorientation and the unknown or the impulse to flee when facing danger. All of these are valid for each of us and, at the same time, they are predictable reactions. Walt Disney's *imagineers*[2] based their design of "Disneyland" precisely on these reactions. The environment is founded on an illusion, a trick, but, as a member of the initial imagineers team, John Hench, demonstrated: imagined stress can induce reactions that are just as strong as those provoked by real, imminent danger. Hence, a sudden and unexpected change is one of the brain's most powerful stress triggers. Hench used this artifice in order to prepare the entrance into another world – into *Disney's land*. Thereby, the visitor feels this shift, not only visually, but also viscerally. Any memory is stronger and more intense, when, not one, but all of our senses are involved, and especially when we experience powerful feelings.[3] By contrast, this fright or state of induced anxiety emphasises the state of calm, which follows. This alternation between states of stimulation, excitement and calm keep the visitor's interest awake and avoid boredom. These are the main principles, which stood at the basis of the conceptual structure of the park.

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[1] Esther M. Sternberg, *Healing Places: The Science of Place and Well-Being* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 129-138.
[2] This is the name which was used for the members of Walt Disney's team, a mixture between imagination and engineering, Sternberg, *Healing Places,* 129-138.
[3] John Zeisel, *Inquiry by Design – Environment / Behavior / Neuroscience in Architecture, Interiors, landscapes and Planning* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 148

Disney intuitively used several space structuring principles, which Lynch[1] would only describe approximately ten years later, namely a spatial structure based on *landmarks* and *paths* – whose directions are marked by certain cues or "wienies", as Disney's team named them.[2] These wienies are exciting cues, which attract and incite the public to walk towards them. The name is derived from the hot dog stands on stadiums, which become some sort of focal points that attract buyers. Unlike these small inciting cues (popcorn, sweets or souvenir stands) – according to Disney's team – landmarks have to have certain characteristics: they should be large enough so that they can be noticed from a distance, they should contrast with their background so that they are easily perceived, they should evoke positive memories or associations so that the visitor will choose to walk towards them, and they should be memorable.[3] Disney picked out these characteristics based on his experience as an ambulance driver during the First World War in France, when he had to find a way to orient himself and cope with the unfamiliar space of old European towns. During the same period, he came to the conclusion that people are fascinated by castles: usually they are associated with fairy-tales, stories, with certain images, desires and dreams; actually with what could be called *a romantic atmosphere*. This is why Disney decided that the main landmark, the major attraction of the park should be the image of a castle built on top of a hill. This becomes the focus of most viewpoints throughout the park and it acts as an incentive and as a *mnemonic device*, convincing people that it is worth walking all the way up to the top. This castle is actually the main element, *the landmark,* around which the entire park is structured and against which the visitor can always check their position in space. Through this artifice, the visitor will no longer experience that uncomfortable feeling of being lost or disoriented.

The "Disney experience" starts form the main square with a *festive* atmosphere. This fact is extremely relevant, precisely because this type of atmosphere is capable of *changing the psychological mood*. This is the mechanism which triggers a certain type of behaviour, and which, later on, is constantly reinforced by the presence of the wienies. Actually, the main idea of the entire amusement park is to offer a pleasant alternative to the daily reality, an alternative that should entice you to return. The square continues with the "Main Street", for which Disney used as an inspiration source the image and the memory he had of the *atmosphere* of an early 20th century Midwest main street. It is interesting to note that Disney's Main Street is not (necessarily) a *reproduction* of a real street, but rather it revives a certain kind of context: namely the one of a calm, lazy summer day on a dusty street – actually the perfect setting for the beginning of a story. This street is sprinkled with visual, auditory and olfactory stimuli, which incite the visitor to move on forward. For example, many shops sell fudge, which most visitors associate with their childhood flavours. In order to emphasise this stimulus, Disney's team designed fans, which would scatter the smell of fudge. As a result, Disneyland is still registering the highest sales of fudge worldwide. At the end of the street, in order to keep the visitors' interest alive, the designers offer a wide range of alternatives, each having several wienies spread around for enticing them. In order to

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[1] Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Massachusettes: MIT Press: 1960), 46-83.
[2] Sternberg, *Healing Places,* 133.
[3] Ibid., 133-136.

maximise the visual attraction, the settings built by Disney's team make use of light, sound and movement in order to ensure the passing from one scene of the story to the other. This type of effect was imported from cinema and it is called "cross-dissolve",[1] a technique through which a scene blends gradually into the next. In the three dimensional space this blending is done by preparing the moment of passage from one frame to the other with the help of sounds, smells – which enhance the visual stimuli. In order to complete and improve the experience, at the same time, cues from the previous setting are being turned off. This shift is designed in such a way that the visitor does not even realise that the scene has changed until he reaches the destination point. This alternation between a comfortable state and anxiety for the unknown, and then, again, of calm, give the experience rhythm and maintain the interest awake. Amazingly, this is done without a word, with no verbal cue or any obligation to follow a certain path. Everything is suggested through the cues embedded in the environment. The environment "speaks" and even decides for the visitor which path should be taken.

Walt Disney's success produces a paradigm shift in space design, especially in the commercial and entertainment sector. His idea of practically selling an illusion, a story, *a fiction* lets the buyer's imagination run wild and allows him to become any character he chooses to. *The visitor can be anybody for a day* – this is the *identity* that Disneyland chooses to sell. This experience is what attracts people and makes them come back. Disney managed to identify and take advantage of *a desire* – being part of a dream world, of something beyond our daily routine – a desire that develops during the childhood years and sticks with us throughout our entire life.

The Psychology Behind Mall Design
Simultaneously to Walt Disney's world, during the same period, another building type was being developed in the United States of America, namely the *mall* or the shopping centre. The '50s, in the United States of America, are very much influenced by the presence of the automobile. It is the period during which the life of Americans revolves around the car and everything is being done out of or beside a car. This situation facilitated the birth of the *first consumption society* in the world. Consequently, the recipe for this new building type automatically included the presence of the car.[2] The mall is a specific type of shopping centre, which combines a certain set of characteristics. Firstly, it is a self-sufficient building type – in a way, it behaves just as an amusement park, in the sense that it is a very clearly enclosed space, with strict rules, and it is a very carefully monitored environment, too. Then, secondly, the mall wants to reproduce inside the *illusion* of a city, or, to be more precise, the main street of the city's commercial area. This is its brand, or *fictional identity*. Just as the theme park wants to reproduce an imaginary fairy-tale world, the mall wants to reproduce the atmosphere of the downtown area, replicating and "improving" it, by making it more accessible by car. Thirdly, it is an extremely *controlled* environment: this building type is based on the invention of the air conditioning, thus, it becomes immune to bad weather conditions. At the same time, this strict control is being used for the visitors as well, namely by the way

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[1] Ibid., 141-142.
[2] Dana Vais, "Cultura mallului" (Mall culture), *Korunk* 5 (2009), accessed September 13, 2012, http://www.korunk.org/?q=ro/node/11212

in which the commercial centre is structured: the layout is designed on purpose just as a maze, so that the visitor has a limited number of choices, following a pre-established path.[1] The main feature of the shopping centre – and of the amusement park, too – is the fact that it is always monitoring moods, reactions and actions, so that it can constantly redesign its environment, its strategies and cues in order to modulate the behaviour of the visitors with one goal in mind: convincing them to shop.

Victor Gruen conceived the '50s mall as a catalyser for suburban development. This type of development was necessary from a demographical point of view, but, at the same time, the speed with which it evolved, led to the overnight emergence of communities which were not able to coagulate in order to emanate an identitary character on their own. This is why, as in the example of the town of Júzcar, the identity was *imported*, meaning that the mall duplicated an area of the initial city in a fictional manner and projected it as well onto the community. Placed in the vicinity of the city, through its complementary services (restaurants, banks, cinemas, sport facilities, postal office, pharmacies, etc., all in a carefully balanced percentage in order to keep the visitor's interest awake, just as in the case of Disneyland), the mall becomes *the landmark* of the area – a catalyser which attracts potential developers for residential complexes and office spaces. Thus, just as a real city centre, the mall became during the '50s and '60s the boost for the suburbanisation phenomenon.[2]

The second stage, during the '80s, brought with itself a shift in the concept of the mall. The postmodern world, in which the concept of the suburb is already outdated, needs a new image, a reinvention of the mall. The new image offered by Jon Jerde[3] was that of "showbiz". At this moment the influence of the entertainment world was at its peak – Walt Disney's true legacy. *This* mall is no longer just a shopping centre; it becomes an *amusement centre*. The commercial aspect falls into the background, while the *experience* provided just by visiting the mall, becomes its main aspect. The net area of commercial spaces is largely decreased when compared with Gruen's alternative; this new layout is focusing more on the scenography of "public" spaces, on extravaganza and on an "out of this world" experience. Thus, it temporarily replaces reality with an entertainment world. The malls begin to organise events, concerts, exhibitions, even book launches, competing more and more with the centre of the city. Unlike it, the mall is capable of infinitely redefining its identity and putting on a new face every day and it can become quite aggressive to other forms of identity.

The mixture between commercial spaces and entertainment spaces can be felt also in the layout. The accesses do not always coincide with the exits, the vertical circulation nodes are separated so that the customers cannot go down the same way they went up. The elevators and escalators are separated, and, from time to time, they even have their direction of movement reversed. Therefore, the entire structure becomes more and more like a maze. The mall is a hallucinating and bewildering world, in which everything is carefully directed, so that one will pass among as many temptations as possible. The decision-making capacity is reduced even further: when designing a mall,

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[1] Dana Vais, *Global şi local în arhitectura contemporană – teorie anul II – note de curs* (Global and local in contemporary architecture) (Cluj-Napoca: U. T. Press, 2011), 166-169.
[2] Vais, *Global şi local în arhitectura contemporană*, 167
[3] Vais, "Cultura mallului"

the planners use highly refined ways to determine changes in behaviour and in leading the customer on a certain pre-established path. Not even the manner of display is left to chance: the windows or the front areas never display products of strict necessity, because then the buyer would have no reason for entering the shop. They actually display products which could be bought *on impulse*. The window has *a mnemonic role* in the sense that it increases the chance for a weak behaviour – meaning that the public would be more susceptible to surrender to the stimuli.[1] This "new" mall uses space in excess, so that it can sell the experience of buying![2]

Yet, why do malls attract so many people? How do they influence our decisions? This phenomenon has been called "the Gruen Transfer".[3] The term refers to the moment when a buyer enters a mall and finds himself in the middle of a maze-like-structure, which induces the buyer to lose his control and weakens his decision making ability. This is the result of a psychological setting aimed at disorienting people. It is based on stimulating the senses through sounds, smells, colours, lighting, temperature and interior design. The first visible effect is that walking speed slows down, the muscles relax, and the individual forgets why he came and is tempted to shop on impulse.[4]

The concept of the mall is based on a very well planned setting which uses strong lights, warm colours (yellow, red, orange), loud music with an intense tempo, sometimes even mirth-provoking gas. All these are orchestrated so that the buyer focuses his energy and attention on the act of shopping. The buyer is cut off from reality and the passage of time. Mall buildings are usually opaque, natural light does not reach inside them, thus we hardly perceive the passing of time or the influence of weather conditions. The more scenographic the display is, the more probable that the individual will see, desire and buy the product. For example, there is a case study investigating IKEA stores. The IKEA concept is unique in its way, it uses the idea of having different spaces designed as the rooms of a home, laid out on a pre-established path. The path is very clear and cannot be cut short. The paths that shorten the way are very well hidden and disguised, practically invisible to the visitor – who has no choice but to follow the imposed path. The idea was inspired by zoo parks. This alternative type of display, which uses cubicles instead of traditional shelf displays, has the advantage of showing different instances of how the products can be used, thus stimulating the imagination of the buyer, provoking him to buy on impulse products which he had no intention of buying before![5]

"Mall culture" is redefining our identity by becoming the characteristic of today's consumption society – a society based on *here and now*, on present experiences, anaesthetising and substituting reality, and the need of affiliation to a community, a culture or a social environment. This is a new type of identity – an identity truly postmodern in character, as it is impossible to link it or to identify it with one place or one environment; an identity more relative than ever.

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[1] Burrhus Frederic Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 110.
[2] Vais, "Cultura mallului"
[3] "What does 'The Gruen Transfer' mean?" ABC 1, accessed September 13, 2012, http://www.abc.net.au/tv/gruentransfer/faq.htm
[4] "The Gruen Transfer"
[5] Ahargrave, "The Psychology of Shopping" *biz/ed,* March 14, 2005, accessed September 13, 2012 http://www.bized.co.uk/current/leisure/2004_5/140305.htm

This entertainment feature expands rapidly, practically invading all public building types: museums, libraries, airports, hospitals, schools; *all start to behave like malls*. Our environments are changing; we are transforming them by projecting onto them the desire of clinging to an identity, without really having one. Thus, museum visitors, researchers, patients, students, all become *consumers* – consuming a fictional identity – *a brand* – and by buying it, they identify themselves with the product.

Conclusions

A very important aspect of this theoretical construct was to analyse the way in which the concept of *identity* evolved in time. We showed that the concept of *identity* is itself an artificial construct – an imposed set of rules, norms of behaviour and a network of meanings. Nevertheless, the most important aspect – even if we were to define the concept from the eclectic viewpoint of postmodernity – is the fact that an identity always responds to a necessity. This necessity can be cultural, social, religious or historical. Thus, identities can range from "critical regionalism" to "generic cities" or they can even fold multiple places – i.e. identities – into one space, as is the case of "heterotopias".

However, beside this wide range of definitions, the analysis also led us to discover that there is yet another category, which we named non-identities or fictional identities. They are the characteristic of the "mall culture", based on *desires* – not necessities – and although they might supply the illusion of belonging to a group or community sharing the same ideals. In fact, they are designed to just sell the product. Still, they can feel very real, as the case of Júzcar proves it.

Nevertheless, the most important conclusion that can be drawn is the fact that there is a very strong link, and even *an interdependence* between identity and the way in which the environment is designed. The case studies we have analysed demonstrate that amusement parks and shopping centres have a very similar bond with their identities – even though they are fictional ones – as any other historical, cultural, social or religious environment has with theirs. *Our environments reflect who we are and what we believe in, no matter if it is or it is not fictional.*

"If it is now recognized that people have multiple identities then the same point can be made in relation to places. Moreover, such multiple identities can either be a source of richness or a source of conflict, or both."[1]

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[1] Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 153