

## The Spectacle of “East Meets West”: A Postmodernist Shopping Mall—Telford Plaza in Hong Kong

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**Abstract:** Like a woman embellishing herself in grandeur and elegance, the body of a shopping mall is aesthetically fashioned from time to time. The linear structure of a shopping mall is modernist itself, from which a shopping mall can depart, moving towards postmodernity by its narrative fashion. A shopping mall can be postmodernist by departing from the modernist linear structure. Telford Plaza, a local shopping mall in Hong Kong, consists of modernist and postmodernist elements, addressing the way of life of Hong Kong people through the spectacle of “the East Meets West.” The interplay of modernist and postmodernist elements evokes compelling sensations to strollers, with which “the East Meets West” resonates.

**KEYWORDS:** Postmodernism, shopping mall, the East Meets West, Hong Kong, spectacle, feminism, male gaze.

To strollers, Telford Plaza’s modernist elements constitute the modernity of the shopping mall. In simple words, Telford Plaza is a modernist shopping mall itself. The modernist elements of Telford Plaza are functionality, structural uniformity and a progressive proximity to future that adds to the modernity of the shopping mall. To sum up, then, the modernist features are functionality, linearity and progressivity.

Telford Plaza is a modernist shopping mall that functions to attract strollers to consume goods. Conner emphasizes that functionality is tantamount to the beauty of modern architecture (Connor 1989, 6–7). The key function of a modern shopping mall is to invite strollers to spend money on consuming goods without being too obvious. A shopping mall is thus “a distinctive sign of the global dissemination of late capitalism.” (Friedberg Ann 1993, 111). In a shopping mall, strollers visit shopping malls mainly for buying commodities. Spending money on what they like to purchase has become part of the modern life. Of strollers, women have keen interests in shopping. Unlike women who lack power and social status in the past, in modernity women spend lavishly in shopping malls in order to empower themselves (118). The ability to consume is in a way to show how much power one can gain. Consumption is a gain of power. In Telford Plaza, there are more than 100 shops located for strollers to shop. Each shop is made of glass that

allows strollers to stroll along shops to fascinatingly “window-shop.” Glass has long been adopted by international modernist architecture. Benjamin pioneers shopping arcades in Paris erected of glass roofs across inner passages in the nineteenth century. The arcades in Paris are the first international style of modern architecture (Stevenson 2003, 64), the symbols of modernist shopping malls. In many respects, shopping arcades in Paris are the forerunners to the modern department store (64). Strolling along each passage on every floor, strollers gaze at both sides of the glassy shops, taking part ardently in consuming goods.



Driven by desire, strollers unconsciously gaze at the beloved goods through the glass. Lacan points out that the cause of desire, the objects, more than the desire of the subject, drives the strollers to gaze at the objects. As this stage, looking the objects through the window and buying/consuming goods are disconnected. In delays, the desire of the subject retroactively processes the cause of desire—the objects, turning the objects into desired objects in the psychic field (Žižek 2005, 94). In other words, goods displayed in the glassy shops arouse the desire of strollers to gaze at the goods, creating the illusions of choices that retain the elevation of buying/consuming goods. Strollers are exhilarated, fascinated at buying goods while seeing the objects through the glass, that directly affects the consumption. Seeing, strolling and buying goods are closely connected to one another that constitute “the conspicuous consumption of the commodities of capitalist production” (Stevenson 2003, 64) featuring modernity. A modernist shopping mall functions to open up space to see, to stroll, to consume goods. Telford Plaza is a replica of the modernist shopping arcades originated in Paris as Benjamin saw it, however, as noted by Stevenson, Benjamin argues “the replication of built form does not result in any replication of the traditions, practices or aura of the original city or space” (Stevenson 2003, 65). Each shopping mall is connected to its specific aura in relation to power and consumption that cannot be replaced by a replica. Values of tradition and culture are embedded in each shopping mall. Telford Plaza is a modernist shopping mall that preserves values of residents of both the Kowloon Bay lower- and middle class. Outside the modernist shopping mall Telford Plaza, there is a platform (with a park) linked to different entrances of the shopping mall, some private estates on one side, and some public estates on the other side.



The design of the shopping mall as a function of a modernist shopping mall aims to preserve the

aura of the specific region to facilitate strollers' consumption. Telford Plaza is a modernist shopping mall that retains the Kowloon Bay aura, which functions to attract consumers in the region to consume. The way in which shoppers stroll to consume could be related to the structure of the shopping mall. To facilitate strolling, Telford Plaza, having conformed to unifying geometric principles, is a modernist architecture that is linearly structured. As a modernist shopping mall, Telford Plaza is divided into two wings: the new being linear and extended from the old wing. Both wings are linked by mobile escalators with strips of films of mural paintings on the wall as decorations for strollers enjoyably to stroll along the entire shopping mall.



Le Corbusier marks that a “plan” is the generator of modernist architecture: “The whole structure rises from its base and is developed in accordance with a rule which is written on the ground in the plan: noble forms, variety of form, unity of the geometric principle. A profound projection of harmony: this is the architecture” (Stevenson 2003, 65). Telford Plaza’s plan is the expansion of the old wing to the new wing. The parallel structure of conflating the new wing with the old wing constitutes the rationality, coherence, harmony and progress of the shopping mall. The mimetic geometric principle in art is an epiphany of pure spirit found in modernist architecture (Roberts 1995, 132). The shopping mall is linearly structured which allows strollers to stroll along the shops to gaze at the objects through the glass. Telford Plaza is a shopping mall structured in accordance to geometric principles, constituting the harmony, progression and rationality that shows the modernity of the shopping mall.

A linearly structured shopping mall functioning to appeal to strollers to consume goods, Telford Plaza is a modernist shopping mall that constantly fashions itself in order to appeal to shoppers to stroll along the shopping mall. Why Telford Plaza constantly changes its fashion is to “capture the proximate future” (Sweetman 2001, 62) to gain the affection of consumers, which is a sign of modernity. Capturing the proximate future by itself is forward-looking. Catching up with the latest trend, fashion embodies the moving, progressive present in proximity to the future. Fashioning a shopping mall is a feature of modernity. To attract a great number of shoppers to stroll and re-stroll along the shopping mall, Telford Plaza constantly fashions itself aesthetically. Meaghan Morris addresses this as a paradox embedded in every shopping place (1998, 67–8). On one hand, a shopping mall is physically, monumentally present. On the other hand, a shopping mall dissolves into abstract femininity. Fashioning a shopping mall incessantly reveals a kind of femininity. In Fall 2003, the “fashion” of Telford Plaza was “*Art Walk*.” “*Art Walk*,” which



attempted to capture the proximity to the future aesthetics, exhibits an aesthetic femininity. With the theme “*Art Walk*,” the shopping mall Telford Plaza opens up a space for strollers to step into the world of art. It is like Baudelaire strolling on the boulevard in Paris, depicting the melancholic city through spleen poems and prose. Meaghan Morris emphasizes “walking with every step, here and there, now and then” (Morris 1998, 64) as a signifier of strollers in shopper malls. Walking “step by step” is the way that strollers stroll in the shopping malls. Given that the shopping mall is fashioned as “*Art Walk*,” strollers stroll along the shopping mall “step by step” so as to be devoted to aesthetics. What the strollers anticipate in the future is the world of art/aesthetics in proximity to the present modernity, in which consumer culture is intermingled with of arts in the shopping mall. Telford Plaza is a modernist shopping mall that is constantly aesthetically fashioned. While Telford Plaza is a linear structured modernist shopping mall, constantly changing its fashion mainly to attract consumers to consume goods, Telford Plaza is aesthetically postmodernist in some ways that rise above modernity.

Charles Jencks asserts that, “... Postmodernism has the essential double meaning: the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence” (Jencks 1991, 6). Jencks is a representative of postmodernist architect who prestigiously dates the death of modernist architecture as July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1972 at 3:32p and gives a full account of the failure of modernist architectures to communicate with users fully and comprehensively on various levels simultaneously (9). The narrative Jencks advocates reflects the incredulity towards meta-narratives in legitimization of knowledge that Lyotard reveals (Lyotard 1984, xxiv). In postmodernity, legitimization of knowledge by scientific knowledge is open to attack. Each game has its own rules to establish the social bond with the people. In architecture, rules are open to pluralistic interpretations to achieve the communication



with users/people in society. Telford shopping mall is postmodernist in this sense. Against modern architecture’s failure to communicate with users, Jencks accounts for the articulation of postmodernist architecture targeting/aiming at different “taste cultures,” pluralism for participation of a wide range of users. At times, double-coding or irony is employed to facilitate various kinds of users (Jencks 1991, 6). Double-coding is articulated at two semiotic levels; namely, it addresses a concerned minority who cares about architectural meanings, and the local

inhabitants, or the public (Woods 1999, 99). According to Jencks, the birth of postmodernist architecture comes after the date of death of modernist architecture. Telford Plaza departs from modernity and gradually moves towards postmodernity. Having fashioned itself in pluralistic ways in different sectors, Telford Plaza articulates different taste cultures to communicate with a wide range of users, from the minority who pay special attentions to architectural meanings to inhabitants in Kowloon Bay and even the public at large. Double-coding as language is at work in communicating with a large variety of users. While Modernism fails to communicate with users, Postmodernism is a continuation and transcendence of Modernism. Telford Plaza is a postmodernist shopping mall that continues and transcends its modernity by opening up multiple elements.



To continue and transcends its modernity, Telford Plaza's post-modernist elements enable the shopping mall Telford to be postmodernistic. The postmodernist elements of Telford Plaza are hybridism, pluralism, effective communication. Pastiche, similarities and contradictions, parody, critical regions, nostalgia, the hyper-real, the popular culture, all come into play. These elements shall be illustrated by drawing on Jenck's semiotic study of architecture: "radical eclecticism," multi-valence, ornamentation, Venturi's "complexities and contradictions," Frampton's Critical Regionalism, Guy Debord's "Spectacle," and the demarcation between high and low culture. This shows how Telford Plaza continues and transcends its modernity to move towards postmodernity.

First of all, Telford Plaza is open to pluralism. Various sectors are designed to suit the taste of various consumers. Hybridization, meaning various elements come into the same place, is hence embraced. Jencks puts the change of styles to suit the desires of consumers as "radical eclecticism" (Klotz, 243). For example, generally, children's corner is specially designed for



Kids. To kids, pools of flamingoes and doves hung on the ceiling in circular form symbolize freedom, fun and imagination. Jencks adopts a semiotic view derived from Saussure to study postmodernist architecture. The context signified is a matter of intersecting language and communications (Connor 1989, 80). Children who visit the children's corner would be able to

comprehend the signified meanings given in the context—freedom and imagination in the children’s world. Because of the effective communication with users, Jencks draws the conclusion that postmodernist architecture mutates away from uni-valence to multi-valence (80). Unlike the uni-valence stressed in modernist architecture that focus on the single, absolute reading of each context, post-modernist architecture allows a multiplicity of reading contexts, or an advanced reading of the contexts (80). The ornamented children’s corner, for instance, allows the children to grasp what the meaning is all about before getting into the multiple readings of the context. Whereas ornamentation could be presented as a kind of alienation or a crime in a negative sense in modernist architecture, ornaments add to contextual meanings positively in postmodernist architecture, enhancing the communication with users. Connor claims that some architects associated with the movement of Contextualism—the change of meanings subject to the change in context—emphasize that modernist architecture fails to respond to physical contexts (81). On the contrary, postmodernist architecture takes advantages of ornamentation and Contextualism to communicate with users. In the children’s corner, for example, ornaments of pools of flamingoes and doves enrich meanings in the context, through which children fall



into the fantastic imaginative world. Telford Plaza is a postmodernist mall divided up into various taste cultures, contexts, specifically to communicate meaningfully with different end-users. Its pluralistic, hybrid, eclectic nature constitutes post-modernity of Telford Plaza.

Secondly, walking along the passages, strollers find complexity and contradictions between shops in Telford Plaza. Although shops are located in specific sectors for different users, shops put together in the same sector are complex and contradictory themselves. This can be seen in the contradictory shops located in Telford Plaza.



Robert Venturi speaks of architecture playfully, “Less is a bore” (Venturi 1996, 403). In the view of Venturi, postmodernist architecture is necessarily complex and contradictory based on the richness and ambiguity of modern architecture. Venturi states, “Hybrid rather than ‘pure,’ compromising rather than ‘clean,’ distorted rather than ‘straightforward,’ ambiguous rather than ‘articulated,’ perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as ‘interesting,’ conventional rather than ‘designed,’ accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear” (Venturi 1996, 403–

4). In this way elements add to complexity and contradictions of architecture, fulfilling the playfulness of post-modernity. This can be seen in the example discussed above.



In addition, complexity and contradictions of post-modernist architecture are found in the phenomenon of “both-and” instead of “either-or.” This means that binary opposites in the hierarchy are broken down, which yields complexity and contradictions in post-modern architecture. According to Fredric Jameson, rhetorical devices are employed in postmodernist architecture more than modernist architecture to stir up playfulness. Similarities and contradictions are juxtaposed at the same place that creates a formation of “pastiche” (Ward 1997, 23). For Jencks this is “a form of quotations” (24), while Jameson says that it is “blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor” (Jameson 1998, 5). I think both of them make sense of pastiche, as pastiche alludes to other references in simple and plain ways. For example, in the cosmopolitan setting of Telford Plaza, a Japanese shop that sells branded Japanese desserts and cakes and a French shop that sells French perfumes and flavors respectively are found. The Japanese cosmopolitan shop and the French cosmopolitan shop are decorated, embellished in their own unique cultures. However, both shops are located next to each other in the same area contradictorily yet similarly. Interestingly, the column outside the shops is fashioned in



impressionism rhetorically. The “pastiche” Telford Plaza established along the passage hence



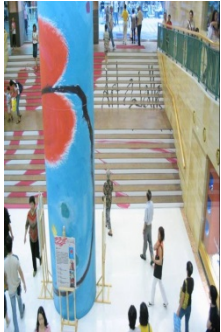
appeals to consumers of various kinds. Complexity and contradictions that forms the “pastiche” in playfulness is conveyed as “schizophrenia” that features postmodernity. This eradicates the sense of personal identity “I” when strolling (119).

Other than juxtapositions of shops within the shopping mall, Telford Plaza is generally divided into two wings: the old wing and the new wing as critical regions. The old wing embodies the Western culture, whereas the new wing embodies the Chinese culture. Both wings are separate critical regions joined together that demonstrate post-modernity in Telford Plaza, according to

Frampton’s Critical Regionalism.

Critical Regionalism is a strategy that “mediates” the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from peculiar places (Frampton 1983, 21). It “deconstructs” the overall spectrum of universal culture. At the same time, it yields synthetic contradiction to critique universal culture. Whereas universal culture is first and the foremost in modernity, in post-modernity universal culture is critiqued by taking elements from peculiar places to enhance the critical self-consciousness of cultures of peculiar regions, as Klotz notes. Two critical regions in Telford Plaza are the old wing of the Western style and the new wing of the Chinese style. Both regions speak of their own architectural narratives (Klotz 1992, 242): the East and the West respectively. Linking both regions together in the shopping mall constitutes the spectacle of “the East Meets West,” intensifying the critical awareness of where strollers are living in.

Moreover, in Telford Plaza, the old wing is Western. The pink embellished staircase with the theme “*Art Walk*” is at odds with the blue column in Impressionistic painting. A creative



collage of arts is thus formed or created (Ward 1997, 26), a sign of postmodernity. It is the “collaborative authorship” by which nothing purely new is allowed to take place (Connor 1989, 83). “Radical abstraction” occurs: the historical and the poetical (Klotz 1992, 242). The historical makes a reference to the modern Western cosmopolitan culture while the poetical makes a reference to the Western arts. Trans-avant-garde is thus employed to advocate the interchangeability of languages. In this case, both languages of the Western cosmopolitan culture and the Western aesthetic are manipulated to yield contradictions and similarities. Playfulness thus comes into effect. The tectonic is the primary architectural principle that resists gravity.



Pebbled diagonal gridlines of the ceiling leads to instability of the tectonic. Ornaments, decorations, juxtapositions of similarities and contradictions and the tectonic structure achieve the sensational visual experience by the tactile of human perceptions (Frampton 1983, 29). Imbued with post-modernist Western designs and structures, the new wing of Telford Plaza lively expresses the consciousness of the Western world by its Western narrative. The critical region of



the West unveils post-modernity.

Oppositely, the new wing is Chinese. The new wing of Telford Plaza, on the other hand, is associated with the Oriental Chinese culture. Colorful bars of Chinese paintings, Chinese



words and Chinese calligraphies are hung up from the glassy roofs. It triggers off a nostalgic feeling towards the Chinese antiques. The allusions to Orientalism are references of both the historical and the poetical, the distinctive features of ‘Radical Abstraction’ (Heinrich Klotz, 242), similar to the “Radical Abstraction” drawn from the West in the old wing (as discussed above). The Chinese paintings, Chinese words and Chinese calligraphies on the colorful bars are images which draw strollers into the world of Chinese heritage. It is what Baudrillard points out, the “hyper-real” taking over the real in the image-driven world (Baudrillard 1988, 166). One cannot distinguish between the imaginary/the simulacrum and the real, as differences are eradicated from the simulacrum and the real (167). Strollers are fascinated about the seeing, while the seeing is so obscene that the simulacrum cannot be differentiated from the real (Baudrillard 1993, 346). “Seeing” becomes paradoxical. Strollers engaged in the image-driven Chinese world are incapable to realize the real, falling into the traps of the simulacra—the Chinese words.



The level of critical self-consciousness aroused thus may not be as high as the desired level proposed by Critical Regionalism. Strollers may not be highly critical to the region, but may be immersed in the region, that affects the consumption. The new wing of Telford Plaza associated with the Chinese culture is driven by the images of Chinese paintings, Chinese words and Chinese calligraphies. The allusion to the past of Chinese aesthetics in the Critical Region suffices to be postmodernist, as illustrated above from the banners of Chinese calligraphies.

The East meets the West. This can be manifested by both the old and the new wings that are linked together by an escalator with strips of films of mural paintings. Before taking



the escalator to the new wing, there is a pathway linking to other entrances. The pathway is decorated with cloudy ceilings and baskets of flowers hanging from lamp-lights. Ornaments



help to fashion a Western pathway. Where the escalator goes up, there is a pink banner indicating the theme “*Art Walk*” and artificial butterflies hanging from the ceilings. All these ornaments help to decorate a shopping mall that is more user-friendly. Baskets of flowers, clouds, butterflies ... constitute a contemporary phantasmagoria, The escalator decorated with strips of films of mural paintings and butterflies marks the division of the old and the new wings.



The design of joining both the old wing associated with the Western culture and the new wing associated with the Chinese culture constitutes the spectacle of “the East Meets West.” The spectacle, according to Guy Debord, is “the very heart of society’s real unreality”



(Debord 1995, 3). It is not a collection of images, but rather “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (2). The spectacle of East meets West helps to construct the identity of Hong Kong people by its images. Plunged into the image-driven world, Hong Kong people are getting more alienated from the images than objects possessed and become the objects of the Hong Kong images. In other words, Hong Kong strollers have become the objects of Hong

Kong images. That is what Debord calls “the shift from being into having, and having into appearing” (3). On the whole, the spectacle of “the East Meets West” could be conceived



as a pastiche made of quotations that liberate nostalgia or a parody in a critical mockery tone. There could be different interpretations strollers come up with. This is the second-order meaning of the semiological system/myths (Barthes 2000, 114). The second order meaning is the meaning encoded/interpreted by readers. As Hong Kong citizens, we all share the myth of “East meets West” in post-colonial Hong Kong. We all share the sense of belonging to Hong Kong through the nostalgic narrative or discourse of “the East Meets West”; at the same time, the post-modernist design and decoration of the shopping mall allows the spectacle of “East meets West” to make a pun/parody on Hong Kong. The post-colonial Hong Kong is cynically mocked at through the spectacle of “East meets West.” It is “in a new kind of way” (Jameson 1998, 7) in postmodernist art, which invokes the necessary failure of arts and the aesthetic but does not necessarily mean “the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past” (ibid.) in the Hong Kong context. Strollers experience a new avant-garde art by strolling in a shopping mall in Hong Kong, the place where they live. It allows strollers to critically reflect upon their culture of “the East Meets West,” not the culture of the East nor the culture of the West alone. Hence, the spectacle of “East meets West” is post-modernist in that it welcomes and embraces pluralistic contradictory perspectives from both the East and the West.

The spectacle of East meets West is found where the demarcation between high and low culture collapses. Chinese paintings are posted outside shops in the new wing while Western paintings



are posted outside shops in the old wing respectively as a kind of everyday decoration. Both the



Chinese and Western cultures have been transformed into popular culture. The post-modernist shopping mall allows strollers to gain a sense of ease and comfort with “the East Meets West”

presented in the form of popular culture. Parody comes to the scene, as the boundary between high and low culture breaks down to welcome hybridity. Similar to the parody between shops, parody puts the high and low cultures together, the cultures of the East and the West together, in fragmentations. Hong Kong is neither in high nor low culture, neither absolutely in the East nor in the West but fragmented in a pastiche that cannot be defined—“the East Meets West.” Post-modernity manifests itself everywhere in Telford Plaza.

Telford Plaza is a linearly structured modernist shopping mall that constantly fashions itself to facilitate strollers to stroll along the shopping mall to consume goods. The narrative, fictional spectacle of “the East meets West” fashions the modernist shopping mall Telford Plaza, dividing the mall into critical regions of the East and the West, in which shops are similarly and differently juxtaposed and decorated with ornaments, contextually to communicate with users in playfulness and parodies. This demonstrates that Telford Plaza departs from the functional, linearly progressive modernity and moves towards the hybrid, pluralistic, communicative post-modernity, signifying that post-modernity is a continuation and transcendence of modernity, as pointed out by Jencks (Jencks 1991, 459). The spectacle of “the East meets West” is a vehicle for communicating with Hong Kong strollers, by which Telford Plaza as a post-modernist shopping mall continues and transcends modernity in critical, reflective local/indigenous dialects.

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