

## **Communicating the Culture of Consumerism: Spatiality of SM Mall, Baguio City, Philippines**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*An alternative view of looking at space as a communication apparatus that constructs the culture of consumerism, the study takes a postmodern lens and begins its discourses on the city, consumerism, SM as an exemplar space, and Baguio locals' display of consumerism. Soja's *Trialectics of Spatiality* as a frame of reference, emphasized the third space which unfolded the narratives of the perceived, conceived and lived spatiality of SM Baguio. Using the city map and photographs as cultural texts, the research draws into the discussion the notions of the city and space as ideations and actualizations that create and re-create the culture of consumerism.*

**Keywords:** culture of consumerism, trialectics of spatiality, spatiality

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### ***Baguio, SM and Theoretical Elaborations***

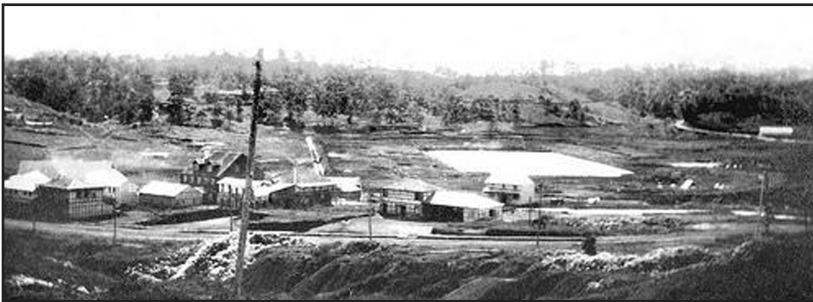
##### ***Baguio as a City, SM and Culture of Consumerism***

Culture is the transfer of shared knowledge, design of broader principles, constructs of the world and ways of living (Keesing, 1974, in Gudykunst and Kim, 1992, p. 12). It is paramount in society-building and viewed as a system that is dynamic and adaptable based on the visioning of its people. Bringing this definition in analysis of cities, culture is viewed as sporadic and supports the assumption that when cities change and develop, culture evolves along with it.

Looking into the history of Baguio City, an area discovered by the Americans in 1900, Baguio was primarily a “kafagway” or “rancheria” where Benguet people pasture their cattle and horses. An idyllic retreat, claimed and developed by the Americans, they worked closely with the Benguet people and migrant laborers and built roads to connect it to the lowland provinces and other cities. Later called “Baguio” after the moss-like green plant that covered the terrain; it has now established itself as the Summer Capital of the Philippines. Combining the rustic ambience and comforts of urbanity, Baguio’s evolution as a city has always been slow. Conscious of the city’s ethnic origin, Baguio local residents always consider clauses of development within the bounds of their distinct culture.



Panoramic View of Baguio, Benguet 1900 (John Tewell Collection)

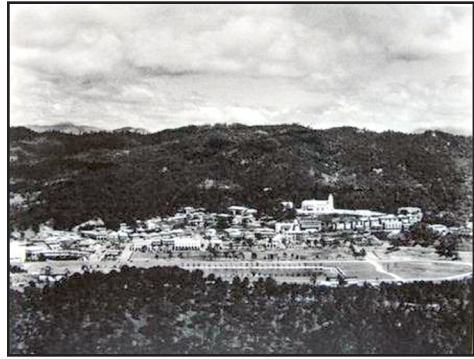


Baguio City Panorama, ca. 1940 after the war (John Tewell Collection)

However, changes are apparent and with the national goal of urbanization, commercial buildings continue to rise in the city. Amidst resistance of Baguio locals in the 1990s, the latest addition was the 16th SM (Shoe Mart) mall which began

operations on November 21, 2003, (occupying a lot area of 79,763 square meters, floor area of 106,231 square meters). It overlooks the whole city of Baguio.

Located at the top and in the center of the city, SM has niched itself as the premier shopping complex and tourist destination. With its operation, it set the pulse of the city and observable changes in behavior reflective of the consumerism culture among Baguio locals have become evident.



Baguio in the 1930's (Agaton Yaranon Collection)

Dialectics on city and culture reveals a dynamic “general mistrust of the artificial or ephemeral character of the city life, a sense that it encourages moral and other kinds of confusion, often juxtaposed with a reluctant admission that there is nonetheless something, appealing--exciting about the possibilities that it unfolds” (Gibson and Watson, 1995, p. 6). Reconstruction of modes of society from rural to urban, or presuppositions of the state of somewhere in between, makes its members absorb all these changes—witnessing and being involved in the experience of the emerging city parallel to that of culture. This change is inevitable and reluctance which makes people suspicious at first of any modifications implemented in the area is always present; however, people eventually begin to blend in and re-construct their lifestyle in synch with the city and its new culture.

SM Baguio identifies itself as an exemplar of consumerism culture which is a permutation of cities resulting from the capitalist mode of production. Engagement in consumerism is not limited to the desire for consumption but elaborates further on its signification where people take part in purchasing to become immersed in the social milieu (Norris, 2004, p. 1-2). In cities and spaces that are undergoing a transition from the rural to urban life, consumerism become pronounced because signs



[Top] The Old Pines Hotel; [Bottom] SM Baguio which now occupies the old Pines Hotel (Dody Campos)

already connote to real objects that dominate consumer culture and further pushes individuals to consume because it is founded on an insatiable lack (Baudrillard, in Norris, 2004, p.6). This “lack” is transposed to a hybrid form of consumerism that Soja (in Arentsen, et al., p. 2) points out as a consumption, not only of signs, but already inclusive of visual and experiential which strengthens engagement in consumption. Inclusion of such in consumerism culture is communicated through varied apparatus.



SM City Baguio (Yzanne Merced, 2010)

### *SM, Baguio in Transit and Spatiality*

The physical space reveals itself as the communicator of consumerism culture. Space as literally defined as the point of distance from one another is concrete and measurable. Space, in itself communicates. Baudrillard explains that communication in this level of discourse is no longer speech or language and that it has widely spread through the signs and symbols (Norris, 2004, p. 7). He explains that the “syntax of consumption has an object/advertising system that constitutes signification which is not language” (p.7). Inherent in this is the simplicity and effectiveness of the code wherein it is empty of meaning and communication becomes a language of signals (2004). This drowns all other modes of overt language because the way it is signified is dominant across discourses but contains some semblance to tangibility. The current study considers consumerism as a communicated culture that emanates from space with SM as an exemplar in the city. Spatial communication, becomes the construct of consumerism culture as a “landscape representation” (Falkheimer, et al., in Way, M., 2006, p. 310) containing action, performance and interaction which produces and constitutes a space transforming it outside fixed sections and regular geometries (Elk & Stober, in Way, M., 2006).

Postmodern cities and spaces present juxtapositions of geometric concepts of distance, connections, intersections and its elemental ideological conflicts of time and its inhabitants (Foucault, in Soja, 1996, p. 17). Elaborating Foucault, Soja explores the concept of spatiality/space as an ontological restructuring that presupposes being-in-the-world that is definable with its historicity, society and spatial beings (1995). Emphasizing Thirdness in analysis of space, he explains that a space is not just a tangible construct, but is socially construed, and its inhabited idealizations occur through actualizing behaviors that are accorded to and within the space.

Pertinent to space, is arrangement and ordering. “The logic of space leads to ideology” (Arentsen, et al., 2007, p. 8) and, central to its production is the confluence between the physical and social space wherein dialogue, identity and collective consciousness are involved (p.9). Translation of social norms and mode of economics are seen through the visual ordering of

spaces (2007, p. 10). In the ordering of spaces, specific to studies on cities, the collective space produces an embodied collective identity and culture that is recognizable (p. 16). SM, in this study, represents the space that communicates the culture of consumerism as established by the locals through interspersing the space within conduct of their activities, inhabiting it and actualizing it as iconic of consumerism.

### *Spatiality Becomes Pronounced*

Depiction of spatial arrangements is visualized through maps being the “symbolized image of geographical reality that represents selected features or characteristics of a place (Crampton, 2001, p. 697).” Mapping is elemental in representing places and locations and reveals resemblance to spaces in the real terrain. Derrida posits that we have “to read between the lines of the map—‘in the margins of the text’ to discover the silences and contradictions” that are salient in the real image (2001). Maps are cultural texts that reveal epistemes which contain assemblages of roads that are created to make spaces accessible to construct possibilities of communing. Roads are cultural texts too that reveal notions of society as arranged. These cultural texts are essential in this study which seeks to illustrate the manner in which SM as an exemplar constructs the culture of consumerism in the city.

Architectural design is also part of the discourse of the city. Its display enables understanding of an epoch which the city and its people wish to reveal. The study likewise explored the design of SM as an exemplar of a city and society in transition.

### *Points of Trialectics*

Edward Soja looks at the logic of space to reveal how reality reflects ideology. Looking at space from an epistemological point of view, Soja (in Arentsen, et al, 2007, p. 6) expounds on three main concerns: 1) space is never given, 2) space is a culturally constructed entity, and, 3) a part of the general cultural web. Space is material and its representations will never become a social ideology until constructed and idealized by individuals.

Interjecting the concept of Third Space as an “alternative construct that transcends both” locates spaces in the changing societies (p. 9). Third Space is created by the effects of cultural change and are spaces of transition between localities over time; eluding the single power structure and considering the possibility for socio-political transformation (2007). Soja posits that “there is no such thing as a postmodern city” and what we currently have are transition cities that are hybrid forms within changing realities (2007). City in transit is very indicative of Baguio wherein the presence of SM communicates culture of consumerism that elaborates on the city’s cultural changes and modifications.

Thirdness in space is interpreted through living and actualizing the space which is discursive in nature and inclusive of narratives of societal transformations. Trialectics of Spatiality highlights these elemental concepts (Soja, 1996, p. 65) and within these clauses, this study locates itself:

- Perceived Space – consists of concrete spatial forms that can be empirically mapped; inclusive of spaces that are outcomes of human activity.

*SM and the city become locatable spaces that can be mapped.*

- Conceived Space – constructed in mental or cognitive forms; dominant space in any society that is expressed through systems of signs and symbols; represents power and/or ideology.

*Baguio locals become entranced and engulfed in the consumerism culture.*

- Lived Space (Third Space) – consists of actual social and spatial practices; overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects and tends to be expressed in systems of nonverbal symbols and signs; a mode of thinking about space that draws upon both the material and the mental spaces of perceived and conceived , but extends beyond in scope, substance, and meaning.



*SM and the city are actualized by the locals.*

All three create spatiality and is defined as: (Soja, 1996, in Arentsen et al., 2007, p. 8)

“a [i.e., socially-produced space] that is substantiated and is a recognizable social product, part of a ‘second nature’ [i.e. the transformed and socially concretized spatiality [[socially-produced space]] arising from the application of purposeful human labour] which incorporates as it [i.e. socially produced space] socializes and transforms both physical and psychological spaces.”

Trialectics of spatiality blurs compartmentalization and enunciates the intertextuality of a single space. SM then becomes a discursive spatial apparatus that contain notions of city and consumerism culture.

### *Spatializing SM Baguio*

Looking into the city map of Baguio as a text to show the silent meanings in the arrangement of spaces in the city, inclusive of SM and the vehicular flow in the roads within the vicinity of the mall, photographs of the mall and old Baguio City photographs, questionnaire as administered to 23 Baguio local residents revealed the Trialectics of Spatiality of SM Baguio as exemplar for communicating the culture of consumerism. This study tentatively answers the perceived, conceived, and lived spaces of the mall in the city of Baguio.

## **THE TRIALECTICS OF SPATIALITY OF SM BAGUIO**

### *Perceived Space*

Focusing on the visual representation of SM in the map, one can observe that it is strategically located in the middle of the city, surrounded mostly by main roads (light yellow in color), showing easy accessibility of SM Baguio. As depicted in the city



map, SM is locatable—thus, the mall as a space in Baguio is one of the easiest structures to identify because of its location in the middle—an emblem where city life revolves around it. Its location opens SM to possibilities of constructing the other parts of spatiality. SM in the map is further emphasized in the way the company logo is used to denote to the space. Familiarity of the logo directs the gaze of the map viewer, further etching its identity in the city.

Out of 11 main roads widely used by vehicles in the city, 9 of these roads can directly lead to SM Baguio; three connecting main roads can be used to go directly to SM, and, four connecting main roads and streets that can lead to its direction. Road connectivity shortens the distance from one space to another; making SM a viable space for people to commune in.

**Table 1.1** Roads and streets that may directly lead to SM Baguio

Main roads that may directly lead to SM Baguio	Intersecting Main Roads that may lead to SM Baguio	Short-cut (main roads and streets) that may lead to SM Baguio
Session Road	Leonard Wood and Session Road	Governor Pack Road to UP Baguio Drive
Harrison Road	Kisad Road and Governor Pack Road	Father Carlu Street to Session Road
Military Cut-off Road	Military Cut-off Road and Upper Session Road	Harrison Road to Calderon Street
Kisad Road		Assumption to Session Road
Kennon Road		
Legarda Road		
Leonard Wood Road		
Loakan Road		
Governor Pack Road		
9	3	4



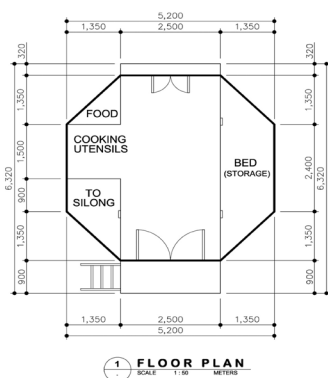
Looking beyond the prevailing signs of consumption, what SM wants its customers to consume is also the space itself. The structure includes a veranda overlooking the city—projecting a space that can be conceived not only of objects/signs but also that of visuals.

SM provides a spectacular view of the city and occupies a commanding, panoptic position in the landscape of Baguio.

Visual consumption is not only through the picturesque view of the city. The architectural design of SM combines the regional prototype mall structure (box-type mall) and the local design which is indicative of postmodern architecture, surrounding itself with veranda, wide-open spaces, circular slopes, following the contours of the mountains of Baguio. Examining the floor plan of SM Baguio, one can see a strong resemblance to native Cordillera houses.



Traditional Cordillera Houses (John Tewell Collection)



Re-scaled Floor Plan and Elevation of a Traditional Cordillera House  
(Peter John L. Sta Maria, 2010)



[Left] Dap-Ay- a meeting space for Cordillera elders (Shubert Ciencia, 2007)  
[Right] SM's Atrium - A modified version of Dap-Ay and Cordillera House Roofing Style

Merging the local and regional architecture, SM re-interprets the history of Baguio and its locals. Dap-Ay, a traditional space where elders hold their meetings in the olden times have been re-interpreted by the mall, recreating it as Atrium which serves as a “communal area” where events and programs are held; a popular choice for people to sit on, talk, wait, etc. The Atrium reinvents that sense of community for the Baguio locals that enable the recall of ethnic history and origins.

The merging of design invites the people (both locals and tourists) to consume both visually and experientially. Inside SM Baguio, one can feel the merging of the indigenous culture and the rawness of the view from the mall is interspersed with the urban lifestyle of shopping accommodating the traditional/rural with that of the urban/modern lifestyles.

### *Lived Spaces*

The perceived and conceived spaces of SM Baguio make it easy for most locals to actualize the space. Out of a total of 23 respondents, there were no indications of 0 visits to SM. Four times a week is the highest number (6 respondents), three times a week indicated by 4 respondents and at least twice a week for three of the respondents. It can be implied that most locals inhabit SM because of its perceived and conceived notions of spaces. Even among the tourists, SM Baguio is one of the most frequently visited spaces in the city.

SM as a lived space is actualized through the conduct of activities. Table 1.2 provides a list of activities conducted by respondents inside the mall. Space provisions in SM offer a one-stop, multi-tasked area that can be easily absorbed within one's daily routine. Semblance of life force as mundane activities can be conducted inside it makes SM not only a conceived space for consumption but evolves as a needed space. Actualizing consumerism through consumption of signs (shopping), visuals and experiences, SM as idealized by the people who inhabit the place becomes lived. Constructed consumptions play between reality and illusion. The space becomes livable for locals because of the creation of confluence between the illusory (shopping) and the real (conduct of daily activities i.e., paying bills, meeting with friends, etc.). SM becomes a space which satisfies the needs of both worlds. This makes the consumerism culture in SM as an exemplar and unique form, bringing in a hybrid space for consumption. The space makes city life grounded in the local tradition while immersing the locals in consumerism culture.

**Table 1.2** List of activities in SM

ACTIVITIES IN SM	TOTAL
Shop	13
Eat	10
Relax/rest	9
Meet with family	4
Meet-up with friends	13
Others	
Browse	1
Window-shop	1
Pay bills	7
Go to the gym	3
Personal healthcare (derma, spa, check-up)	2
Use wi-fi	1
Meet-up with colleagues	1

*Spatiality*

With SM as a perceived, idealized, and conceived by the locals and deeply enunciated through lived experiences and actions inside the space, the city itself has constructed a space for consumerism culture. SM’s spatiality produces that ideation of consumption as integrated in the local people’s lifestyle. Alongside the substantive changes of Baguio City as it transitions from rural to urban, or probably its location of somewhere in-between transitions, SM Mall becomes a socially-produced space that concretizes conceptions of “historical consciousness.” SM becomes “at home” in the city and becomes “a home” for the locals because of its incorporation of the rural and urban architectural design that furnishes a similitude of the city’s historicity. SM as an exemplar space for consumerism culture aids in the recreation of “historical consciousness” among the locals. Time becomes elemental inside SM as the space

re-conceptualizes the distinct culture of Baguio as conveyed inside the mall—a coagulated space that allows the locals and tourists to conceive of the past and the present... that which makes SM's spatiality tentatively suitable for the city and the people. Tentative acceptance of the structure of SM as a space in the city furthers its aptness as demonstrated by the locals' modified lifestyle.

The mall becomes a social space where locality and semblances of urbanization are positioned recreating an emerging culture of consumerism that which is unique. Indicative of the city's transformation and identifiable indicators of a peripheral society, consumerism is practiced through visual consumption (products/objects), experiential aspects (through the conduct of daily activities in the mall and presentation and representation of reality and illusion). Consumerism as a culture becomes embedded in the city life of Baguio as exemplified by SM and the locals.

Through spatiality of SM, the city and its people perceive, conceive, and live the space. SM becomes an exemplar spatiality that creates and re-constructs a city. With SM at the center of the discursive field, the cycle of the culture of consumerism is perpetuated in the larger city-sphere... where SM becomes part of it and in this tentative cycle becomes the city itself.

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### **Photographs and Images**

[Photographs of Dody Estepa Campos] Old Baguio Historical Club. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/oldbaguio/>

[Photographs of Shubert Ciencia]. Dap-Ay, Banaue, Ifugao. Retrieved from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/bigberto/2221440875/>

[Photographs of Yzanne Merced]

[Peter John Sta Maria] Road Map depicting magnetic pull & Re-scaled floor plan

[Photographs of John Tewell] Old Baguio Photograph Collection. Retrieved from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/johntewell>

[Photographs of Agaton Yaranon] Old Baguio Historical Club. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/oldbaguio/>