

Chapter 6: Co-creating Fashion Spaces

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Abstract

Recent developments in digital technology and consumer culture have created new opportunities for retail and brand event concepts which create value by offering more than solely marketing or transactions, but rather a place where passion is shared. This chapter will define the concept of ‘fashion space’ and consumer experience, and delves into strategies for creating experiences that both align with a brand’s ethos and identity and build brand communities. It will provide insight on creating strong shared brand experiences that integrate physical and digital spaces, AR and VR. These insights can be used for consumer spaces but also for media and buyer events, runway shows, test labs and showrooms.

Since its launch in 2007, international fashion brand COS has focused on creating fashion spaces that build and reinforce a COS fashion community. COS retail stores with their extraordinary architecture, both traditional and contemporary, contribute stories and facilitate intense brand experiences. Moreover, COS’ dedication to share the artistic inspirations of its people led to collaborating on interactive and multi-sensory installations which allow consumers to affectively connect to the brand’s personality and values. Thus, the brand was able to establish itself firmly in the lifestyle of its customers, facilitating and developing their aesthetics and values.

Introduction

Globalization, individualization, e-commerce and the ever-growing influence of social media have had a tremendous impact on the use of spaces in fashion. After the turn of the 20th century, the post-industrial ‘re-orchestration’ of relations between producers and consumers has become tangible in many shopping destinations around the world with the emergence of flagship and concept stores, temporary stores and empty retail space. In the meantime, virtual fashion sites are recalibrating relations across fashion networks, generating new collaborations between cultural practices including art, design, fashion, production and consumption.

Over the last 20 years, globalization and e-commerce have also resulted in overcrowded marketplaces in which commodification is common. Thus, branding that functions as a mark of a relationship between products (Lury, 2002) and between products and services by adding symbolism and emotion, is of an increasing importance. Growing individualization has added to this. Millennials and post-millennials value experiences over products and join brand communities for identity formation and communication (Caru and Cova, 2003). This trend has led many fashion brands to reinvent their value proposition which manifests in the curation of customer experiences that surpass traditional formats of fashion spaces like transactional retail stores and runway shows. Good examples of this are Burberry’s Makers House, a showcase of the work of the brand’s designers and craftspeople held in an old Soho warehouse, and Hermes’ multi-sensual and interactive exhibition ‘Avec Elle’ held at Tokyo’s National Art Center which invited visitors to move from one film scene to the next, as the Hermès woman reveals her personality through the pieces in the autumn/winter 2018 collection (Warburton, 2018).

The experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) is recognized as a framework to understand the new consumer. Experiential consumption refers in general to the attainment of enriching emotional experiences through which consumers attempt to improve the quality of their lives. It is driven by the desire to live, not to have, and therefore prioritizes lived experiences over ownership. Brand communication has an important function in this framework. However, brand communication practitioners must often still find their way from a firm-centered to a relational branding perspective in which the informed customer co-creates experiences (Holbrook 2018; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Only the individual consumer can determine his or her personal experience with the brand. What communication professionals can do is “provide consumers with a platform to experience brands in a way that contributes to their quality of life” (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2005: 193). The strategic goal of fashion communication thereby shifts from effectively communicating to customers to *affectively connecting* customers to the brand’s personality (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle, 2006). This means that communication needs to enter a two-way relationship with the customer that is emotionally charged.

COS – An Introduction

Founded by the H&M Group in 2007, COS (Collection of Style) has become a go-to for women and men seeking timeless and seasonless clothing. “At COS, we want to propose a style inspired by architecture, graphics, design and arts”, explains Creative Director Karin Gustafsson (COS.com). The brand owes its success as much to the casual complexity of the clothing as to their reasonable, mid-market prices. COS opened stores all over Europe and expanded—after only five years—to Asia and the Middle East. In this process, the brand has conceptualized spaces that are more than just retail, using exceptional architecture that contributes rich narratives. These spaces include a Neoclassical bank in Sydney, a modern edifice in Istanbul and a theatre built in Los Angeles in the 1920s.

A refreshing, customer-focused logic is another reason for the brand’s success. Since its launch, COS has cultivated a sense of authenticity and promotes itself not with just images of product, but by welcoming the consumer into their world with an in-house magazine and non-commercial booklets. The brand’s London flagship store in Regent Street incorporates a small but comfortable sitting room, complete with modern chairs and a coffee table which displays their publications. The brand thus provides stories which offer insight into the principles and creatives that have inspired the brand and its community. True to this style, COS has supported the arts since the launch of the brand through collaborations with established and emerging artists, galleries and creative studios which include, amongst others, Design Miami (2017), Agnes Martin (at the Guggenheim, New York, 2016), Michael Sailstorfer (Berlin, 2015), André Fu/studio AFSO (Hong Kong, 2015) and the COS x Serpentine Galleries Park Nights in London. These collaborations focus on co-creating spaces together with customers using interactive installations. The collaborations with London-based design duo Studio Swine and New York architectural design studio Snarkitecture are the most striking examples of this practice.

Brand experience in space

The creation of meaningful brand experiences in physical space is the focus of this chapter. Practices in space have been subject of research for some time. Space, in essence, is human movement, creating paths, intersections and borders. Space becomes place when human emotions imbue an environment with interpersonal meaning based on everyday practices. Place thus has an identity, relations and a history (Sherry et al., 2007). ‘Non-places’ don’t have these characteristics, but often—as in the case of anonymous hypermarkets (huge supermarkets)—offer a blank canvas for the creation of new meaning. Of course, space is also ordered and planned into places by governments and experts.

Henri Lefebvre (1991, first published in 1974) describes interdependent ‘moments’ of space as a generative process of social relations. Space is calculable and enables social and technological domination, but it also represents and gives room to interactions of production and reproduction which form the basis of coexistence. Therefore, he sees a triad of space at play: conceived-perceived-lived space. Conceived space is at work in representations of space, i.e. the drawings of an architect or plans from experts and officials. Perceived space is representational space which refers to how the space is perceived by visitors and inhabitants based on their habitual signs and symbols. Lived space, finally, refers to the spatial practice of its everyday users. Users of space can potentially redefine the planned meaning of the space and agree on new meanings. Seen over time, place thus becomes a moment in space (Overdiek, 2017: 122).

Spatiology and third place

Lefebvre’s so-called spatiology provides a method for analyzing the spatial processes of fashion events and spaces which are at the same time planned and ‘signed’ by the brand; interpreted through its perception by networks of users, suppliers, designers and commentators (Alexander, 2019; Alexander and Kent, 2017); and populated by fashion consumers. Translated to the current context, the planned and situated event of a fashion show for example is co-created by the perceptions of the above stated relevant networks as well as by the practices and interpretations of fashion consumers. This might be facilitated through digital practices like live streaming the event. However, Lefebvre places emphasis on the importance of embodied *moments in space* which refers to the consumer’s material and sensory interaction with the brand. Sensitivity amplifies this experience, and sound and smell play prominent roles. Bodies can thus (re)appropriate or (re)invent space by inventing new functions and meaning.

The recent development in retail space embraces the brandscape (Riewoldt, 2002) and servicescape (Bitner, 1992) approaches in which the store design merges with the brand personality. These approaches are very visible in the themed flagship store (Kozinets et al., 2002; Crewe, 2018) and retail environments catering to emotions with special layout, design, atmospheric and social means. Such environments allow consumers to experience the brand values and vision in a three-dimensional hyper-reality. Design, atmospherics and social, so-called *cues* in these spaces are highly sensorial and interactive. Nike’s House of Innovation 000 flagship store on 5th Avenue in New York for example uses all of these cues to create an immersive experience. It is also completely module. The walls can be moved, and the store can be entirely shifted using a grid system to make way for special events (Green, 2018).

Finally, the concept of the ‘third place’ (Oldenburg 1999, Alexander, 2019) is important in understanding the practice of fashion spaces. Oldenburg coined this concept by looking at the everyday life of consumers – the home being the first place and work being the second place. The third place is a public environment which is a neutral ground in between the private (often lonely or role-determined) home and the rule-guided workplace. The third place is a place to relax, socialize and browse. It is “a public place that hosts the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals” (Oldenburg, 1999: 16). This may include a gym or pub, but also a bookstore or concept store. Third places are homely and accessible and promote a sense of community. To some extent, this idea of the third place is also applicable to online platforms such as social media which offer socialization with likeminded individuals.

Spatial experience as a ‘magnifying moment’

Brand experiences are “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings and cognitions) as well as behavioral responses that are evoked by brand related experiential attributes when consumers interact with brands” (Brakus et al., 2009: 53). Leading perspectives on brand experience as well as those on customer experience describe experience as the seamless effect of a brand’s services across all physical and digital touchpoints on the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). But not every experience is extraordinary. There are peak moments along the broader customer journey. Following Lefebvre’s theory, we can call these ‘magnifying moments’ and relate them closely to embodied experiences in physical space.

Lefebvre first observed this kind of amplified experience at festivals in rural France. In 1945 he wrote: “Festivals contrasted violently with everyday life — but they were not separate from it. They were like everyday life, but more intense (...) moments of that life (...) were reunited, amplified, magnified in the festival” (Elden, 2004: 118). The most powerful experiences are emplaced and create meaning. A brand needs to provision environments where consumers can literally meet the brand and create a sense of place (Sherry 1998). Consumers’ motives to participate in this co-creation of brand space can be hedonic (fun, pleasure) but also epistemic, in which they search for new meaning or affirmation of meaning. Cova (1997; with Cova 2002; with Caru 2003) provides further insight with his ‘tribal’ approach to marketing. As a countermovement in society and a reaction to growing individualism and fragmentation, he sees the consumers’ search for communities of emotion. Following Maffesoli (1996), he calls these communities neo-tribes, as they rally similar to tribes of archaic societies around non-rational elements like rituals and shared passions. Examples are skateboarders, antique car fanatics, vinyl lovers, World-of-Warcraft gamers, Game-of-Thrones fans etc.. Neo-tribes are unstable, small-scale and affectual. They come into life and fade by the symbolically and ritually manifested commitment of their members. Also, unlike archaic tribes, a person can belong to several neo-tribes.

How can a brand communicate to align with neo-tribes? Cova (1997) speaks of the ‘linking value’ brands and products can have. Ephemeral postmodern tribes are always on the lookout to consolidate, affirm or strengthen their union: a site, a symbol, the support of a ritual. Consequently, the tribal way of building customer loyalty is to focus on the support of customer/customer relationships instead of the customer/brand relationship. Doing this, they are building affective loyalty by supporting rituals and the formation of cult places. Rather than being a brand community, the neo-tribe can be a community supported by a brand. Brand-consumer relationships are thus built on trust and an emotional bond between the brand and the consumer, facilitated through brand values.

Supporting neo-tribes, the brand engages in a social contribution. Broadening Cova's approach means to look at brand ethics and a growing consumer need to be connected, inspired and to embrace values and act on them. Co-creating meaningful affective experiences is only possible based on a brand vision that includes values, most prominently transformational values like inclusivity and sustainability. Recent brand activities such as Nike's advertisement with American football player Colin Kaepernick point in this direction (Sherman, 2016). At best, spatial brand activities can support and inspire consumers in their transformation to more sustainable and racially and socially inclusive cultures.

Pine and Gilmore (1999) presented a 'realms of experience' model. This model distinguishes four different types of experience along the axes of intensity of experience and active participation of consumers in the creation of the experience. These four realms are characterized as: entertaining, learning, aesthetic and escapist. Whereas the result of entertaining and learning realms which have a lower intensity of experience, is happiness and satisfaction, aesthetic and escapist realms can realize enchantment in consumers. The more they require the active participation, or co-creation, of the consumer, the more they forge affective bonds between brands and consumers. The realms are ideal types. In reality, they often overlap. With Lefevre and Cova in mind, this model can be enriched with a realm of transformation: The more a space integrates a transformative value theme with characteristics of intensity and active participation, the more it might become a place of enchantment and transformation for the consumer.

Co-creation and (digital) interactivity

The consumer is being empowered to co-construct a personalized experience around herself within a firm's 'experience environment' (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Like experience itself, co-creation often seems to be an industry buzzword without being entirely understood (Holbrook, 2018). Co-creation is neither the outsourcing of activities to customers (like self-scan cashiers) nor the scripting of customer events. It is an active dialog with the consumer and involves transparency of information and access to information and space. The customer needs to be treated as an equal partner in interactive spaces — in online and in physical environments. Customer engagement has evolved as a concept measuring the intensity of an individual's connection with a brand's offerings or activities. Involvement of the values of this customer is seen as a key element to achieve engagement. Vivek et al. (2018) point to four important dimensions of engaging marketing programs. They must generate dialogue, encourage the facilitative role of the brand, provide authentic connection, and offer relevance to customers.

The intensity of life and embodied encounters of a brand and people in physical space is strongly related to customer engagement. Moor (2003: 41) speaks of a 'space of proximity' which needs to be created by the brand. Even "as organizations move to digital platforms, the constituents of the physical realm remain central to understanding the customer experience — indeed, they may act as a reference point" (Bolton et al., 2018). Current developments in technology such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) thus merge the physical with the virtual space, rather than substituting it. Traditional retailers are bringing digital channels into stores and online retailers are opening brick-and-mortar shops, seeking to co-create experiences which cannot (yet) be delivered by a device. Interactive consumer experiences must now be conceptualized in a holistic and omnichannel context. Bolton et al. (2018) explain how customer experiences are harmonized at the intersection of physical, digital and social realms. They depict customer experience in a three-dimensional figure characterized by low to high digital density, low to high physical complexity and low to high social presence.

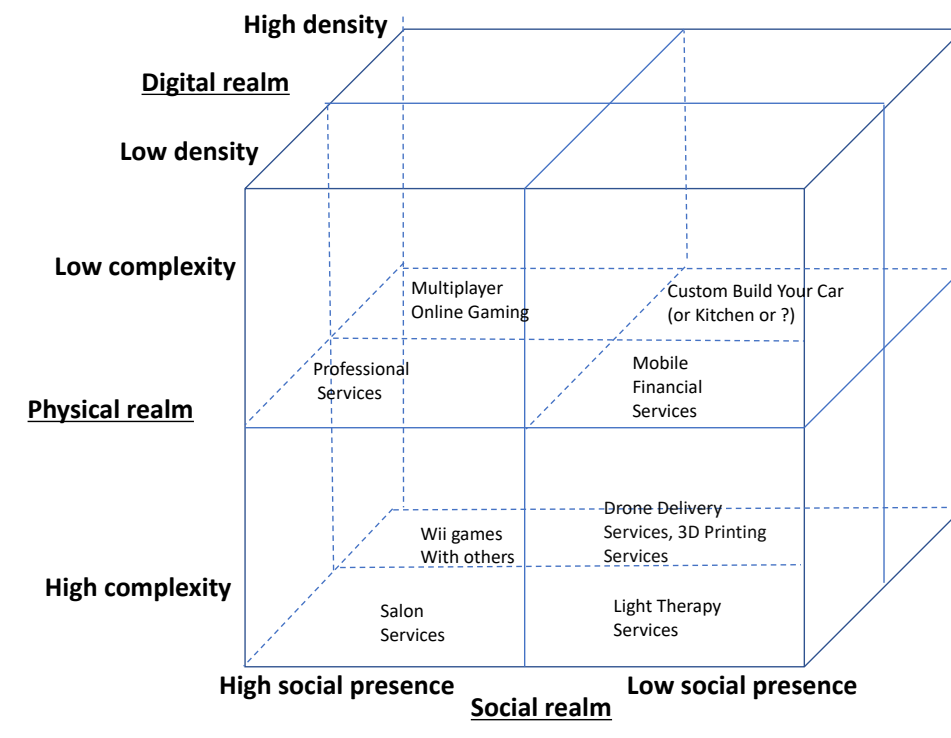


Figure 1: Future B2C retail and professional services in the digital/physical/social realm (Bolton et al., 2018: 784). Reprinted with permission.

Bringing together digital, physical and social realms can generate new hybrid fashion spaces. Experiments like H&M's collaboration with Moschino using augmented reality, and the Magic Leap One at New York Fashion Week in October 2018 (see Rocamora 2018 for more examples) give a glimpse on the possibilities which arise once technology will be more mature and accessible for broader groups of consumers. Data exchange between customers and brands in physical space create strong feedback loops. Using data analytics and mobile strategies can hugely enhance the personalization of experiences. A good example is Nike using the Nike app and Nike Plus, a free digital membership program at their 'House of Innovation 000'. The store's mannequins are displayed with QR codes, which app users can scan. Once the code is scanned, the app tells them what the mannequin is wearing, which can then be delivered to a fitting room or brought out by an employee. Nike Plus members get perks like free courier delivery, free shipping for online purchases, and 'unlocks', which can include anything from exclusive access to in-demand shoes to members-only store hours (Green 2018). However, the use of digital devices, VR and AR needs to be well balanced as consumers keep searching for sensory and bodily experiences and life social interaction in physical spaces.

The rise of the 'evental' space

Drawing on Lefebvre's 'magnifying moment in space' (Overdiek 2017: 124) and Cova's 'linking value' (1997), fashion spaces can facilitate meaningful, sometimes transformative experiences for their customers. Affect is strongly addressed when and where brands permeate the everyday life and spaces of consumers. This explains why the pop-up store and ritually emerging festivals and markets have become so widespread in brand communication. These formats can emerge in everyday environments—empty shops and offices or as a nomad

pop-up store in public places—and forge both surprise and a spatial disruption of the daily routine for consumers.

Pop-up stores are pivotal for physical, yet digitally connected, spaces in fashion. They are perfect places to test or enter markets and co-create experiences and products (Taube and Warnaby, 2017). Moreover, for the brand, they present a smaller financial risk than investing in a festival or flagship store. As such, they are also available to independent brands and start-ups. Often misunderstood as point of sales, pop-up stores are much more effective at branding than at transaction. Pop-up stores need to have a pre-pop-up and post-pop-up phase which is taking place online and via social media. Also, they need to supply ample opportunities for the consumer to exchange data with the brand i.e. by taking pictures and posting them with a hashtag. Pop-up stores thus can be conceptualized as affective fashion spaces and as spatial events. They share a lot of characteristics with what Tafesse (2016) describes as *new event marketing*. As affective fashion spaces, pop-up stores are ‘evental’ and activate the following four processes with consumers:

1. Stimulating all senses
2. Engaging in bodily movement
3. Providing space for social interaction
4. Facilitating discovery and learning

Temporary spaces with interactive installations such as those conceptualized and curated by fashion brand COS can be seen as an aesthetic extension of the pop-up store. They are temporary and perceived as ‘scarce’ and they are multi-sensory. A sound case to explain and exemplify Tafesse’s four processes in fashion space is the *Loop* installation by COS x Snarkitecture.

***Loop* by COS x Snarkitecture**

In 2017 COS revealed *Loop*, an installation by New York-based design studio Snarkitecture, at the Gana Art Center in Seoul, South Korea. The installation filled two rooms and was based on the ball path children’s toy: a sequence of four distinct metal tracks which curved throughout a white space, creating an intertwined path. The sculpture was brought to life by the steady hum of 100,000 marbles, with one marble introduced every five seconds.



Image 1: COS x Snarkitecture, Seoul *Loop*. Image courtesy of COS. Reprinted with permission.

1. Stimulating the senses

While the professionals who conceived *Loop* called it an installation, it worked very much like an immersive space: an environment that transported the visitor to a ‘different planet’. The sphere was serene, contemplative and mesmerizing. The *Loop* tracks were suspended from the ceiling above the visitors’ heads and its whole visuality was of beautiful simplicity and rhythm, created by the movement of the rolling marbles. It could be perceived as a metaphor of life going by, or as an analogy of a natural moving phenomenon such as a river. At the same time, its form and function were that of a well-known toy some of the visitors might have had in their own childhood.

Regarding sound, the steady hum of the rolling marbles had a mantra like effect causing slight vibrations across the space. Visitors could touch the tracks and pick up and place marbles. The ball track ended in a second room with a sea of marbles. Deliberately, to keep the experience clean and simple, there was no scent or taste utilized in this space. However, over the duration of the installation, Seoul-based organic brand Novac hosted a pop-up juice bar at the entrance of the Art Center.



Image 2: COS x Snarkitecture, Seoul *Loop*. Image courtesy of COS. Reprinted with permission.

Loop was hosted at the Gana Art Center, located in the Pyeongchang-dong area of Seoul, an arts and culture district surrounded by the Bugak mountains. COS chose to facilitate this experience outside of the city’s core shopping area because it fit the simple and peaceful effect Snarkitecture aimed to create. At the same time, a small model of *Loop* was built in COS’ Cheongdam flagship store, also designed to be interactive and to encourage play. Additionally, customers at the flagship store were offered the chance to take a shuttle service to see the *Loop* space at the Art Center.

2. Engaging in bodily movement

In the Gana Art Center, visitors could move freely through the installation and could alter the speed or sequence of the marbles. They were free to touch and interact with the tracks and marbles as they liked. This is a freedom of movement and touch which is usually not allowed in art spaces. This freedom resulted in unforeseen activities in the ‘lived space’. Some visitors were placing marbles very close to each other so that they could travel the track ‘together’ whilst some very quickly put several marbles on the track so that a catch-up effect occurred.



Image 3: One marble is released every five seconds on to a random track to create a rhythmic yet surprising moment. COS x Snarkitecture, Seoul *Loop*. Image courtesy of COS. Reprinted with permission.

3. Providing space for social interaction

COS chose to keep the experience simple and did not facilitate a dedicated space where visitors could socialize. However, COS carefully determined the relevance of the experience for their Seoul customers whom they describe as interested in art and design. COS had opened their first store in Seoul in 2014 and wanted to ‘pay back’ their community with a shared inspiration. The Loop experience in its simplicity, functionality and playfulness very much echoes the COS brand personality. COS placed minimal signage in the space. There was only one branded sign announcing the COS x Snarkitecture installation outside of the Art space and a copy with text in the space. Moreover, no product or sales elements were included in the space. The only reference was the light blue colour of the tracks which referred to a colour COS used in the season’s collection. Through building this experience and enabling customers to have a shared experience, albeit an anonymous one, the brand built authenticity and genuine connections. As memorabilia, cotton tote bags with a pictograph of Loop on it together with a humble COS x Snarkitecture signature, could be taken away, allowing the visitors to remember the experience and recognize each other later in the street.

4. Facilitating discovery and learning

Loop was the third collaboration between COS and Snarkitecture, a New York-based studio established to investigate the boundaries between art and architecture. COS has supported the arts since the launch of the brand through collaborations with established and emerging artists, galleries and creative studios “for an exchange with the creative talent that inspires us” said Karin Gustafsson, COS’ Creative Director in the *Loop* press release. Snarkitecture created a “work of art which draws on what we do, but also gives us the chance to reflect on their point of view”. She hereby stresses discovery and learning from each other as the brand’s practice. Daniel Arsham, co-founder of Snarkitecture commented in the same release: “Our intention was to create a contemplative environment with *Loop* – a space that was not

immediately understood upon entering (...), we were mindful of creating a work that provided an escape. It was important to offer a setting and feeling that were completely new and inspiring to visitors.”

Visitor reactions on Instagram posted with the hashtag #COSxSnarkitecture illustrate perceptions of *Loop* as a peaceful and playful space. Many of the reported experiences focused on the weight, material and movement of the glass marbles:

“I found the sound of the marble balls movements very soothing.”

”I put a marble on it. It is good to see something ordinary that suddenly becomes precious.”

“How do I roll? I am worried.”

“We get inspiration from children and play. The child communicates with surrounding objects or buildings in a completely different way from adults.”

“It’s for the first time that I’ve seen so many glass marbles. It gives me a greater sensitivity.”

“The encounter between #cos and #snarkitecture gave me a surprisingly good expression of the sensibility felt in neatness.”

“Geographical sensation. 0.8 oz marbles, I found out what ceramic is all about.”



Image 4: Visitor interacting with *Loop* - COS x Snarkitecture, Seoul. Image courtesy of COS. Reprinted with permission.

The Instagram posts generated from the installation illustrate that the lived space also reveals itself as a possibility to pose with shadows, perform in interaction with the marbles and tracks and thus represent oneself in a new way. This made *Loop* a photogenic experience for audiences to share via social media.

COS thus enacted with *Loop* all four processes that help to co-create physical space with customers and visitors. This resulted in a meaningful experience and allowed visitors to interact with the brand’s personality. Using elements of the aesthetic and escapist realms,

Loop also achieved an intense experience which—for some of the visitors—may have been transformative.



Image 5: COS x Snarkitecture, Seoul *Loop* Exit. Image courtesy of COS. Reprinted with permission.

Conclusion

Brands must now create places where passion is shared. If space and the making of place is thought of as an equal and dynamic interaction between customers and the brand, strategies for how to create experiences that both align with a brand's identity and ethos and facilitate brand communities take center stage.

Consumers search to co-create and link with brands when these brands facilitate neo-tribal and spatial experiences around meaningful topics. Creating strong shared experiences for consumers includes a well-balanced integration of physical and digital space, sometimes including AR and VR. Most importantly, these spaces are integrated by brand themes which are relevant to consumers. The strongest experiences are affective and immerse the customer in aesthetic and escapist realms in physical space. A space that provides this needs to be multisensory and facilitate bodily movement, social interaction and discovery. The Loop installation by COS x Snarkitecture powerfully embraces and executes this strategy. By conceptualizing and using fashion spaces in this way, brands can also contribute to their customers' transformation to more inclusive and sustainable cultures.

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