

## Chapter 12

# The Consumption of Experience and the Ethnic Market: Cosmopolitan Identity Beyond Multiculturalism

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In this chapter I argue that contemporary Western cities are characterized by a process of symbolic and representational modification in which places of consumption play a central role in cultural change. During the last few years, the literature has underlined the involvement of marketing strategies in delivering experiences, rather than selling products, as brand images. At a deeper level, a new way has been identified for companies to foster alternative lifestyles in their ‘consumption of experiences’, and to face competition in the present market place. In the context of marketing strategies, the present discussion recognizes that ‘experience’ is what is actually sold on the market today and looks at the ways in which global and local flows of experiences are restructuring places of consumption and are influencing social actors’ experience. This chapter addresses the two-way cultural movement that views Western societies as increasingly orientalized and non-Western world as increasingly Westernized.

In this context, the analysis also looks at ‘ethnicity’ as a means of consumption delivered as a particular kind of experience. From this point of view, customers are seen as tourists travelling in exotic scenarios and to cultural destinations, while dwelling in multicultural cities. In spite of differences in trading, the study has identified a hybridization of styles in the quest for experience, which is casting the meaning of belonging to a specific ethnic group and that of local identity under revision.

Empirical research was carried out in two places of consumption in Florence: one is ‘The Art Gallery Hotel’, a model site of ‘cosmopolitan experience’; the other an ethnic restaurant called ‘*India – Ristorante e non solo*’ (India – Not Just A Restaurant), where the ‘authenticity’ of the experience is taken as an example of cultural construction. My aim is to analyse and compare the two places in order to systematize the content and the organizational principles of the experience delivered in built-up environment. In particular, the discussion focuses on the symbolic meanings and the cultural milieu employed to give a thematic connotation to the experience that is being sold. Then, it verifies how the double flow of cultural authenticity and cultural cosmopolitanism are central symbolic features to our lifestyles and to the commercialization of places in our consumption processes.

## **Which Meaning for a Multicultural Society?**

Rather than referring to a multicultural society as the place in which people coming from a variety of different countries gather together, with all the political, social and economic implications the process addresses, my analysis examines this complex phenomenon as a social fact based on the meaning it acquires in the field of consumption. More specifically, I look at what I have called ‘ethnic consumption’ within the social dynamics of the Italian, Florentine landscape.

The view is now well established that the global market is driving our lives in a symbolic and economic process in which not only we belong to a specific culture but are also engaged to consume culture, cultural symbols and cultural styles. For this reason, and taking in consideration marketing strategies, I refer to culture not only as an identity indicator but mostly as a factor of taste. Moreover, we should consider that while consumption of ethnic goods was once a sign of social distinction – it put in evidence our cultural and economic capitals – nowadays it may also be a sign used by consumers to communicate a special kind of lifestyle and a personal taste that can also be shared by the majority of the population for, being mass traded, it can have a low range price. Thus, paradoxically, our identity is at the same time local- and global-embedded.

In this sense, ethnic consumption is expression of the new trends in the field of consumption and an useful indicator of the globalizing fluxes of contemporary culture. It is both an indicator of a kind of consumption aimed at awakening traditional emotions, a voice of nostalgic feelings linked to an idea of authenticity that the ethnic mark conveys in our imagination, and a sign of the symbolic presence of a multicultural society. It is representation of contemporary identities – given by the multitude of different objects sold, coming from different countries – and, finally, a mark of what I have called a cosmopolitan experience, in the sense that contemporary consumption gathers products targeted to certain people, functional to Westerners’ taste and to its desire to be global. Products become, thus, de-territorialized from their authentic context and style, as they are mostly linked to a certain idea of what is ‘ethnic’ to the Western public.

Given a multicultural background, there is a tendency peculiar to the contemporary market, whereby the ethnic style is the reflection of our lifestyles in the process of the aesthetization of culture, rather than being a sign of belonging. This occurs regardless of the tendency of the traditional market to import goods to satisfy immigrant people’s tastes. I consider the cosmopolitan trend as Western taste organized, at a symbolic level, to consume products coming from different countries but functional to Western consumption,<sup>1</sup> and for this reason I describe these products as disorganized in their authentic traits.

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1 We should not forget the fact that being white and Western pre-supposes a state of ethnicity too.

This process becomes evident throughout marketing strategies which make goods become traditional;<sup>2</sup> peculiar, that is, to the non-Western context but with the feeling they are part of the outside world. In particular, I point out a movement which sees the practice of what I call pluri-localization of traditional identities as a way to create a cosmopolitan aesthetic context in the thematic consumption field. As we shall see in the case of the Hotel, the experience of the city of Florence is sold as an aesthetic experience in which the determinants of a real multicultural city are glossed over, while the aesthetic aspects are reproduced – the feeling of being global within a cosmopolitan landscape. It seems to be important to convey the idea of a cosmopolitan belonging to the present culture; a kind of international lifestyle that most of the time does not answer to the integration of cultures and places, keeping people aggregated in a specific aesthetic portion of the territory.

Starting from the idea that consumption is an emotional experience, and without denying the materialistic act of acquisition, I look at consumption of ethnic taste as a bridge that makes people travel in different contexts, in places others than those of the daily life, in a ‘nowhere place’ reproduced by the spectacularization of merchandise.

### **The ‘Experience of Consumption’ or the ‘Consumption of Experience’?**

Consumption plays a complex role in our society. Theories on consumption have been dominated by two different viewpoints, the economic and the sociological. The major difference between the two is a theoretical shift from the satisfaction of needs to the rising of desires, and from this to the role played by emotions in stimulating the senses of the new consumer. If from the economic point of view consumption has been seen as a means to satisfying needs, sociologically it is seen as having a symbolic role (Baudrillard 1974; Bourdieu 1979; Veblen 1899). On the other hand, it is necessary to underline evolution and differences in interpretation within the sociological framework too.

The classic body of sociological literature is diverse in terms of focus and findings, given that it is mostly linked to a theoretical shift from the modern period to the postmodern era. The most evident difference from modern theories is that modern interpretations once reflected the productive pattern peculiar to industrial society and were dominated by the key terms of utility, rationalism and convenience, all of which reflected differences in consumers’ social status. On the contrary, the postmodern era has been characterized by a series of cultural and social changes on the basis of which assets are fundamentally considered for their ‘non-material’ value, both symbolic and communicative. In this sense, although the classical sociological literature focuses on the symbolic meaning of consumption as one of the leading characteristics that showed differences in status among consumers,

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2 For example, by creating a special environment of experience and by giving a personality to objects sold.

contemporary studies are more concerned with the idea that a symbolic turn is now occurring (Featherstone 1991; Fabris 2003; Rojek 1995; Pine and Gilmore 1999). According to post-modern theories, symbolism in consumption is less evocative of the status-symbol of the consumer, which in a way was driven by consumer desires, and more based on lifestyle symbols, stimulated through the emotional perceptions of the consumer.<sup>3</sup>

This means that, according to the post-modern insights, the market plays a role in the identity-building process of the social actors involved. In other words, contemporary theories conceive the post-modern market as the stage from which consumers show their individual identity or their group cultural affiliation and, obviously, their economic capital. However, it is argued that such a stage now mostly shows the distinctiveness of consumers' personal tastes, rather than simply demonstrate their social prestige, as the status-symbol once used to do. Following this line of thought, it is necessary to underline distance and differences that the cultural approach fosters, in theory and in empirical research, in respect to the economic vision.

Mike Featherstone (1991) explained that if the culture of contemporary consumption is characterized by constant production and reproduction of signs that modify the existing symbolic order, then the very activity of acquiring – the shopping – cannot be reduced to a simple act of material appropriation (as the economic vision argued) through means of economic transaction. Shields (1992) demonstrated that at least a third of the visitors to shopping centres do not go there with the intention of carrying out an economic transaction. A significant part of present day consumers look for vivid emotions in their choice of where to shop. Therefore, I suggest that to comprehend these changes in consumers' motives, we must understand that within the symbolic order consumption can also be *experiential*. We shall see that if strategies of consumption are reworked so as to act on a multiplicity of signs and senses, shopping can be considered an event that is inseparable from *the communicational path* embedded in goods and in the built environment within which practices of consumption take place. This is not to say that the instrumental or the symbolic aspects of acquisition do not have relevance, but that next to these traditional interpretations we must consider the analysis of spaces of consumption as places of *cultural experience*.

An important part of the present studying focuses on the analysis of space layout and organizational modifications in innovative places of commerce. The way in which a place is organized is a contribution to marketing strategies aimed at creating a thematic experience. Therefore, the idea of making the environment heterogeneous and multi-factored is a way of enhancing the communicative distinctiveness of the goods so as to stimulate consumer's imagination and

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3 It has been observed that the contemporary consumer is primarily interested in whether a product suits his or her lifestyle, rather than simply in its monetary value. I refer to lifestyle as to the whole of habits, values and social determinants each social actor faces and adheres to in daily life.

emotions. Modifying the milieu outline is also the best way to create the right choreography that can produce a special context within which consumers may be able to live a special experience. Consequently, this is the best way to make people consume.

As Schmitt suggested, 'Today customers take functional features and benefits, product quality, and a positive brand image as a given. What they want is products, communications, and marketing campaigns that dazzle their senses, touch their hearts, and stimulate their minds... They want products, communications and marketing campaigns to deliver an experience' (1992, p. 22). Drawing on empirical research, I study the ways in which a significant part of contemporary consumption is thus considered primarily as an experiential event, and secondarily as a way in which goods become bridges of passage towards a symbolic attitude, perceiving an everyday activity – shopping – as an 'event'. These strategies, stemming from the new 'economy of experience', are efficacious because they manage to influence symbolic self-image. In this specific context, I refer to self-image as a dynamic process by which *goods* become *communicative performances* that generate symbolic relationships with consumers' emotions. On the other hand, the process creates a need for them to negotiate a temporary but specific lifestyle for, within the representational field of consuming, the consumption of experiences may give individuals a meaning for their sense of local belonging, for their relations with others and even for their tastes, thus generating a cultural meaning for everyday activities. Nowadays goods are part of the representational flow of our society. The communicative patterns that they offer are employed as a cultural background in which to inscribe our identity preferences.

Contemporary marketing strategies are interested in stimulating the emotional processes of the consumer rather than simply influencing their desires. At the basis of such a shift is the awareness that consumers make their choices according to their own personality and sense of identity, but mostly that the new consumer has the ability to enter a new personal relationship with goods sold. In this context, raised emotions and those created within such a relationship become a significant means of influencing the shopping experience. Since consumers orient their choices on the basis of their individual taste and proper lifestyles, in order to choose a specific, personal lifestyle, images, aromas, and colours – in other words, all the aspects of the current lifestyles paraded in store displays, according to the most innovative marketing strategies – are directed at immersing the consumers in a thematic experience. Therefore competition based on price oscillation no longer meets the needs of the contemporary consumers. Such a strategy would fail to take into account the different identities of contemporary consumers and of the products on offer. Consumers are now searching for 'memorable experiences' that enhance their generic activities in some special way. So, whereas past strategies acted upon the request of a generic consumer, the consumption of experience acts on the individuality of the person, an individuality in search of vivid sensations that create particular and diverse environments.

If we assume that consumption can be experiential, we must reflect on the reasons why such a process is occurring nowadays. First of all, while mass culture accelerated the transformation of experiences into products of consumption, advertising and display practices in spaces dedicated to consumption have done the opposite. Today products have been transformed into images, signs, representations and, again, experiences. Consequently, 'the experience of consumption' and 'the consumption of experience' are becoming less distinguishable (Featherstone 1991). Spending a few hours at a shopping centre, or eating in a particular restaurant – the 'experience of consumption' – is directly related to the communicative capacity of such locations – the 'consumption of experience'. The concept of 'the experience of the user' is today of interest to many disciplines and activities linked to entertainment, consumption and design. In this perspective, attention has been paid to creating and offering special and intense moments to the consumer. This takes into account the little free time people have. In their book dedicated to the rising of the experience economy Pine II and Gilmore (1999) recognize that the value of contemporary goods must involve marketing an experience as a reflection of how consumers spend their time living intensely. That in this perspective *experience* becomes the good really sold is at the basis of the most innovative restructuring of spaces of consumption. From concept stores to theme restaurants to luxury corners of airports, the management of space takes advantage of the added value of experience. For instance, the new Giorgio Armani Store in Milan offers the experience of being immersed into Japanese culture while looking through clothing stands. The potential consumer strolls in a Zen garden and eats at a sushi bar. Selling experience as merchandise is part of a project, of the new frontiers of marketing, whereby a design denominator, *experience design*, aims to create experiences involving specific sectors of the market. Thus, the experience design seeks to adapt the experience to the cultural heritage of the selected brand names. For example, any experience offered in an Armani concept store must be in line with the value of the brand name. It must be characterized by elegance and minimalist styling. It must be linked to a Japanese setting, with the tranquillity of Shinto temples and the simplicity of the materials used in the temples (Simeone 2001).

Modernity has seen strategies geared to tying the brand name to the identity of the product, thereby establishing a static identification with the product itself. Post-modern techniques related to 'name brands' mostly play with a place or environment of representation, so as to multiply the identification of the product. If we add the fact that from the shopping point of view, the literature says that the post-modern era is characterized by 'shoppertainment' or 'entertaining', we can identify shopping as the search for entertainment and the focusing of attention on the design of products. Today the search for entertainment in recreating spaces of consumption contributes to the experiential settings that try to multiply and influence all the senses of the potential consumer (I feel, I touch, I smell, I think, I act = I sense [Arnould et al. 2002]). Again, what is new is the fact that contemporary strategies of spatial organization are increasingly multidimensional in their logic.

According to the concepts of classical economy, the value of goods was equivalent to work strength and production time. Today, the communicative patterns of products interact with the consumer to create the culture of *consumption of experiences*, so as to reach and give an answer to the mobility and heterogeneous dimension of contemporary identity.

Empirical research has identified three different kinds of typology that can be used to organize the innovative space of consumption: *multi-functionalism*, *poly-sensorialism* and *pluri-localization*. These three typologies refer to the organizational principles of our experience within the restyling of the created environment in specific spaces of commerce. *Multi-functionalism* refers to the fact that nowadays places of consumption use the same amount of space functions that once were kept separated and that now are under 'one united roof'. *Poly-sensorialism* refers to the fact that contemporary marketing strategies try to stimulate all our senses. *Pluri-localization* refers to the power of a place to remind the consumer of different aspects of different cultures within a single experience.

This typology will be the guideline to understand empirically the organizational principles of the created environment. From the selling point of view, experiences can be recreated mainly following two different strategies. Experiences are established through the communicative diversification of the created environment, so as to recreate a thematic setting. Alternatively, the original products are allowed to express a special experience. Here, I focus on the first strategy.

When trying to understand the reasons for the birth of the present process it is difficult to ignore the influence played by different technologies in shaping our perception. As we are immersed in new forms of technology and thematic parks are invading our tourist experience, we are ever more willing to look for stimulating representational scenarios during a great part of our daily life. The most simple patterns of communication are not considered interesting enough to catch our attention. In other words, the influence played by the new instruments of communications, and the need for marketing to differentiate the characteristics of products in the market place are, nowadays, among the main reasons for the need for experience in the consumption field. We could add another factor of interest concerning the raising of the shopping activity from an objective status to a status of subjective participation. Goods in the market place now share a special moment of experience with the consumer and become part of one's lifestyle. They are now endowed with a specific biography and, in certain way, with a certain amount of communicative qualities. In brief, I examine areas of contact among mixed symbolic contexts to analyze the complexity of consumption and the nature of the experience that is showed in contemporary consumer spaces. Empirical research was carried out in Florence, dealing with one Hotel, The 'Gallery Hotel Art', and a special kind of Indian restaurant, 'India – Not Just A Restaurant'. I observed the communicative aspects of the experience proposed by these two places of consumption. Using the typology approach in studying their space layout, I have identified the multifunctional aspect, the poly-sensorial aspect and the pluri-localized aspect. This should help us to grasp the cultural character of the experiences delivered.

Both spaces of consumption offer a special pluri-localized context for the cultural experience that they offer, which basically allows people to shift from a cosmopolitan understanding of the cultural context to the recreation of an authentic space. Here, giving a cultural connotation to the activity of consuming appeared to be the most important aspect, although ethnographic research also pointed to the need to recreate a sense of place, even if related to an unstable identity, as in the case of the cosmopolitan Hotel, or to an authentically rooted context, as in the case of the Indian restaurant. It has emerged how, the consumption of ethnic goods can also be interpreted in terms of the Western desire to satisfy the complexity of a cosmopolitan taste. The study has looked at ethnic consumption as an exchange market for Western desires, parallel to the ethnic consumption proper to immigrant consume habits.

### A Spatial Example of ‘Cosmopolitan Experience’: The Gallery Hotel Art

The Gallery Hotel Art in Florence is a locus of syncretism. The hotel combines classic and contemporary styles. According to the interior design and architecture magazine *AD* (1999), it is like staying in a luxurious hotel in the historical centre of one of the most famous cities of art, while enjoying contemporary art and design. Visiting the hotel, the first thing I noticed was the oriental-styled hall. Along the walls there were several ethnic artefacts, spotlighted on pedestals as if in a museum, suggesting an authenticity to each piece. They were red-enamelled pieces from nineteenth century Burma. The reception desk was contemporary in design and made of African Wengè wood; behind it there were more Burmese pieces. The bookcases in Japanese-styled reading room displayed both antique and art books. The restaurant, as described in the presentational promotion, is the place to meet the city and taste ‘fusion’ cooking, a culinary experience that mixes Tuscan, French and Japanese cuisines. The promotional presentation claims that in this syncretic ‘frontier zone’ the guest can have an experience ‘beyond the boundaries of an Italian night,’ though the question, why is there no reference to anything Florentine? remains unanswered. The hotel manager explained that the rooms were decorated in typical Florentine style, but the goal of the hotel was not to communicate an exclusively *local* message, but to give clients a *cosmopolitan experience* beyond the boundaries of an Italian sojourn so as to multiply faces of Florence beyond the idea of the uncontested city of Renaissance masterpieces. The architect, Michele Bonan, undertook not only the restoration of the building, but the transformation of space into *multifunctional* areas in which art, exoticism and culture encounter the public. He explains that the word ‘Gallery is the perfect container for taste that is in continual evolution, a place of peaceful charm where a summary of the areas leans towards the simplicity and symmetry of Asia, where East meets West.’ In addition to this, the hotel hosts art shows that range from contemporary art to photography, from ethnic culture to design, creating a continually changing atmosphere. The Art Gallery director – Isabella Brancolini



– said that her intention was to show art and ethnic objects as if they were in an art gallery, but accessible and usable at any time, just as if they were at home or in a contemporary museum.

The organization of the Gallery Hotel Art supports the hotel-event model, with great attention paid to creating a dynamic, multifunctional environment furnished with exotic objects, thus moving beyond the idea of a *local space* identified with a *Florentine place* and atmosphere; the message here is *global* and *syncretic*. To go beyond boundaries also implies the use of a unique concept of the guest, far removed from the generic clients of the past. Now, the guest is considered to be a person with multiple identities, and satisfying of his/her desires concerns both tourists and inhabitants of the city: the hotel meets the demand for diversity, a desire that residents and tourists have in common. So the Gallery Hotel follows the communicative patterns of ‘experiential consumption’, to which architecture too seems committed, to create *multifunctional*, *pluri-localized* and *poly-sensorial* places that are ready to answer the unstable desires that have been created.

A poly-sensorial experience has been created in the hotel’s Fusion Bar. The five senses of the consumer are stimulated before becoming mixed in a total experience, involving the guest in a sensitive relationship within the environment. The ingredients are:

1. *Seeing*: the decor, the objects, the furnishings contribute to the excitement of discovering images of the world go by. CDs and books identify cultural fusion.
2. *Listening*: specially compiled music plays softly.
3. *Smelling*: delicate aromas stimulate the food-smell interaction.
4. *Touching*: objects of contrasting materials can be touched.
5. *Tasting*: unusual combinations of subtle and delicate flavors are offered in a crescendo of new sensations.

The Gallery Hotel Art and the Fusion Bar offer a new frontier zone in which to sell a particular experience. A *cosmopolitan experience* requires communicative codes from a variety of contexts. ‘Experiential marketing’ strategies affect the poly-sensoriality of the visitor. In a way, experience creates a dilated Florentine context, one which surpasses defining Florence as simply a city of art.

Multifunctional style and cosmopolitan taste are qualities sought by the European young professional, the primary kind of guest in this hotel. Used to living in cities with historical and artistic traditions, and largely tied to the concept of localizing, the client arrives in Florence looking for new experiences. He or she stays in a cosmopolitan environment that satisfies his or her need for experiences ‘over and above Italian boundaries’. This is in contrast to the American tourist, who is used to living in newer cities and wants a more classical Italian sojourn, to be part of the presumed Florentine ‘authenticity’ and to experience its art heritage.

Hannerz has argued that ‘genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a will to interact with the other; it sees an intellectual and aesthetic aperture towards

divergent cultural experiences, looking for contrasts rather than uniformity' (1996, p. 131). This seems to be close to the aesthetic model proposed by the Gallery Hotel Art. The cosmopolitan traveller wants to be, and is immersed in, experiencing cultural contrasts and mixed cuisines. Even if the cosmopolitan aesthete is not looking for encounters with the other and is not interested in cultural exchange with diversity, he or she is integrated through superficial consuming, aesthetic contact, travelling among communication codes and syncretic styles, multifunctional environments and multiple tastes. In this case to experience 'ethnicity' is a question of style, not even a question of 'otherness'; a model prepared to stimulate our aesthetic imagination and to 'feed' our fashion desires.

One of the hotel's advertising postcards portrays this concept perfectly. The foreground shows one of the rooms furnished with pastel-coloured and colonial-style futons. While enjoying an aperitif on the terrace, one can view the historical centre of Florence with a glimpse of Palazzo Vecchio. The cosmopolitan aesthete looks upon a detached Florence, but such a foreshortened glimpse is sufficient since an added value is given by the enlarged experience lived within the Hotel and 'beyond the boundaries of an Italian night'. In fact, 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' is characterized by a diffusion of representative images, both on an emotional and on an experiential level, captured from the habit of looking at the circumscribed context through shortcuts and frames (Urry 1995).

A comparison of the post-modern architecture of the Hotel Bonaventure in Los Angeles to that of the Gallery Hotel Art, shows that the taste of a social constitution is built on distinct functions of cultural and economic capital. The populist appearance of the post-modern Hotel Bonaventure reflected a new spatial language that integrated social codes into urban landscape; the hotel reproduced the characteristic signs and spectacles of the American commercial strip, thus immersing itself into the social fabric from which these symbols were derived. In the case of the Gallery Hotel Art, as in other contemporary locations of consumption, post-modern idealism has been surpassed by new aims. Whereas post-modern architecture acted upon the manipulation of symbols and the citation of signs, the contemporary movement modifies space with the application of formulas of mobility, temporality, poly-sensoriality and syncretic planning. The Gallery Hotel Art tries to extend a lifestyle. It proposes that a multifunctional use of space is necessary to interpret the desires of transitory experiences. Nowadays the variety of experiences combined from the world of consumers is a hybridization of channelled messages and a multiplicity of styles that reflects a segmented and nebulous social identity.

The cosmopolitan experience that the tourist is offered by the Galley Hotel Art multiplies her or his travel experiences by adding an aesthetic dimension during her or his stay. Its architecture is part of a global project of urban marketing. The power of the metropolis stems from its reflexive capacity to redefine itself by paying special attention to the connection of cultural changes to spatial reality. The restyling and reorganizing of its image is the first goal. Here, space is expanded beyond the idea of a local identity.

The anthropological definition of a place is that of a space rooted into a specific culture and tradition. The space under investigation is a place with no specific geographical references, it is a place of 'crossing experiences'. The global and the local ideas of experience are conjoined without forgetting the new directions of personal identity. People are today able to interpret plural identities. The strong and stable subject postulated by the 'Metaphysical' era is no longer in use and this is true mostly in urban contexts and marketing strategies. Architecture too is trying to make more fluid the meaning of belonging through the implementation of mobile materials and patterns.

Therefore the cultural experience that a guest has in the Gallery is of crossing borders of experiences. The guest is a personalized guest: the guest and the inhabitants of the city have the same desires and ways of satisfying them. Florentine culture is mixed with other different cultural experiences, but places of origin are decontextualized from their historical background and translated into experiences in search of new multiple re-localizations and varied locales. This process is induced by globalization, which has made the classical relationship between place and culture problematic. In a way, we can say that identity today may also deal with problems of instability and of lifestyle rather than only of belonging. Marketing strategies have reconfigured multiple levels of locality that have freed the place from its need of roots and stability. The sense of a place is here an ensemble of images and signs that deal with the loss of culture continuity rather than with cultural roots. As a consequence, identity too, in a way, is nowadays becoming more and more a marketable item. According to marketing strategies, not only do we belong to a specific culture, but we can also share aspects of different cultures. Finally, we can negotiate our dynamic identity by consuming cultures rather than belonging to any of them. Through the creation of a cosmopolitan experience the fact is stressed that there are three different organizational principles for creating environments that reproduce a thematic mixed experience ready to be consumed.

### **The Ethnic Restaurant: An Experience in Authenticity?**

Experiencing the variety of contemporary consumer goods and the places of consumption stimulate the senses of taste and sight. Nutrition, has been overshadowed by the aesthetic experience of food. People are interested in savouring the tastes of other cultures in a particular setting. Most of the print space in Italian travel and entertainment magazines is devoted to 'the culture of taste'. The magazine *Gulliver* (2002) states that in Padua, it is possible to eat Japanese food underwater, in a restaurant that simulates a submarine, with port-holes and rocks. Another restaurant in Piacenza emphasizes the spirit of travel by displaying a details from different countries in every corner. It offers a mix of African, Asian and American cuisines. Finally, there is a restaurant that incorporates new and seductive sensorial experiences: one can order a shiatzu massage before or during the meal.

In analyzing spaces of 'ethnic' food consumption questions are raised concerning social identity and how the West continues to represent others (in fact most of these fashionable places are organized by Westerners). This issue becomes more pressing when a society is pervaded by multiple and syncretic tastes and heterogenic narrative codes. If we linked food experience to our identity – multi-ethnic contextualization of contemporary food – and to the notion 'we are what we eat', we can be described as unstable subjects, in constant contact between the global and the local, and so dissatisfied with the simple act of eating that it must be spectacularized.

The symbolic aspect of food has been tackled in many studies that deal with its role in social traditions (Bourdieu 1979; Douglas and Isherwood 1979). According to Bourdieu (1979), food is a social demarcator, distinguishing status, marginalizing certain groups and defining social boundaries. In contrast, La Cecla (1997) maintains that food is one of the first and more accessible areas in which the boundary between different cultures can be crossed. 'Tasting' other cuisines is a valuable means of cultural contact; taste is the text that needs to be translated. Today, taste is no longer sufficient to make us cross this boundary. All the senses must be stimulated. The experience must be total. Seductive techniques are therefore crucial for creating spaces of consumption.

The Florentine 'India – Not Just A Restaurant' is interesting because of the particular type of syncretism it encapsulates. First, the restaurant is a poly-sensory zone of Indian experience. Second, it has managed to merge Western and Eastern cultures while using strategies of experiential marketing. It will be useful to analyse the quality of the experiential zone before looking at the details of this restaurant.

Many ethnic restaurants offer an atmosphere strongly marked by the characteristic traits of the culture of origin. The farther away a restaurant is from its origin, the more it is constrained to theatricalize that culture. Experiential micro-space is built to attract a particular type of consumer; its presumed 'authenticity' is directly proportional to the cultural distance of the consumer. In this case, the farther the consumer is from Indian culture, the more the restaurant is forced, paradoxically, to create a hybrid zone based on Western desires, unfaithful to its original context.

'India – Not Just A Restaurant' reproduces a slice of India – including imported objects, artisan decorations, waiters' costumes – that is aestheticized, and therefore immune from the historical changes that all cultures are subjected to. Yet it is this exercise in style that allows for experiential consumption; it is the reproduction of the extremes of typicality that makes the environment rich. Here, Indian typicality is built on Western desires which are always brought near the concept of authenticity, both in ethnicity and location, but more frequently ethnicity is exclusively tied to otherness, forgetting the dialogical aspect of the term. The commercialization of identity shows itself to be a symbolic practice founded on a nostalgia for tradition and for the location of origin.

'India – Not Just A Restaurant' is an example of the hypothesis that consumption is a form of ethnic experience where the consumer is offered an

entrance to 'altered' cultures in their context. In the menu of 'India – Not Just A Restaurant' the aim of the restaurant reads: 'An India to taste, to smell, to observe, to touch, to listen to, an India mysterious and rich where the heart delights and the senses are stimulated. Let yourself be transported on this unique voyage, letting your emotions and curiosity run...' This India however, is falsely traditional. It is only a Western spectacularization of an Indian culture that is in a persistent state of typicality. Removed from the original location, which is created from experiential marketing research, the consumer is now a sensorial traveller of the zones of consumption. A cultural association in Turin promotes urban tours called, 'Tourists for home', with itineraries that vary from visiting Asian shops to dining at Latin American restaurants. The concept is built on contemporary ideas of travelling. Not only does the person travel, but the culture and the objects that the trip incorporates travel too. The problem is that a culture that travels is a culture that ceases to reflect the typicality of its original location. This typicality is now subject to a process of constant contamination because of its dislocation among a pluralized context.

In *Dining Out* (1989), Finkelstein proposes a descriptive typology of restaurants based on styles of eating out. In the first category, restaurants that are '*Fete speciale*', have a material organization aimed at attracting the guest. In the second category, the 'parodist restaurant' offers a particular experience through a recreated atmosphere. Finally, there are restaurants of economic convenience, including ethnic restaurants. Today, ethnic restaurants can no longer be confined to convenience, but overlap into the first two categories.

'India – Not Just A Restaurant' typifies a narrative space that has intensified the food experience, and has mixed communicative codes. Upon entering the restaurant, the consumer can gaze through kitchen windows at tandoori ovens. The room itself is furnished with typical Indian tapestries, masks and photographs of colonial times. However, its novelty comes from the small bazaar where one can buy jewellery, incense, statuettes, photographs and books on India; it is now possible to bring home a piece of this culture. Next to the bazaar there are an exhibition of antique turbans, a reconstructed bar with all the Indian magic to offer cocktails and a television channel dedicated to Indian soap operas. The evenings are enlivened by dance performances, magic and Indian stories. 'India – Not Just A Restaurant' succeeds in fusing the reconstruction of a local culture with a global design defined by new communicative modalities in which to produce an Indian experience. It points to the internal contradiction of liberating ethnicity from the Western obsession that wants it tied to its authenticity, unmoved from its place of origin. In spite of the fact that it is based on Indian authenticity, 'India – Not Just A Restaurant' occupies a frontier zone in which the homogeneity of the represented nation is transformed in a dislocated cultural destination. On the one hand, a stigmatized Indian culture is in a state of pre-modern inertia; on the other hand, the evident falsification of the context unveils the stereotype of a recreated atmosphere. Here, ethnicity is fundamentally a consumption benefit and a question of style, a sign with no referent. Even ethnic consumption is not an exception to the normal

dynamics of contemporary consumer experience; instead, it represents a variant theme of consumption based on the supply and demand of experience. In reality, certain types of ethnic consumption and those of the West, are moving along the same axis and with the same objectives but we always forget the presence of a white ethnicity and we find it in exotic cultures that are considered to be authentic and unpolluted. developing a distance between us and them.

However, the cultural syncretism espoused by the cosmopolitan experience of the Gallery Hotel Art differs from the experience of authenticity staged by 'India – Not Just A Restaurant'. The two spaces of consumption use different typologies of taste. The panorama of taste – the taste-scape – is the field in the distinctive character is played. In the case of the Gallery Hotel Art, the cosmopolitan experience is represented by a particular taste-scape. It is refined and contaminated by oriental styles, aromas, and chains of expository semantics that travel from the public space of the art gallery to the inviting atmosphere of the living room. The cosmopolitan citizen is such because she or he metaphorically transits between styles and heterogenic architectural modernity. The furnishings, displayed as if they were works of art and unique pieces, emphasize the distinctive taste of their viewers and multiply the sense of their own temporary inertia. In 'India – Not Just A Restaurant', regardless of the aesthetic furnishings, the taste-scape is less refined. It recreates the Indian legacy, based on a folkloric idea of culture, in which the tourist experience attract the visitors to this poly-sensorial fragment of India. Here, taste is not associated with the refined art of the world, but is intended to recreate an authentic cultural context, which in reality is just a detached territorial fragment of Indian culture.

The three multi-factorial dimensions of the created environment – the multifunctional, the poly-sensorial and the pluri-localization of a thematic space – are some of the most important contributions to the creation of an experience and to the weight of a suitable lifestyle.

'India – Not Just A Restaurant' is a multifunction place. It gathers different functions that were once kept separated. It is the case of a restaurant that is organized as a museum, a bazaar and a place of entertainment; at the same time it stimulates all the senses of the consumers. Finally, it is pluri-localized in a state of culture characterized by a localized (and at the same time de-localized) Indian site, which claims to be an authentic scenario that in effect is also contaminated by Italian style and modern Indian and in general ethnic Western standards.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion developed in this chapter has underlined the importance of the *experience* in the new forms of consumption. In particular, this study identifies the principles on the basis of which the layout of some of the new spaces of consumption is organized in order to convey in the consumer the emotion of a specific and unique cultural experience. Multi-functionalism and poly-sensorial factors in the pluri-localization of cultures are key aspects of such a context.

The symbolic analysis of the activity of consumption demonstrates the ways in which a large number of consumers are nowadays much more interested in buying a living thematic experience than simply acquiring goods. On the other hand, on an empirical level, the study has shown the presence of two kinds of cultural flow that are used to give meaning to the experience that is being sold. To understand this point, it has been necessary to take into account the fact that the communicative patterns embedded in goods have a multifactor logic so as to intensify the characteristic of the experience.

Basically, contemporary consumers try to buy things that can create private relationships with their emotions, but above all with their principles and tastes. In other words, buying is a complex experience capable of giving meaning to those emotional contexts and relationships that, at same time, can give relevance and expression to people's lifestyle symbols.

Even if different characteristics of different cultures are present in the exhibition of a thematic experience, the analysis has stressed that the practice of enriching the environment of commercial spaces can also be carried out on a cosmopolitan and local level. The evocative power of a place is one of the most important factors in giving birth to an experience. For this reason, I have translated the multicultural aspects of the experience of consumption into cosmopolitan, which is to say the aesthetization of identity and cultural traits. The ethnic identity is thus invested of a pluri-localized power as a means of communication: of our personal belonging to the local and global culture.

The discussion has identified the actual expression of contemporary cultural flow, which fluctuates between flows of locality and of cosmopolitan and hybridization. Empirical analysis has shown that contemporary consumers wander among experiences as if they were travelling to exotic destinations, thus transforming a daily activity, such as that of consuming, into a special and rich event that gives meaning to their personal urban practices.

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