The Role of Consumerism in American Architecture

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Consumerism is an important social and economic organizing force. It is a key aspect affecting the production of buildings, and much building production can only be understood by analyzing its relationship to consumerism. Different types of building production have different degrees of relationship to consumerism. A shopping mall may have a strong relationship because its appearance may serve to attract shoppers and add an additional cachet—another value to the experience of acquiring the goods offered inside. On the other hand, corporate tenants in an office building may have a less intense involvement with the appearance of the building in which they are housed. The services they have to offer are separate from the experience of looking at, and being in, their headquarters building. Because consumerism is dependent on stimulating consumption and adding intangible qualities of identity-definition, consumerist buildings are an inherently populist category of architectural production that must communicate with the public.

High art or avant garde architecture by contrast is an internally oriented self-referential art form that does not necessarily have to communicate with or involve the public. High art architecture itself has in many ways become a consumerist commodity itself. Most architectural criticism and analysis have been focused on high art architecture with the result that we lack an understanding of the new suburban landscape, in which consumerist architecture plays an important role. Consumerist architecture has the power to create public gathering spaces that actually attract large numbers of people. These are the reasons why the subject merits greater critical investigation.

Consumerism is the single most important social and economic organizing force in the United States today, if not the world, as demonstrated by the recent consumer revolt in Eastern Europe. Buildings such as theme parks and shopping malls are consumerist when their design advertises the businesses they house or intensifies the experience offered therein. Despite its importance, consumerism has not received the attention it deserves as a cultural force, instrumental in shaping building production, especially in the United States. Because architecture that responds to consumerism deals in direct, rather than abstract, symbolism, consumerist architecture has fallen outside the realm inhabited by avant garde architects and their critics.

Consumerism's widely shared values endow it with conflicting powers. It is capable of producing architecture with genuine civic and public characteristics, but its manipulative exploitation of forms for commercial purposes tends to contradict and undermine this potential. In this essay I analyze the role of consumerism in current American architectural production and expand and further define categories of consumer-related building production, which I outlined in a series of earlier essays beginning with the Spring 1983 special issue of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Quarterly, and continued with issue 131 of the Design Quarterly.¹

Consumerist architecture exhibits a love of eclecticism similar to that found in post-modernism, but it is an eclecticism founded on the belief that memories of other eras and places can legitimately be represented, rather than ironically deconstructed. Unlike high art architects, consumerist architects are not free to satisfy only their own internal set of artistic concerns, rather they must try to locate common ground with the sets of architectural images already held by the public at large. Finally consumerist architecture differs from traditional vernacular architecture because it is rooted in marketing techniques and is consciously plotted to achieve the goal of inducing consumption. Vernacular architecture grows out of an accepted body of building practice and associated cultural lore, interpreted by individuals, usually for personal use.

For the purposes of this essay, I am defining consumerism as the synergistic interaction of mass production and consumption. Its fundamental characteristic is the use of advertising and product design to stimulate the public's demand for goods and services. For example, with the successive introduction of canned and then frozen foods, consumers found themselves buying nationally advertised products rather than local produce. At one time shoppers bought only a generic product, such as peas. Today the peas themselves are frozen and come bound up with a brand name and symbol; thus the necessity for the tall, green authority figure of the Jolly Green Giant.

Similarly fast-food restaurants are often successful in inner-city areas because of the appeal of advertising and the fact that dining out symbolizes a supply of ready spending money. Fast-food outlets have so proliferated that, within a few block area of 125th Street in Harlem, the roll call of fried chicken emporiums includes three different Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises, Cincinnati Fried Chicken, Famous Fried Chicken, Southern Fried Chicken, Lincoln Fried Chicken, Mama's Fried Chicken, Kansas Fried Chicken, Miami Fried Chicken, and Hollywood Fried Chicken.² Jordan Pacheco, a member of Chicago's Imperial gang, explained the status role of fast food in the inner city in a recent newspaper article, "Everyone is tired of their mother's food—rice and beans over and over. I wanted to live the life of a man. Fast food gets you status and respect." In consumerism the act of acquiring the product and the associations of
the product's advertising and marketing become as or more important than the product itself. Tonja Ward, a twenty-one-year-old in Harlem, watches eight hours of TV a day. She recently saw a Roy Rogers ad in which some fish touted a new chicken sandwich. Since there is no Roy Rogers nearby, she asked her boyfriend to buy her the sandwich downtown. A McDonald's ad made her feel she "had to have" its double cheeseburger; a subsequent Roy Rogers commercial for its double cheeseburger produced the same yearning. She also went to Kentucky Fried Chicken tempted by its "corn mania" promotion.4

In broad terms, contemporary architectural patronage and practice in the United States can be viewed as a consumerist enterprise, as Stephen Kiernan has shown in "The Architecture of Plenty."5 According to Kiernan's theories, this production has consumerist characteristics, such as being "conceptually if not materially expendable," and possessing the marketing concepts of "formal" and "augmented" qualities beyond mere utility.6 "Contemporary architecture shows evidence of four formal traits: packaging, style, special features, and brand names, all of which can be manipulated to establish an identifiable position for a product within the market place."7

The role of consumerism in shaping personality has grown in the United States as traditional customs are supplanted. The citizen of today's consumer society is often relatively free of the inherited cultural programming that would have been a birthright in preindustrialized societies. Americans select and compose their personal cultural identities item by item. Their belief systems come from the organizations they belong to—twelve-step programs—or from the consumerist act of selecting among different varieties of pop psychology. Recipes are learned from Julia Child rather than granny, and conceptions of sexual-social interaction are learned from Dr. Ruth rather than handed down from generation to generation. By and large, the only new institutional environments that are actually used by great numbers of people and play a central part in their lives are recreational environments, such as swap meets, sports and entertainment events, and shopping malls, and theme environments.

Indeed, shopping can be a form of consuming in a purely devotional sense, a subjugation before objects to which magical transformational powers are often attributed. Thus, shopping can be thought of as a quasi-religious experience as well as a form of recreation. It is often a way of consuming substitute identities, of transcending self, of acting out hidden parts of one's self by purchasing artifacts symbolizing these alter egos. Furthermore, it is both a public and a commercial act. The individual shopper joins with the larger shopping public to participate in a joint ritual. In short, shopping dissolves ego boundaries. It creates a larger world view, a cosmology of television, advertising, and magazines. Advertising and marketing enable consumers to experience goods and services twice instead of once. The experience of anticipation is intensified and becomes as important as the experience of acquisition.

The power of shopping as a compulsion, and an escape, is certainly not an entirely benign phenomenon. Shopping in a modern consumer society encourages the quantification of an ideal world in superficial, simplistic, and materialistic terms. In a totally consumerist society, individuals would only be judged by the cost and programmed associations of their clothes and...
possessions. But is it really the role of the architect to tell a shopper that he/she really doesn't need another new pair of shoes? Perhaps the most architects can do is try to harness the commonly shared interest in shopping in the service of creating public places that people really want to use, places that relate shopping back to a larger public and civic identity.

Every culture has accepted ways of doing things, customs that its members take for granted. Just as soap opera has supplanted folklore and storytelling, commercialized architecture has taken the place of the traditional vernacular in the building of present-day America. Common building types that are part of the American roadside environment also constitute a vernacular, a commercial vernacular. The legitimacy of applying the term vernacular to commercial building production, such as burger stands and car repair shops, has been advocated by the historian J.B. Jackson and the architect Charles Moore, among others.8

Commercial vernacular is part of our economic and social evolution, and it is tied to changes in public taste and living patterns. What makes its study confusing is that this vernacular seems so unvernacular. Although there are accepted ways of building commercial vernacular architecture today, these widely accepted practices are often the result of technological innovation, advertising, and marketing, whereas in earlier times these customs were the result of slowly evolving patterns of social interaction. "Every farmer knew the right proportions and designed his buildings in the same way as his ancestors always had," wrote Lena Ason-Palmqvist of the early Swedish settlers of Minnesota and the farm buildings they constructed.9

Traditional vernacular architecture provided a direct accommodation to a particular set of demands. A building in a northern climate might have a very steep roof to
shed snow. A building in a southern climate might have an internal courtyard or a large veranda for shade and ventilation. Such buildings have been admired for the ways they fit their local climate and purpose. They pretend to be nothing more or less than what they are. Furthermore, traditional vernacular architecture is almost always thought of as consisting of a single style from a particular region, such as the sod house of the prairie states. Styles of commercial vernacular architecture are as eclectic as the society they reflect, embracing every style from expressionistic modernism to atavistic neoprimitivism. The commercial vernacular usually pretends to be almost anything other than what it actually is: Spanish tile, Tudor half-timbering, and colonial American fanlights are guises slipped onto structures like Halloween costumes.

One of the most insightful commentaries on the nature of American commercial vernacular architecture has been made by Peter Papademetriou. He notes that in developing cities of the American sunbelt, the traditional hierarchy of building type has been replaced by a hierarchy of building style, of copies and reinterpretations of a wide variety of architectural prototypes and sources that includes modern high art buildings as part of their repertoire. In the dispersed suburban space of the sunbelt, it is the symbolic messages of building elements and stylistic allegiances of buildings that create whatever larger network of meaning that the landscape forms collectively. The references could be to anything from Mies van der Rohe to nineteenth-century Eastlake ornament.

Traditional folk structures are viewed with nostalgia and affection because they are associated with ways of living that have been outmoded by technological changes. Pennsylvania Dutch barns and nineteenth-century California adobe ranch houses have obvious appeal. But car washes from the 1960s and coffee shops from the 1950s are considerably less charming to most observers. They still function as part of everyday life and are therefore not viewed in the warm amber light of obsolescence.

In *Design Quarterly* 128, J.B. Jackson wrote about commercial vernacular architecture as a continuation of humankind's age-old struggle to be housed and to accommodate needs with as much comfort and decency as possible. For example, in Jackson’s view the highway has taken the place of more traditional generators of shared hopes and beliefs, such as the Christian church. In its omnipresence, the culture of the highway structures the lives of most Americans. It is the necessary precondition for everything from the suburban shopping mall to the drive-up taco stand and the single-family detached house. The culture of the highway is a direct response to economic imperatives, but its imagery is often determined in a self-conscious way.

This is particularly true for the category of commercial vernacular architecture I term consumerist, an architecture self-consciously concerned with selling the products or the services that it houses. Almost any building type can be classed as consumerist architecture, although government buildings, such as new post offices and firehouses, and industrial and warehouse buildings are often
too straightforward and utilitarian to qualify. The distinguishing consumerist characteristic of commercial vernacular architecture that makes it consumerist is that its relationship to the consumer is a central concern in determining the appearance of the building as part of a consciously planned strategy of marketing. Commercial vernacular architecture is deliberately conceived of as imagery, as a form of environmental psychology based on marketing. The individual ice cream stand is likely to be a work of commercial vernacular architecture, while an individual Baskin Robbins is consumerist architecture, because it is part of a chain, part of a corporate campaign strategy. In that sense the commercial aspect of consumerist architecture tends to overwhelm any vernacular aspects still remaining to commercial vernacular architecture. In that sense a consumerist building is just as much a designed object, as any high art building.

Because the choice of imagery is carefully considered, consumerist architecture does not have the same unity of conception found in earlier vernacular architecture between a building program and its imagery. Consumerist environments such as Knott’s Berry Farm are planned to play upon the emotions of their users. But oftentimes an architect’s manipulative thinking about a building’s users is preferable to not thinking about them at all. In contrast to much high art or vanguard architecture, the meaning of consumerist architecture is informed by psychology and the need to communicate. Consumerist architecture attempts to address directly the presumed needs of users in the same way that advertising and marketing attempt to address consumer needs.

According to market strategy, the consumer needs to believe that there is a conceptual difference between shopping center A and shopping center B. This product differentiation is most easily accomplished in high-end projects, where there is an ample budget.
and the project can be heavily "themed," such as La Borgata in Scottsdale or Two Rodeo in Beverly Hills. Such environments read as being different from everyday environments because of the consistency and elaboration of their themed references. An example of the precision necessary in the design of commercial vernacular and consumerist architecture is the chain of Friendly's restaurants. In one incarnation the building design set up customer expectations inconsistent with the kind of food and service available inside—it resembled a small New England branch bank. "People attracted by the meticulously detailed exterior were disappointed to find that they had to sit at counter stools choosing among hamburger sandwiches, ice cream and other common fare."12 In order for the chain to succeed, Friendly's had to make its exterior simpler, more informal and suburban, and make the restaurant slightly more formal by upgrading the menu and installing booths so that the appearance of the exterior matched the character of the service and food offered inside.

But just as consumers are shopping for familiarity and consistency, they also have an appetite for novelty. Shopping malls and other consumerist buildings that have a fantasy element have a competitive edge over those that do not. In this sense, consumerist architecture operates like any other form of marketing and advertising. The labeling of a building is often as or more important than the actual character of its design. Taco Bell restaurants located in areas outside of the southwestern states are designed to appear Hispanic but not too Hispanic. In actuality, they are really rather straightforward buildings with a few superficial Hispanic touches.13

Consumerist architecture is involved in the process of consumption to varying degrees of intensity. I have identified two levels of involvement for the purposes of this essay. A consumerist building may be designed to enhance the image of the businesses that are housed inside in a general way. These are secondary consumerist buildings, such as corporate office parks. Second-order consumerist buildings are not actually part of the goods and services being offered by the businesses they house. In some cases consumerist buildings are also intended to be an integral part of the experience of consuming the goods or services offered inside. These buildings enhance the experience of consuming the product associated with the building. I am classifying these structures, such as amusement parks and themed shopping centers as primary consumerist buildings.

The imagery of secondary consumerist buildings is relatively simple and tends to be confined to a display of wealth consonant with the institutional identity of the client, with a bow to fashion that allows both client and architect to appear up to date and progressive. Secondary consumerist structures are treated as styled containers, their interiors composed of blank, gypsum-board walls, and acoustic-tiled hung ceilings. The speculative office building has become the cheapest possible envelope for the amount of space it surrounds. Most of its budget is devoted to the provision of required services. Many of the spaces inside, such as interior hallways, lack distinguishing characteristics because of rigid development restraints, and because the plan must present the fewest obstacles to any possible interior alterations.

Stephen Kiernan has compared these containers to the marketing concept of packaging: "A package has three marketing functions: to be visible; to be found (by differentiating it from other products through form, style, color, and texture) and to be legible (by conveying information about its contents through graphics and details)."14
Primary consumer buildings, such as resort hotels or gambling casinos, must offer a more complex and often more intense experiential package so that their public spaces, as well as their facades, must convey a special ambience. Consumer buildings at this level carry a broader range of representational meaning than does corporate architecture. Consider the bewildering variety of ethnic and theme restaurants possible that may have motifs borrowed from virtually any geographical locale or time period. One of the crazes of the 1980s in the United States was the fad for brand-new recreated diners from the 1930s–1950s, such as Johnny Rocket’s on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles. More long-standing is the tradition of South Seas exoticism in restaurants such as Kelbo’s in West Los Angeles, with its flaming blue drinks and multiple tiki gods.

Commercial vernacular’s most perplexing quality is that it goes to great lengths to appear to be what it is not. In the early 1960s apartment houses in southern California were often given the names of casinos or far-off resorts, such as Dunes or Riviera. Apartment houses in Texas often have Frenchified clipped box-hedge parterres and mansard roofs. Just as in the world of literature and theater, the builders of these edifices are not disturbed by the obvious duplicity of these forms. On the contrary, make-believe and altered identity is part of what these buildings are selling. They must appeal to their potential user’s emotions and to their fantasy lives, sensations, and experiences presumably not available elsewhere in the consumer’s surroundings. The consumer’s most important experiences are not an integral part of life; rather, they must be purchased. This is the point of Charles Moore’s famous essay, “You Have to Pay for the Public Life.” The consumer expects the amusement park, the theme restaurant, and the resort to address emotional needs precisely because the rest of his environment does not.
This workaday world has been defined as a means to utilitarian ends that provide for the provision of goods and services and the satisfaction of the needs of daily life. Consumerist buildings are the release from the overwhelming rationality and uncommunicativeness of the rest of the environment.

As the forces of mass production and distribution take over larger and larger sectors of daily life, anything that seems individual or different takes on enhanced importance. The corner cafe is now a Sizzler and the bank on Main Street is a branch of Citibank. With the proliferation of chains and the homogenization of the commercial landscape, it becomes all the more important to create moments or places that purport to be unlike the otherwise increasingly unmodulated continuum of existence.

The America of blank concrete tilt-slab warehouses and identical franchised buildings feeds the public’s desire for a substitute reality. Such expediency is characteristic of a large sector of American building production. Much of it is simply a means to an end. The architecture of discount department stores, such as The Home Depot, is not a significant factor in the success of that chain of stores compared to the role played by store planning—the organization and presentation of merchandise. The discount shopper cares primarily about getting a microwave oven at the lowest possible markup above the wholesale cost. The shopper doesn’t care whether or not the experience of buying the microwave is integrated into a setting that includes other aspects of life.

The attitude that most buildings exist to serve a function and not as objects of great interest in themselves was aided by advances in building technology and legitimized by orthodox modernism, once it had been drained of its earlier ideological core. Late modernism has celebrated the capacity for producing blankness by creating buildings that are not
articulated, either by ornament or by the materials from which they are made. The prefabricated panel replaces the masonry block, and the single sheet of glass replaces multiple panes.

Because this marketing advertising is often most effective on a national basis, this consumer society has created an American landscape that is increasingly interchangeable as identical businesses in identical buildings are repeated across the country. Loyalty to the neighborhood burger stand is replaced by loyalty to the local franchise of a nationally promoted brand. A brochure distributed to the customers of White Castle hamburger stands in 1951 boasted that customers in every location are "sitting on the same kind of stool" and "the hamburger you eat is prepared in exactly the same way over a gas flame of the same intensity."16

Goods and services are easier to obtain and are available at more locations and more times than ever before. The suburban house with a full freezer of microwavable dinners, a well-stocked VCR library, and two cars parked in the garage has almost unlimited access to material resources that free its inhabitants from dependency on traditional social networks for obtaining both entertainment and the necessities of life. This is what a consumerist society delivers in return for manipulation by advertising: a high quality of life measured in material terms and a sense of freedom and choice. The choice may be limited by behavioral conditioning, but then what culture ever escapes the age-old battle between individual free will and societal imposition of values?

Consumerist architecture is not new; it is, rather, a long-established tradition in American architecture that has become increasingly ubiquitous. The pre-World War II Old France restaurant in Boston had interior walls made to look like the facade of a village square, complete with shingled roofs and fake second-story windows.17 Clifton’s Brookdale Cafeteria in downtown Los Angeles was designed as a fake forest, complete with redwood tree surrounds around the structural posts, a flowing brook, a waterfall, and a wishing well. Not all such fantasies were so benign. The chain of Coon Chicken Inns, phased out during the 1950s, featured a minstrel-like caricature of a black man as the surround of its entrance door to symbolize the all-black staff of waiters.18

The need for consumerist architecture has been fostered by the growing dominance of the machine in daily life. Large-scale systems of production and distribution become more important than the social mechanism of shared civic life and human interaction. Buying a newspaper from a familiar vendor at a corner stand creates the possibility for social exchange. Buying the same newspaper from a vending machine does not. Basic to the concept of consumerist architecture is the idea that the experience of one’s surroundings, and more particularly the experience of shopping and being entertained, is always enhanced by being presented in terms other than the actual or expected nature of that experience. The increased social mobility of the postwar era forced objects to become increasingly important as props, not just, for example, as stoves. New models of appliances were introduced not merely out of need, but to ensure continued demand by taking appliances out of the realm of mere utility and redefining them as accoutrements of the good life.

The irony of contemporary life is that
virtually every conceivable object—from a designer toothbrush to an all-natural fiber and cedar-chip doggie bed—is now defined as a reference point, an element of personal identity. Part of the task of consumerist architecture is reinforcing the individual desirability of each of the items or services offered within its walls. John Hewitt discusses Terrence Conran’s Habitat and Conran’s stores as a world “where you are what you bought. The problem is knowing what to buy. Habitat resolved this problem, it took the guessing out of good taste.” Conran’s and Habitat had a consistent policy of graphics, interiors, and store display combined with high-toned props. “For the Habitat man the shop is not a schoolroom but a theater, a place where fantasies are played on and identities are taken on and discarded with each new set of commodities. The essence of this commodity fetishism is that human relations come to be mediated through objects.”

Consumer architecture is vital, even in a modern mass market society, because it fulfills more of the traditional function of art than any other category of architecture. However, these functions still performed by consumerist architecture are no longer served by high art architecture. Alan Gowans has defined these roles as follows: “substitute imagery—preserving the physical appearance of persons or things; illustration—telling stories or recording events in pictorial forms; beautification—ornamenting or designing objects so as to identify their use and relate them to human experience; conviction and persuasion—making tangible symbols and visual metaphors of ideas and beliefs which a given society collectively holds, or it is felt, ought to hold.”

This set of functions was not important to leaders of high art architecture, such as Le Corbusier, Melnikov, and Gropius, who broke with the historical role of architecture as a reinforcer of social institutions during the first third of the twentieth century as
part of a larger avant garde political and artistic modernist movement. They advocated architectural innovation as the primary medium for expressing and accommodating technological and sociological change.

The vanguard promised to free modern life of outmoded historical precedents and to enable it to take full advantage of the assumption that modernization was progress and led invariably to a higher quality of life. It was an idealistic, utopian outlook in its belief that radical critiques of existing economic and social structures could be translated and implemented into programs of action. The means by which these goals would be implemented were to be the rationalization of building construction and the restructuring of the form of the city. The concepts of standardized housing types, mass production of buildings, and new materials and methods were integral elements of the modernist creed of this avant garde. They gave the new architecture bold forms that were symbolic of the machine age and were influenced by the increasingly abstract, self-absorbed, and analytic nature of modern art.

Today's vanguard has a far more narrowly circumscribed set of interests. Even though they share the earlier vanguard's preoccupation with the internal relationships of architecture, they have abandoned the theoretical framework that previously supported this abstraction. The vocabulary of modernism has lost its polemical impact through familiarity and cooption by utilitarian and commercial architecture. In the 1990s the absence of molding is as likely to connote a low budget as a departure from fussy conventions. The argument of the earlier avant garde that their modernist vocabularies were either determined by, or the most fitting expression for, new functionalist architecture has frequently had the effect of causing vanguard architects to limit themselves to formal concerns. However, as Kenneth Frampton has observed in Modern Architecture, this has not prevented them from attempting to borrow the chic of the earlier avant garde. This chic grew out of the definition of the avant garde as being more advanced than society as a whole and holding positions that run counter to conventional thought.

The new pseudo-avant-garde tradition, epitomized by Deconstruction, has reduced the idea of modernity to the perpetuation of novelty for its own sake. It emphasizes the aspect of the architect as a Bohemian artist who must exist in opposition to and in isolation from positions of real power. Conversely, the adoption of this position frees the vanguard from any accountability to society. The architect is free to play by the rules of artists in other arts, where the only permissible concern of the artist is a personal perception and critique of the structure of the chosen art form. Lost in the architect's imitation of the painter or sculptor is the capacity of architecture to shape and accommodate human activity and experience in socially agreed upon terms. Some post-modernists, such as Philip Johnson, have publicly broken with this concept of architect as artist: "The public, in fact, never really cottoned to our
particular idea that everybody should have a flat-roofed glass house." He went on to say, "We once more want our churches to look like churches and our houses to look like houses and not boxes." Such a definition presumes that the notion of house and church are defined by the public as much or more so than the architect.

Architects have been turned into famous people in order to make them more fitting objects of publicity. The only thing that satisfies the media appetite for fame is a personality. Witness the infamous Michael Graves Dexter shoe ads or designer Brian Murphy's ads for The Gap. The media differentiates groups of architects in ranked categories of more and less fashionable. One of the reasons for this, as Frederic Jameson has stated, is "commodity production and in particular our clothing, furniture, buildings and other artifacts are not intimately tied in with styling changes which derive from artistic experimentation; our advertising for example, is fed by postmodernism in all the arts and inconceivable without it." The consumer has a secure "opinion base" and permission to like the work. It is product differentiation according to market segment. The most consumable aspects of architecture have been the most widely publicized. Private houses are published over and over again because people can imagine living in them. Everyone understands what a house is and what it is like to live in one. This has the additional advantage of allowing architects more creative freedom than other categories of building. Many architects go on to superstar status from an initial base of published residential work. As Sharon Zukin has pointed out, the large-scale and high profile of major developments require the participation of superstar architects in order to answer "the desire by major corporations in the services to recoup value from long-term large-scale investments in product development." Investments on this scale in urban redevelopment generate market demand for highly individualized yet increasingly standardized architectural designs.

High art architecture and consumerist architecture are at cross-purposes by nature. Architects are trained to go to elaborate, some might say absurd, lengths to avoid fantasy and literal representation, qualities that are the lifeblood of consumer architecture. Consumerist architecture must communicate with the public clearly and directly. If the public cannot comprehend their work, then the architects of a consumerist building have not done the job that they were hired to do. High art architecture, as it has often been practiced in late modernism, and even in post-modernism, may not attempt to communicate with its audience at all. Peter Eisenman may base house designs on a series of rotating cubes in the manner of minimal artists. Frank Gehry inverts normal expectations about building finishes by exposing construction.

The latest formal movement to exhibit such tendencies is Deconstruction, which "claims that post-modern architecture does not confront the present and the current im-
possibility of cultural consensus (here, despite their rejection of any concept of history, many post-structuralist advocates fall into zeitgeist and periodizing rhetoric). Instead of seeking cultural communication, architecture, in their view, should make explicit its purported obliteration. Fragmentation, dispersion, decentering, schizophrenia, disturbance are the new objectives; it is from these qualities that architecture is to gain its 'critical' edge.27

This kind of abstraction is often an aesthetic accomplishment, but it also frequently contradicts the nature of architecture as a socially based, applied art form. Consumerist architecture is and has always been relevant to daily life, since the needs of daily life (real or reinterpreted to spur production) are the reason for its existence. The predominance of the mass production of goods and services, and their mass consumption, means that cultural values are now commercialized. They do not trickle down from an aristocratic or educated elite, and they do not trickle up from a tradition-bound peasant class. America’s values are molded in the marketplace through the complex interaction of personal choice and behavioral manipulation.

Consumerist architecture has always been comfortable with the use of nonironic and literal ornament and historic references, even when post-modernist and modernist architects have not been. It is easy for consumerist designers to use historical references because popular architecture does not demand the unity of conception required of high art architecture. The individual components of consumerist and commercial vernacular buildings are frequently more important than the way they are put together. Content is frequently as or more important than form in consumerist architecture. High art architects have been handicapped in their use of ornament because they have been trained to value the creation of new forms and the expression of individual artistic sensibility above all else. Historically architects have been more impressed by the setting of new precedents than by the following of old ones. However, if one of the true functions of architecture in a consumer society is to create moods and emotional settings (just as literature and theater have traditionally done), then there is no place for accusations of plagiarism or anachronism. A form that fulfills the required associations to do a particular psychological job also becomes the correct choice in a formal sense as well.

As Denise Scott-Brown noted, “Because buildings and cities are big, they inevitably serve wide taste publics; because they last a long while, over the length of their lives, they serve many different people.”28 But it has become harder for buildings designed by high art architects to communicate with the public. The meanings that consumerist buildings embody would once have represented widely shared values that reflected the overall character and organization of society. Now they do so only insofar as they represent a society in which cultural values are ex-
exploited as commodities. This is the irreducible element of ambiguity in consumerist architecture. It genuinely reflects popular attitudes, such as the nostalgia for an imagined Hispanic Californian past seen in the use of Mission Revival forms. Consumerist architecture allows for the expression of a wide range of attitudes and emotions in a highly specific and easily readable form, to an extent that no other sector of building production can match. Consumerist architecture also undeniably simplifies and limits cultural meaning.

A survey conducted for British Airways of its American customers turned up the suggestion that “the cabins of its 747’s should be fitted with Tudor beams.” However, themed and consumerist environments communicate with the public more efficiently than any other genre of architecture. To ignore them is to ignore the information they communicate about the society we live in. Much as Allison and Peter Smithson wrote in 1956, “Mass production and advertising is establishing our whole pattern of life, principles, morals and aspiration and standards of living. We must somehow get the measure of this invention if we are to match its powerful influence.”

How are the buildings that we see from the freeway, the developer housing, the blank-faced speculative office buildings, and the shopping malls designed? How do they affect the quality of our lives? Those are the issues that architects and the media alike need to come to terms with in order to formulate an architectural philosophy that accommodates daily life in a consumer society. This is the reason to evaluate the role that consumerism has taken in determining a critical sector of building production.

Notes
4. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 104.
13. Ibid., p. 179.
17. Langdon, Orange Roofs, Golden Arches, p. 29.
18. Langdon, Orange Roofs, Golden Arches, p. 49.