

mente ofreciendo a las áreas de venta más avanzadas óptimas oportunidades de asistencia y servicio para el consumidor. El ejemplo nos viene de Francia, Holanda, Japón y Estados Unidos, donde numerosas cadenas de establecimientos se dedican al *self-help*, al autoservicio, con productos e informaciones específicas, y al empleo de la alta tecnología al servicio del consumidor (como, por ejemplo, la elección y la compra nocturna y «automática» de *jeans* y camisetas que se ha experimentado en Estados Unidos). Uno de los primeros ejemplos de comercio interactivo, que propone una relación de empatía y *biofeedback* con la mercancía lo representa la cadena americana The Sharper Image (creada a principios de los ochenta), donde se invita al público a entrar y a experimentar libremente las últimas maravillas tecnológicas, sin ningún control ni limitación. El punto de venta se transforma en este caso en una especie de *showroom*-sala de juegos donde es posible encontrar adultos y niños que juegan a ping-pong y billares en miniatura, empleados que prueban la primera camilla electrónica para masajes, padres que juegan con sus hijos con el balón teledirigido, en un espacio que también actúa en términos de puesta en escena en la apertura y la acogida: desde los *tests* dermatológicos computerizados propuestos por Shisheido en sus puntos de venta para la elección de los cosméticos más adecuados a cada cliente, hasta los servicios tecnológicos de la Fnac-musique de París. En estos casos la palabra clave es «Servicio + Tecnología», para conseguir un compromiso más profundo del cliente.

## Hiperspecialised or interactive, the sales point is changing

One of the most important subjects in recent years in the distribution area is the priority requirement of giving designers new directions, not only in the sectors they tend to move in (creativity and expression), but also in the environment of new design philosophy applied to the sales point and consumer needs. In this sense it is important to frame the problem in an overall view, carry out an analysis of the market and its continual mutations. The evolution in the «staging» of commercial products during the last forty years has followed (sometimes tempestuously, sometimes with a certain delay) in the steps of consumer behaviour in relation to merchandise: in historical periods of great economic necessity, «staging» functioned as a simple introduction. In a wasteland design environment, the product's language was in no way mediatised. In the following years of economic abundance, the sixties and early seventies, sales point design raised new problems: objects began to share the lead with architectural and environmental surroundings which could make them unique and more attractive in relation to other communication offers. During this time, designer philosophy took on major importance and became a complement to product presence: the objects' mythical value was explained in a parallel language—the language of «staging»— which, in the following years, took on an even greater relevance. The third period, from the mid-seventies to the end of the eighties, was characterised by a design logic in which image and «look», in the literal sense of the word, began to prevail, and in which the product became a sign next to other signs and could even be dominated by the style of «staging». «Staging» tended to become, in its more extreme forms, the true commercial aim, while merchandise, in its narrower economic and functional dimension, tended to become marginal. This tendency, while on the one hand seeming motivational and interesting from the commercial point of view as well (stimulating the sales of products not guaranteed by specific material or technological quality, and only sustained by symbolic imagery), on the other hand ran the risk of displacing design's central point and transferring it

from the content to the more ephemeral aspects of visual communication.

In Italy in the last thirty years, there has been a succession of three types of design in the field of «staging» the commercial product, developed in three distinct stages: a first phase in which «staging» is weak or absent and the work of catching the customer is delegated onto the impact of the product itself; a second, transition, phase in which «staging» is introduced as a complementary rule between product and exhibition space; and a third phase, characterised by strong «staging» which implicates the product in a visual performance, communicating aesthetics, but also often turning a deaf ear to the needs of companies and public. Now we are convinced that it is necessary to work towards a possible fourth type of «staging», in which image and style (distinctive elements of the third stage) give way to the sales area identity: in this case it is not a question of simply inventing forms or style which come from the context or which simply dominate or draw the merchandise along, but rather of considering product and sales point «personality» as the beginning of «staging» pointing towards a real dialogue with the consumer. It is from this richer and better connected perspective that the knowledge and depth acting in the customers' experience of the sales point now become stimuli and instructions for new philosophy on design, for a new way of facing the «staging» of a shop. If we follow this logic, some advanced sales points (which apply techniques the Japanese have been proposing for years) no longer exhibit what the sales point offers in the shop window, but rather a synthesis of the cultural models to which it is linked. From the point of view of global communication it is equally important to individualise a *concept*, a strong idea around which the sales point and its foreseeable success are to orbit. If this strategy for individuation is adequately carried out, the sales point will acquire a well-defined identity of its own, absolutely distinct from that of the competition. Until today, this philosophy has been taken up by the more advanced operators who have followed different paths —all of which are very interesting— and which have often been shown to converge with some fundamental concepts. The Future Concept Lab, a research institute which I direct, has been concerned these last few years with obtaining an in-depth point of view about sales points emerging in several countries, and tries to individualise the more interesting theme veins which seem full of development possibili-

ties. We have identified profiles of 20 proposal strategies which seem most meaningful at the moment. To give some significant examples, we will now illustrate 4 concepts: multispecialisation, image manipulation, the open museum, and the interactive shop.

### Multispecialisation

One of the requirements which was most insistently demanded in the past at sales points was range variety, product choice (as wide as possible), and, in a certain sense, the quantity of merchandise exhibited. Automatically, the richness of the supply was united to reliability and qualification of sales points, which made efforts to offer more products than the competition, disregarding product quality and its over-all coherence with the sales area. At the same time, a sort of functional-generic «staging» proliferated which preferred anonymous and indeterminate styles so as not to contaminate the variety of supply. In the last ten years, in opposition to this logic, there has arisen a growing importance of sales point specialisation which has acquired diverse forms, among which there are: product hyperspecialisation, origin specialisation, theme specialisation, directed specialisation, and transverse specialisation.

### Product hyperspecialisation

Foresees strictly one-product sales areas working in-depth on the cultural enrichment of a specific commercial area, giving us all its possible versions. When hyperspecialisation is added to franchising, success seems assured, as proved by the Italian Il Fornaio chain which wagers on regaining the cultural tradition of bread-making (with an enormous variety to choose from), and with a presentation using wood as the element of continuity with the archaic rural world. Other examples of this kind of specialisation are shop chains which only sell sweets (London's Sweet Factory or The Candy Barrel in the USA), others which only sell socks (The Sock Shop) or ties (Tie Rack) or Yoko Moku in Tokyo, which offers an extremely high quality chocolate in a jewellery setting, etc.

### Origin specialisation

Takes in sales areas which are not specialised in products but rather in origin, be it geographic (the most classic version is represented by boutiques for artisan work and folklore from different countries such as Old England and Vie de France chains) or cultural. An interesting and curious example is that of the Roman boutique Ai Monasteri, where it is possible to admire and acquire products from all the monasteries in Italy. Another variety of this concept is that of product origin in regard to material, such as Metals in Milan (strictly metal design products), Sheep Shop in London (lambswool clothing), Papier Plus in Paris (a paper seller's in the literal sense, as there are only paper and cardboard products).

### Theme specialisation

Perhaps makes up the most up-to-date variety of specialisation: it supposes the presence of a central theme around which there gravitate several categories of products having the same function or linked to a same theme area (for example, products linked to body culture, food culture, sports culture, technological culture, etc.). An example is a sales point entirely dedicated to fitness, where we can find anything from an exercise bike to royal jelly, from a track suit to a blood-pressure cuff; or the example of a boutique aware of Nature issues which is significant in this sense and has partly found an outlet in chains such as the British The Body Shop. The particularity of The Body Shop products is in the recipes they prepare using natural ingredients (often 100% of their total components). The secret of their success in this case lies in combining the new interest in Nature issues with the franchise distribution formula, adopting presentations which tune in to ecological philosophy at the sales points.

### Directed specialisation

Is a further possibility which isolates not so much a specific theme as a well-defined reference aim (for example, an age target) and takes this as a base for selecting the range of products offered: an outstanding example of this, in this case, is made up by the myriad

sales points for babies and children opened all over the world. In this case, also, the specificity is created by the variety of commercial lines proposed in sales areas, often directed to enriching infant culture.

### Transverse specialisation

Is a specific kind of specialisation, based more on the over-all style and philosophy of the sales point than on product definition or precise themes. We have defined it as transverse because it proposes an especially selective aesthetic and cultural sensibility which crosses several commercial lines and becomes the sole criterion for choosing the products sold. In this case the transverse theme becomes the formal language of the products and objects which, though very diverse in content and function, are linked in the same cultural area. In general, this area comprises sophisticated sales areas answering to new elite, when not luxury, consumption. In this sort of business every detail has to be individually taken care of, from the interior design to the envelopes or the paper used to wrap the products acquired, so that all this can become a distinctive sign, a symbol of belonging to a culture which is gradually transformed into the culture of that specific sales point. Examples of this distribution philosophy are Vinçon in Barcelona, Conrad and Muji in London, High Tech and Corso Como in Milan.

### Service specialisation

Means sales points in which service precedes the product, where the relation with the customer is the first strategic means for building up the whole of the sales point's activity (in some cases, also virtual) such as Replay's Client Network, or Club Med, or the permanent cultural exchange adopted by numerous companies, by means of newsmagazines and house organs.

### Manipulation of the imaginary

Together with multispecialisation philosophy, a decisive trend has emerged in «staging» sales points which raises «the manipulation of the imaginary» and which has, in many cases, helped to set up very strong production-distribution identities. By manipulation of the

imaginary we understand the task of individualisation and definition of some cultural suggestions strongly present in the collective imagination, which later are translated into the «staging» of the sales points and merchandise language. In these last few years, the manipulation of the imaginary in sales points has been expressed in an especially incisive way in two dimensions: adventure and memory.

### The adventure vein

Has become strongly consolidated in the last ten years within the collective imagination, widely supported by mass media systems and the business world. One of the first translations of adventure in the sales point was carried out by Banana Republic (a notable sales point of imaginary identity which caused a sensation during the 80's), an American chain of shops inspired by Africa and a life of adventures where, till a short while ago, it was possible to find clothes and accessories for a more imaginary than real adventure, and which unequivocally imposed its image by means of a sophisticated operation of global communication: from layout to display (using natural size Jeeps and biplanes in the display window or in the shop, or wild animal paw-prints on the entrance floor), from the catalogue style to products, was all within a sole commercial philosophy which, taking advantage of a cultural climate favouring adventures and Nature, quickly dominated the market. Since then, variants on geographical adventure have multiplied, individualising ever-diverse referents: from the High North (Timberland shops) to Tex-Mex culture (El Charro establishments), to a generic passion for travel (the French shops Au Tour du Monde or establishments proliferating in Northern Europe under the name of Marc' O Polo).

### Memory

Becomes another vein within the landscape of establishments adopting the logic of manipulation of the imaginary. In this case we also find several variations of the concept of memory which go from the incredible expansion of neo-British style (in this sense, one of the most emblematic examples is the Ralph Lauren chain, followed by Henry Cotton, Johnny Lambs, etc.)

to the assertion of a delicate, fairy-tale feminine style (we can think of the «domestic» style of the Laura Ashley boutiques or the Holly Hobby style of Naj Oleari boutiques).

### The Open Museum

Within the logic of a step from the traditional wide range dimension towards a more advanced dimension with identity and in-depth quality, in some sales areas we have arrived at particular logics of space organisation. In a hypothetic renewed space management, the generic continuity of products is interrupted by precise attraction spots which, in some new shops, represent a great amount of diversified compartments given over to diverse stylists, thus creating an ideal museum of style. Within this logic, the philosophy of the display window as the primary attraction element—the place where commitments to cultural trends, highly spectacular and original undertakings become the elements with the greatest punch—is transferred to the whole sales area which becomes comparable to a unique and immense display, a kind of open museum. Shops thought out from this point of view propose «stagings» and products with strong artistic and cultural attraction and increasingly tend to also offer services, information, and training on specific themes. It is in this sense that their over-all philosophy seem to be similar to that of the Open Museum, as typical museum strategies (wide, open spaces, information cards, silent, relaxed surroundings, etc.), like the several Showrooms of Romeo Gigli which increasingly become exhibition spaces for photographic shows or visual arts (and which present pieces of clothing framed like art works), or like the last floor of the Loft department stores in Tokyo, dedicated to exhibiting the most trendy products. In this type of boutiques, we do not necessarily enter to shop, but also to become up-to-date, participate in a collective spectacle, in the *mise en scène* of a culture to which, in the best of cases, we feel we belong to: quite often shopping becomes a later, natural decision, because it is difficult to leave such a stimulating cultural landscape with empty hands.

## The interactive shop

With the birth of primary design and the soft quality of the environment and, above all, with the expansion of technology service, a new world also opens up today in the universe of sales areas. We begin to understand that the inevitable diffusion of high technology and its more sophisticated applications do not necessarily have to be reduced to a simple proposition of a «technological» image which, during these last few years, has picked up the typical support of fashion phenomena (think of the New York spaces of Yamamoto proposed in the film *Nine and a Half Weeks*), but can also contribute in a new way to the aesthetic quality of the environment, to its emotional perfection and, for example, tends to increase the ratio of layout sensuality and environment interactivity increasingly demanded by consumers. There could be, then, the verification of a change in perspective which would make the technological image disappear and reaffirm perhaps invisible technology which, nonetheless, brings about real quality and new services. This phenomenon is beginning to be adequately interpreted and offers more advanced sales areas, optimum opportunities for help and service to the consumer. The example comes from France, Holland, Japan, and the USA, where numerous chains are dedicated to self-help and self-service, with specific products and information and the use of high technology at the consumers' service (as, for example, «automatically» choosing and buying jeans and T-shirts at night, recently experimented in the USA). One of the first examples of interactive shops, which proposes an empathic and biofeedback relationship with goods is represented by the American The Sharper Image chain (created at the beginning of the 80's) where the customer is encouraged to come in and deliberately experiment with all the latest technology, with no limit or control. In this case, the sales point is turned into a sort of showroom-gameroom where we can see grown-ups and children playing miniature ping-pong and paddle machines, employees testing the first electronic massage machine, parents playing with their children with a remote-control ball. All this happens in a space which also acts in terms of a «staging» as to opening and welcome: from the computerised skin testing proposed by Shiseido at its sales points for customers to choose the most adequate cosmetics, to the technological services at the Paris Fnac-musique. In all these cases, the key

words for obtaining a deeper commitment from customers are «Service + Technology».