

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Glazed Shop Front and Urban Sociability

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, January 29th, 2014

Introduction

One of the basic situations that involve urban sociability is where to, and how to, place one's gaze in public space. Our feature image clearly indicates that only a shop under renovation, or vacant, will usually have a blind shop front that will not even merit a cursory look on the part of the passer by.

In our culture of residential privacy it is indeed the shop front, largely glazed and illuminated, which by convention invites the gaze of the passers by on city sidewalks. Is it really so? And how?



How far inside is the gaze of passers by allowed, or invited, to penetrate comfortably past the glazed shop front? What social conventions condition the nature of the penetrating gaze?



What social relationships and experiences are associated to the degree of shop front transparency, observed between indoor commercial and outdoor public space? What is the conventional nature of the experience: Do I want, or do I need, to go in there?

Some answers to these questions can be obtained when exploring various building contexts and types of activity, and correlating them to the treatment, and degree of transparency, of the shop front.

The basic social experience of the glazed shop front

The basic social experience of the glazed shop front is its **public** nature: its opening to the public realm is the only accepted sociable extension of interior life into the public realm, besides the residential balcony as seen previously.

For a telling example: when a commercial activity occupies a former residential space it will usually enlarge its street facing windows and add signage (see below) to signify its public nature and increase visibility of its interior: its goods, services and ambiance.



If it chooses not to do so it will compensate with more signage (see below), to the extent of blocking the view to the interior.



Eventually that particular business, shown above, added a sidewalk terrace (see below) to signal its commercial, public nature, and to create an attractive outdoor eating-place within the transition zone to its entry.



Experiencing different treatments of the glazed shop front

Differences in glazed shop front treatment can occur in spite of similar architectural basis as in **False twins**, or if the architecture and marketing are different as in **Context and ambiance** and in **Context and image**. Inversely the treatment may be similar in spite of different architecture as in **Discretion and security**.

False twins

The architectural symmetry of the façade belies the different nature of the shop occupants (clothes shop on the right and restaurant on the left), hence the differently treated glazed front and adjoining areas.

In the case of the clothes shop (see below) the space behind the totally transparent glazed shop front is treated as a stage set for a dreamy montage of the clothes and accessories, visually separated from the shop interior.



In the case of the restaurant (see below), can the table and chairs behind the mostly transparent glazed shop front be construed as a sort of model table setting one can find repeated inside? What does it feel for the inquisitive potential client to be so close to the restaurant guests as he reads the menus stuck to the window while looking discretely inside to assess the ambience of the place? Would a seated client at that table feel like a fish in a glass bowl?



Context and ambiance

These two state liquor stores are as different as a supermarket can be from an upscale food retailer. One is catering to a student and nursing staff clientele while the other caters to businesspersons that can identify with the interior decoration of the shop.

The first, shown below, has its glazed shop front covered in part with advertising posters and with sample gift packages, and seems to invite a utilitarian hit and run visit.



The second, shown below, has a glazed shop front that could be one of a cupboard, with expensive

and exotic crockery inside it. It seems to invite one to take the time to appreciate the decoration, the quality and price of the merchandise and, eventually, discuss probably both with a salesperson, then pay and leave, while probably looking back once more ... at a quasi ritual setting.



Context and image

These two competing bookstores, on the same street, project pretty much the same differences in terms of image and status as in the case of the liquor stores.

One, shown below, is on the ground floor of a hotel and harbours a bistro in the back of its main book display area. The displaying of books starts at the shop front treated as display windows that hide the view of the interior, reserved for the cognoscenti who will cross the signature wood panelled door. Note the bistro opening hours and the schedule of literary events written, in academic fashion, with chalk on a blackboard right next to the doors.



The other, shown below, is the headquarter of a bookstore chain, with toys, records and stationary sections on the second floor of a dedicated commercial building. Its shop front is transparent and luminous enough to get the message as to where to go to shop: up the grand staircase, or escalator. The glazed shop front will be plastered with billboards on the occasion of sales ... or employees strikes!



Discretion, privacy and security



In spite of the two different architectural, structural and façade treatments the bank, shown above, and the police station, shown below, have quasi-identical treatment of their “shop front”.



Both the bank and the police station have an inner organization which is expressed on the façade, such as a transparent entry area through which one can see their respective public reception and ATM areas, and masked private office areas with curtained or mirror treated windows.

Privacy and discretion seem to be the motivation at the bank, and security and discretion the obvious one at the police station. We may wish to note the mirror effect of the police station windows, right on the sidewalk, for a subliminal invitation to examine one’s civic conscience ... perhaps!

Since the police station is not a commercial setting as such the only explicit identification sign is the uniform logo of the police force and the station number. The bank, inversely, will make use of the blind curtained widows to advertise its various services with an orderly array of posters.

Discussion: The spatial-social life of the glazed shop front

At the basis of the social experience of the glazed shop front located on a street is the particular set of bodily centred spatial-social experiences they provide, as one moves among others to get to them, and as one also needs to place oneself strategically and interact with others upon slowing down, stopping and entering ... as well as when one is inside the shop or coming out.

Unity and variety

As we move along commercial strips our visual field encompasses whole scenes that define where we are and with whom, as well as critical situation defining details that we must address for immediate response as we move.

Our spatial perception is thus organized in terms of background wholes that provide a sense of unity and predictability, and foreground moving details that call for our immediate attention such as crossing a street to get to these colourful shop fronts or when walking in crowd while keeping an eye on the content of shop fronts.



When “design-for-ease” takes command, as shown above, the principle of unity and variety can organize a whole section of a main street, with shops at street level and housing above, socially informing and enriching our visual field and behavioural palette, and readying us for action in a sociable manner.

In and out



The transparent shop front of the hair dressing salon, as shown above, allows one to read pertinent information about the services available without getting too close to the window, for discretion reasons. The toyshop, as shown below, has covered the entire shop front window with merchandise bearing shelves inviting closer perusal without such concern for privacy to the clientele being served inside.



Conclusion

Of course one may be excused for wondering what has happened to these glazed shop front mediated concerns with sociability, with the example below!

Effectively, if not physically, the thin transparent boundary between interior housed merchandise and services, and exterior public space, seems to have been wilfully erased as the storeowner has extended a “3D invitation” to the passerby, by hanging merchandise directly on the glazed shop front!



All images credit Maurice Amiel

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