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THE SOUL OF THE COMPANY STORE

Nike Town Chicago and the Emplaced Brandscape

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But before there could be wonder (or theory, or philosophy, or architectural treatises), there had to be the well-made thing.

—McEwen (1993)

[Nike Town Chicago is] built as a theater, where our consumers are the audience participating in the production. Nike Town gives us the opportunity to explore and experiment with innovative ways to connect with our consumers.

—NTC (1992a)

Fuck the world. Fuck the numbers. Air feels right. Air feels like Nike.

—Strasser and Becklund (1993)

If we acknowledge the existence of an “ancestral blood tie between architecture and philosophy” (McEwen 1993, 2), then Nike Town Chicago (NTC) is surely the embodiment of the corporate dictum

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"Just Do It." As this tagline—part New Age mantra, part secular ejaculation—has been embroidered into the fabric of adcult (Twitchell 1996), so also has the building expanded our notion of alternative translations of retail space. With the exception of pricing strategy, every designed element of the servicescape encourages impulsive behavior and invites instant gratification.¹ NTC is perhaps the most current incarnation of a retail theater alive to the liturgical roots of drama. A paean to design, NTC crosscuts genres of experience to evoke in consumers a range of synergistic thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that encourages active engagement with its servicescape. NTC is not merely the site of "commercial athleticism" (Agnew 1986), nor is it solely a "spiritual gymnasium" (Mandel 1967, 16) or "cathedral of consumption" (O'Guinn and Belk 1989). Neither is it primarily an amusement-centered themed environment (Gottdiener 1996) nor a megaboutique. While this chapter explores the polysemous possibilities the site affords, I begin, as is my custom, with a vignette drawn from my field notes, which I regard as a revelatory incident (Fernandez 1986) opening a window onto the phenomenology of this marketplace:

Even in the company of key informants, I find myself shifting from the role of social scientist to flaneur [perhaps tending toward *dériveur*?] and back again, as I watch consumers watch me watch them watch their surroundings [note: revisit Benjamin's optical unconscious], trying all the while to attend to the observations of my interviewees without allowing my own engagement with the place to mute their comments.

Don and Larry, two entrepreneurs in their midthirties, have invited me to accompany them on their visit to Nike Town Chicago, even though we have just met here on the spot. Each is an industrial designer, and together they create, restore, and market religious goods. As we wander, Larry speaks of the "mystical" quality of the setting, and compares NTC to a "basilica."

¹ And yet, when your sales receipt is presented to you in a small logo-emblazoned upscale envelope, ennobled by its package and giftlike in greeting card-esque aspect (the slip may even approximate a stock certificate or deed of ownership), the premium you've paid feels less like self-indulgence and more like wise investment. Ironically, the most elemental form of everyday retail theater—haggling—is absent from NTC (Sennett 1976).

Don compares his experience of NTC to being in a "museum," observing that "when you 'do' Chicago, you go to the Museum of Science and Industry, the Art Institute, and Nike Town." [Many of my informants are quick to proclaim the "accepted fact" that Nike Town is the "biggest tourist attraction" in the city.] Building on this remark, Larry allows that the building is more than a museum: "It's a museum of the future. You never have to remodel. George Jetson could pull up outside and never tell the difference!" Don supports his contention with an expansive arm gesture: "Look at all these parents showing their kids around; they're *teaching*. Just like a museum."

The two have come to NTC today not to shop, but to study the store, in particular its products and their merchandising. They are keenly aware of the synergies between their own enterprise and Nike's. They've come for "inspiration" and "ideas." Beyond their reverence for the sacral tones of the ambience lies an even more intriguing respect for the products on display. In Don's estimation, "This all speaks to the integrity of their products. If you spend so much effort to showcase your product, it must be really good. They've paid attention to every detail—from door handles and railings to sound effects. They try to reach all your senses. Even the salespeople are low-key. There's no sales pressure." As if to sum up his evaluation of the NTC servicescape, Larry concludes, "There's a carryover effect. Next time I see Nike products in a regular store, I'll recall this good experience." As our conversation unfolds, I notice each of them actively engage the environment, handling products, touching fixtures, closing eyes, and cocking heads to discriminate background sounds, and scanning constantly. They are curiously hypervigilant and yet relaxed, as they absorb the grand design.

I have selected this introductory vignette because it resonates with my own experience of the store and intuitions about the affecting nature of servicescapes. The field note addresses the influence of the designed environment on brand equity in general and on the more numinous dimensions of brand identity in particular. Elsewhere (Sherry 1995a, 36), I have called attention to an obverse strategy of the one McCracken (1988, 105–106) has called "meaning displacement." I think of this strategy as one of *emplacement*, whereby culture instantiates the mundane "by encoding its folkways in holographic fashion into the material vehicles of social life, to be recovered discontinuously, and often outside conscious

awareness" (Sherry 1995a, 36). Emplacement is at work on a molecular level as well, when a corporation embodies its vision not only in the product it makes, but also in the other elements of its marketing mix. Integrated marketing communication (Schultz, Tanenbaum, and Lauterborn 1994), for example, is a manifestation of the emplacement process writ small.

The delight inspired in consumers by their discovery of the larger significance of a corporation's attention to detail—the "aha" experience or epiphany that occurs in the unwrapping of unanticipated added value—shapes relationships developed with a brand. Emplacement is especially intriguing in an era of eroding brand loyalty and "cereal monogamy" (Sherry 1985), when place increasingly becomes (*de facto* if not *de jure*) the brand (Sherry 1995b). So it is with NTC, where brand is both a noun and a verb. Consumers are invited to enhance their brandscape through engagement with this polysemous environment.

A brandscape is a "material and symbolic environment that consumers build with marketplace products, images and messages, that they invest with local meaning, and whose totemic significance largely shapes the adaptation consumers make to the modern world" (Sherry 1985). Brandscaping is one of the ways in which consumption is actively produced by consumers. Emplacement and brandscaping act in tandem to ground or root a consumer's experience in the artifact, while at the same time allowing the artifact to become a projectible field or projective vehicle for culturally mediated idiosyncratic meaning. The cocreation of experience by marketers and consumers—the performance of negotiated meanings—is engendered in NTC by design.² Whether or not they are shoppers, once inside the doors of NTC, consumers become flâneurs and *bricoleurs*.

In this chapter, I explore the interaction of emplacement and brandscaping by focusing on the experience that design conspires to elicit from visitors to NTC. By attending to design cues and affordances provided by the marketer, and observing the effects their

² The "performance" motif emphasized in current NTC merchandising, emblazoned on signage and free-floating in air via optical illusion in the video theater, is both an ironic and reflexive reminder to consumers that their in-store behavior, whether scripted or improvisational, is ultimately theatrical.

reception exerts upon consumers, I highlight aspects of the NTC servicescape that are illustrative of the affecting presence (Armstrong 1974) that all marketplaces become when extraeconomic issues are considered.

METHODOLOGY

This account is a lineal descendant of the wave of ethnographic investigations of periodic markets and upscale specialty stores (McGrath 1989; McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley 1993; Sherry 1990a, 1990b; Sherry and McGrath 1989) that has contributed to the rejuvenation of retailing studies in recent years. It is a collateral relative of the renewed exploration of museums and galleries (Duhaime, Joy, and Ross 1995; McCracken 1990) that is helping consumer researchers better understand the experiential dimensions of servicescapes. After Buttimer (1993, 202), I attempt to "read" vernacular architecture "as text to be decoded in terms of the values of its human inhabitants." In temperament, this account is a hybrid effort that seeks to combine something of the studied alienation of ethnographic inquiry (Sherry 1995) with something of the disciplined reflexivity of introspection (Gould 1991; Holbrook 1988a, 1988b; Rose 1995; Sherry 1996). I intend the result to lie somewhere between the unreflectively critical, idiosyncratic tradition of cultural studies and the conventionally dispassionate stakeholder-focus of ethnographic consumer research. What I strive to produce in this chapter is a phenomenological account of my own engagement with a particular marketplace hedged about with observations and interpretations drawn from other participants in process of enacting the servicescape. In tacking between self and other, I construct an account that is at once "producerly" (Sherry 1996b) and grounded in "reader-response" (Scott 1994). In conveying my own experience of "being-in-the-marketplace" (Richardson 1987; Sherry and McGrath 1989) in tandem with that of fellow consumers, I offer a perspective that is comparative rather than privileged, and probative rather than definitive.

I began this investigation in the summer of 1992 and have continued to visit the site through the autumn of 1996, the time this

chapter was written.³ During this prolonged engagement, I immersed myself in the round of life at the marketplace, gaining an appreciation for the seasonal flux of activity and variety of stakeholder perspectives (Sherry 1990). I employed participant observation extensively throughout the study. I conducted intercept interviews with fifty consumers and observed hundreds of others in their encounter with the servicescape. Interviews ranged from ten minutes to an hour, and from highly unstructured to structured. I shopped with consumers (Otnes, McGrath, and Lowrey 1995) and loitered with intent among clerks and cashiers, interviewing in context. Structured interviews were conducted with the store manager, marketing manager, and various staff members. I photographed dimensions of the servicescape and conducted autodiving interviews (Heisley and Levy 1991; Rook 1989) with some consumers.

Concurrently with the ethnography, and cognizant both of the risks (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993) and rewards of inductive intuition (Murray 1943; Sherry 1991), I practiced what Holbrook has called "subjective personal introspection" (Holbrook 1988a, 1988b), in an effort to capture my own experience of NTC. Thus, what follows is a composite account, and an inevitable confounding of emic and etic perspectives, of the NTC servicescape. While it may well be that the lawyer who defends himself has a fool for a client, I suspect that many social scientists resonate with poet Gary Snyder's (Tarn 1972) discovery that he'd rather be an informant than an anthropologist. In this essay, I attempt just such a shift in perspective.

MANAGERIAL PRÉCIS

NTC, the second in a series of seven company stores launched to date, opened in Chicago in the summer of 1992. Designed in-house

³ Thus, while I employ the ethnographic present tense, my account is actually diachronic, which produces some distortion in synchronic accuracy. For example, exhibits and merchandising displays change over time, rendering some descriptions and photographs anachronistic. Yesterday's *Batman* exhibit becomes today's *Jurassic Park* exhibit. Wherever significant, I note such change in the text.

by Gordon Thompson, the 68,000-square-foot store boasts three selling floors and eighty feet of frontage on the "Magnificent Mile" of Michigan Avenue. The store is designed to deliver a "landmark experience," comparable to "enter[ing] Wrigley Field or hop[ping] on a ride at Disneyland" (NTC 1992a). The NTC "retail theater" concept is intended to combine "the fun of Disneyland and FAO Schwarz, the museum quality of the Smithsonian Institution and the merchandising of Ralph Lauren with the sights and sounds associated with MTV" (NTC 1992b). The store comprises eighteen pavilions that display products related to twenty different sports. Before I present an ethnographic overview of the built environment and experiential dimensions of NTC, it may be instructive to provide an account of the store from the perspective of its principal managers.

Marketing managers envision NTC as a "showcase" for the range of Nike products local dealers are not able to stock as comprehensively or merchandise as effectively. NTC dramatizes the breadth and depth of the Nike product mix. This presentation is expected to benefit dealers. NTC observes a policy of "noncompetition" with dealers, in an effort to be "sensitive" to their livelihoods. NTC does not run sales, does not have exclusive or advance availability of product, and offers training in merchandising to dealers in an effort to export the essence of Nikeworld. NTC exists strategically to enhance the brand without alienating dealers.

Consumers appear to respond to this strategy. Among the most common unelicited product-related consumer comments in my field notes reflect amazement both at the range of products and the premium pricing at NTC. Variations of "I didn't know Nike made this much stuff or was into this many sports!" compete with "Do you believe this [price]? I can get this much cheaper at home!" in my record of emic evaluations. Customers and staff readily acknowledge that "new" products encountered in NTC are eventually ordered through local dealers. Marketing managers describe their concession to dealers—the emphasis on equity building over sales—as a "museum" (versus a "warehouse") strategy.

While headquarters ultimately dictates objectives and evaluates end results, the regional Nike Town marketing managers are encouraged to innovate within a standardized pattern. Designers of

these servicescapes eschew a cookie-cutter approach to design, and are invited to combine common elements and modules with local touches to “fit the space” the stores must occupy. At NTC, marketing managers have “wide parameters” for meeting “budget constraints” and revel in the “individual initiative” that the “loose organization” of their “creative company” permits. “Just Do It” is treated as a mandate for “entrepreneurial initiative.” Managers and clerks alike speak of “shooting from the hip” in pursuit of servicescape refinement.

A NOTE ON BRAND EQUITY: MYTHOLOGY AND SOUL

At the time of this writing, the Nike “swoosh” logo has become so thoroughly identified with the brand that it is iconic. The company name no longer must accompany the mark to achieve recognition among consumers. The symbol and the brand are one. Serendipity and heroic marketing have conspired to produce this iconicity.

The “swoosh” name is derived from the Japanese nylon fabric that gave the company its original distinctive edge. The swoosh symbol—commissioned for thirty-five dollars from a young artist—was designed to combine structural functionality with visibility. Initial corporate reception of the logo was lukewarm. The Nike name was adopted after the logo was designed, as an expedient compromise in the face of deadline pressure. The name was inspired by an awakening dream of a company salesman—an anthropology graduate student turned social worker—and again received a lukewarm initial response (Strasser and Becklund 1993). The correspondence of name and symbol with mythology—the wings of Victory, the talaria (winged sandal) of Hermes—and of mythopoeia with onomatopoeia, has been achieved through marketing.

Over time, the logo has been refreshed to emphasize the company’s commitment to quality and innovation in design. The company’s “discovery” of marketing, and its pursuit of integrated marketing communication (of the “There Is No Finish Line” kind) dates from the historic brand-from-a-brand launch of the Air Jor-

dan line—complete with the Jump Man trademark, which itself has achieved global iconicity—that was commemorated by the launch director (and author of this chapter’s third epigraph) in these prescient words: “On this rock . . . we will build a church” (Strasser and Becklund 1993, 455). While the marketing director was eventually exorcised from the firm before the building of NTC, his New Testament diction was strategically prophetic. Principal among the many meanings of NTC is that of sacred space. NTC is not merely emblematic of the sacralization of sport in America, nor of our recently recovered awareness of its eroticization (Guttmann 1996). It is a basilica of basketball, complete with reliquaries, and monumental witness to the apotheosis of Michael Jordan.⁴

ETHNOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

In the following pages, I provide an ethnographic overview of NTC phenomenology. I begin with a description of the larger retail environment of the store and devote attention to the building’s exterior. I then undertake a sort of “walking tour” of the interior of the store, discussing the ambient surroundings and exploring reactions to them. I employ the pontifical *we* and address the reader rhetorically, as a fellow traveler. Finally, I offer an interpretive summary of the NTC experience.

Let me begin this section with another field note excerpt, to remind the reader of the emic input that has shaped my own perceptions:

So many informants profess to have come to NTC “not to buy something,” but to “see” it, whether on their own, with family

⁴ Upon returning to his career as hard-court demigod shortly before Easter at the United Center (the House that Jordan built, and site of his statue), after having undertaken the archetypal heroic journey involving great challenges, personal sacrifice, and wondrous encounters—enduring the murder of his father and a sojourn as a baseball player—Jordan was greeted by a multistory banner hung from NTC, proclaiming “He’s back!!” Part Christ, part poltergeist (like Muhammad Ali before him), Jordan is revered by Chicago as its current patron saint.

and friends, or with out-of-town guests, because it is "more than just a store." A teenage boy describes the "peaceful feeling" elicited by the "music and colors" of the surroundings and likens his experience to being in an "amusement park" or "museum." He tells me he "sees things [products] here [he] doesn't see in other stores." "Maybe I'll buy something, but I came here because Dad wanted to see it." Consumers seem not to search or browse so much as inspect the store. [Note: explore the comercio-aesthetic dynamic of the visual at NTC. Revisit Urry on the tourist gaze.]

Marie and Anna, two "out-of-town" women in their early twenties, have come to NTC specifically to buy sports shoes in their "hard to find" sizes, and graciously allow me to shop with them. "I come right to the source," proclaims Marie, a former basketball player, in describing her decision to shop NTC. "It's amazing how they draw you up four stories," Anna offers. "The open heights, the use of space. . . . You're *up* here, on the same level. . . . It's like a fantasy. There's the player, there's the player's shoe, there's the shoe for sale—it's all together. It's like a shrine." The immediacy produced by such vertically integrated merchandising is palpable for these two shoppers. Notes Marie, "The store changes with the sports. If there's a development in the sport, it shows up in the store. They constantly change the pictures and exhibits." As we continue to examine shoes, Anna concludes, "It's amazing. It's hard to verbalize. It makes you feel like you can 'do it.'" "Yeah," agrees Marie. "I was a player. I like the court. You can pretend to dunk." Even though physically present with me and their purchases, the women each wander a field of dreams, dwelling in an Erewhon of athletic accomplishment not bounded by the walls of NTC.

Cultural Geography of NTC: Location, Location, Location

A significant measure of the experience NTC affords consumers derives from its prestigious location on "the Boule Mich," a celebrated stretch of North Michigan Avenue also known as "the Magnificent Mile." NTC is flanked by a range of upscale retail outlets and galleries. The art-and-commerce ambience of this setting is not reflected solely in discrete and distinctive offerings by specialized shops. Rather, the effect is heightened by the kind of hybridized

merchandising that gives NTC its own particular appeal, and the architectural diversity for which Chicago is renowned.

Facing north from the NTC entrance, the consumer's gaze takes in the Water Tower district of fine shops (including the vertical mall Water Tower Place) and assorted architectural wonders (the Old Water Tower, the Hancock Building, and the like). Directly across from the entrance, facing west, consumers encounter an architectural pastiche: the majestic Chicago Place, an enormous vertical mall designed in an agglomeration of styles and reminiscent of a European arcade. The Terra Museum of American Art also is prominently visible from the entrance. As if to challenge the primacy of the gaze, the visually unobtrusive Garrett Popcorn Shop, whose door is always open to accommodate the long line of consumers snaking into the extremely narrow shop, emits a pleasingly intense aroma of popcorn, caramel corn, and cheese corn onto the boulevard and into the surrounding stores. Passersby slowing to negotiate the queue or savor the scent often create something of a bottleneck on the sidewalk, giving pedestrians occasion to notice itinerant vendors and street musicians in their wandering orbit.

Facing south, and immediately next door to NTC, consumers are greeted by the Sony store. Sony has also affected a museum-cum-gallery servicescape, which allows consumers to admire state-of-the-art electronics while field-testing them in the store. On the corner southwest of the NTC entrance, Crate and Barrel has a flagship store, conveying, in its cylindrical glass facing, the essence of many of the wares it offers for sale.

Thus, as one looks up and down the boulevard, this urban marketplace resembles nothing so much as a canyon of consumption, its glass and concrete walls reigning over a river of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. As a transparently designed canyon, its cultural ecology is characterized by spectacle and desire. The energy and pace of this urban setting contribute to the immediacy of NTC's external presence and mirror the phenomenal realms contained within the building.

The exterior of the NTC building is fairly unremarkable, concealing its internal wonders in a fashion reminiscent of the way the

outers of Nike footwear conceal their own internal engineering marvels. A landscaped parkway—whose concrete abutments invite consumers to sit and rest, observe and ruminate—gives the store an initial curb appeal. The facade is strongly reminiscent of an old gymnasium. Banners hang between the windows in columns on the middle stories. Two entranceways flank a bank of windows at street level. In those windows, consumers see not only product offerings and vestibule merchandising, but also reflections of their own images and the surrounding streetscape. Reflection is an activity greatly encouraged by the NTC servicescape. Above this central glassworks, the corporate name and logo are centered on a filigree grillwork. On the four structural columns bracketing the entranceways, bas-relief sculptures executed in material resembling aluminum are framed above eye level. These sculptures depict the body parts of athletes engaged in sport—a cyclist's torso, a runner's trunk and limbs, basketball players' arms, torso, and head, the profile of a female enacting aerobics. These sculptures appear to be emerging from the building (or merging with it), and the functions they embody make them suitable *genius loci* for this marketplace. If we allow the temple or shrine conceit to shape our interpretation, the fixity of these cult statues is not simply appropriate, it is also essential to the shaping of experience the consumer will undergo upon crossing the threshold. (Indeed, the *nikai*, or victories [McEwen 1993, 104] themselves, embodied in all the offerings of the corporation, from whence its name was derived, alight in this building.) That threshold crossing marks the entrance of the consumer into an alternative phenomenal realm, an existential condition of being-in-the-marketplace, a participation in a lifeworld just shy of a total institution.

Inside the Building: A Walking Tour

Because space limitations make it impossible to describe all the pavilions in sufficient detail, I limit my discussion to those interior structures that both give the reader an overall sense of the enterprise and reflect the degree of consumer interest that promoted my own initial introspection. That is, I confine my treatment more to the

remarkable than the mundane as communicated to me by intuition and the enthusiasm of informants. I employ a bottom-up approach, describing phenomena encountered in ascending the building.

Vestibule

The vestibule has undergone considerable change since I began this investigation. The original window display consisted of a large rimless paddle wheel whose spokes terminate in athletic shoes, giving the impression of perpetual motion sustained by the product. Over this display, a banner proclaims, "There Is No Finish Line," reminding exiting visitors that true athletes remain suspended in an existential present of achieving, and that Nike will support them in their Sisyphean pursuit. Mounted on a side wall are framed covers of *Sports Illustrated*—each bearing the picture of a Nike celebrity endorser—that look like pictures in an exhibition.⁵ An accompanying plaque pays tribute to the performance of "great athletes," the accomplishments of which confraternity the cobranding sponsors enable the customer to experience vicariously.

The performance motif conjoined with the opportunities for touching greatness (O'Guinn 1989) are impressed upon the consumer at the very outset of the visit. Consumers walk across a set of inlaid embossed concentric circles, at the center of which is the globe (North America featured prominently), ringed about with the Nike Town trademark. This same design, adorned with cardinal compass points, is also reproduced on what appear to simulate manhole covers on street-level floors inside the building. Crossing these globes gives us the impression that we are standing at the

⁵ This concept has recently been reinterpreted in an upstairs wall-of-fame gallery that features photographs of area amateur athletes and accounts of their achievements, while the original vestibule exhibit has been retired. Whether the removal of these covers coincides with the end of history, or the corporation's transcendence of the historic into the realm of the fantastic, if not mythic, is interesting to consider. It may enable viewers to enter more easily into a culture-bound delusional system if they are not reminded so graphically of the firm's historical situatedness. Perhaps history has been "captured totally by the spin-doctors of market forces" (Fjellman 1992, 308).

epicenter of athletics. As if to confirm this impression, a statue of Michael Jordan stands⁶ at the center wall of the vestibule. Accompanying signage identifies him as “The Man,” and as a “good guy” who plays “great ball.” Consumers read of Jordan’s accomplishments while they touch the exhibit. In the background, the sounds of ringing mauls and hammers and the noises associated with the basketball court merge with ethereally atonal New Age music, as we ponder the relationship between effort and reward, and marvel at the retailer’s attempt to forge an identity between them.

First Floor

Crossing the threshold of the vestibule, we enter NTC proper and step directly into a spectacular illusion. Walking through NTC’s “Town Square” simulates the feel of strolling outdoors through a small-town shopping district. The open-air feel is enhanced by the vaulted ceiling, the brick-faced and window-studded exteriors of the pavilions, the street-paved flooring complete with sewer grates, the birdsong soundscape, and booths that simulate vendor carts. This feeling is further enhanced later on during consumers’ meanderings to other floors, where you can look out of pavilion windows, over balconies, and down to the “street” below.

The initial sensory rush consumers experience is delightfully overwhelming. “Oh my God!” “Pretty cool!” “Gorgeous colors!” “Boy, I like this!” These and other spontaneous exclamations in many languages other than English can be captured by the casual auditor standing in Town Square. Hushed voices are audible as well. Poster-size photographs of athletes of varying renown—local, national,

⁶ Once suspended like other NTC statues, now encased in a tubular transparent time capsule not unlike a vertical analogue of the resident of Lenin’s tomb, this white plaster sculpture—part museum specimen, part gallery exhibit—invites veneration. A charitable reading of the “whiteness” of the bleached black statues throughout NTC marks this homogenization as an homage to classical antiquity in the service of projection and visibility. Though these be giants, they are self-made Everymen whose greatness we all can emulate, if not appropriate, through purchase.

international—adorn some walls, where their accomplishments are documented. Exhibit cases containing products and memorabilia proliferate, confounding the boundary between the categories and reinforcing the notion of commodity aesthetics.

The sheer verticality of the Town Center brick facade reinforces the “Flight” motif signage at its pinnacle. The consumer’s gaze is drawn upward to encounter the suspended white plaster statues of athletes in motion—some recognizable as basketball players Scottie Pippen and David Robinson; others, like the nameless cyclists, as anonymous as ghost riders in the sky—and the Nike footgear they wear. Where Sergey Bubka’s vaulting effigy once soared at the beginning of my field study, now stands the soccer pavilion sign, a merchandising tribute to the waxing and waning of celebrity.

At ground level, the open sight lines reinforce feelings of expansiveness and connectivity. Visible everywhere are colorful escalators, catwalks, transparent delivery tubes, and hordes of roaming consumers. People and goods move in concert, passing each other numerous times in transit. These delivery tubes in particular (as well as their associated terminals) fascinate consumers, as shoe boxes whiz along, almost pneumatically, from stockroom to sales floor, visible to all throughout the journey. “Can you ride in them?” children wonder, as their parents reminisce to them about “The Jetsons.” It is a sanitized scene from *Blade Runner*, a transmogrified *Our Town*. Black-and-white murals of athletes, executed in the socialist realism style of wood engravings of the kind sponsored during the Depression by the WPA and FAP, and made commercially viable by artists such as Rockwell Kent, adorn some walls, giving sport the heroically populist cast the corporation seeks to foster. The waffle-patterned sole—the firm’s original innovation, showcased in floor exhibits⁷—is prominently featured in these murals. Macro-photographs of Nike

⁷ These exhibits and others displaying the evolution of footgear through time, however simulated, give viewers the feeling of being in the presence of the original, perhaps even the Ur-shoe, thus facilitating reflection upon the ownership of one’s own shoes and resonance of “original” with “own.” Sensory rhetoric helps link primal and unique aura to ownership.

endorsers mounted on a wall are shielded by vertical blinds painted in neo-impressionist style to resemble athletes, creating an optical illusion that weds present with past, technology with art, and fantasy with reality, again in the service of corporate vision. All art at NTC is performance art.

A curious effect is achieved by signage mounted over the ground floor elevator. A directory for the three showroom floors of NTC gives specific pavilion information. The sign calls attention to the uninterestingness of the fourth-floor "Command Center" of the building in a way that intrigues consumers. Consumers are prohibited from visiting this floor. The attractiveness of a backstage area in what is apparently a completely transparent front-stage is almost irresistible to consumers, and the corporation piques this interest strategically. Images of an inner sanctum—part holy of holies, part behind the curtain of Oz—pepper consumers' commentaries as they ride the elevator. We are in a high-tech tabernacle.

Perhaps the most compelling consumer experience on the ground floor of NTC is achieved on water. Two liquid media engage our attention here. The more apparent of the two is the large aquarium that provides the backdrop for shelving units full of sandals and Aquasocks. A tankful of exotic fish, color-coordinated to products (Katz 1994), draws consumers toward the outdoor-gear boutique. Adults rush children to "see the pretty fish," lifting the children for a better view and a chance to touch the glass. "Are they real fish?" is a frequent question, as children try to discriminate the fantasy-reality boundaries of the NTC environment.

Even more alluring is the video pond set off in a grotto flanked by lava lamp lighting and wave-contoured shelving, hard by a set of wave-contoured benches with acrylic swoosh inlays. The pond is a bank of nine video screens set in the floor, which projects the illusion of water and underwater scenes. Children flirt with its visual cliff appeal, while adults joke about "walking on water." Kids, often lost to the biblical subtext but not the fantasy feeling of such walking, are as apt to respond that they've never "walked on TV before." Consumers often gather around the pond, either standing or sitting, and gaze deeply into the video screens. Cast by design as Christ

and Narcissus, we imagine perhaps that the brand will work miracles for us, and mask our self-absorption as reflection. Now literally bathed in the glow of the electronic hearth, perhaps we feel that Nike Town is Our Town. This transformation is especially relevant in our postmodern era, where "third places" (Oldenburg 1989) are as likely as not to be retail "drop-in centers" (Katz 1994, 271).

Second Floor

Riding the escalator to the second floor, consumers continue to cock and swivel their heads to absorb the sights and sounds of NTC, pointing out discoveries, calling out observations, and anticipating what they are likely to encounter next. Their curiosity whetted by having seen display cases of heroes' relics, corporate sacra, public-service projects, and products themselves, consumers take direction from the engaging signage—sometimes neon, sometimes contoured to follow the building's angles, sometimes varied typographically to suit the pavilion—as they debark.⁸ Indeed, the escalators have something of the feel of an amusement park ride or monorail shuttle, and encourage a festive attitude among riders. Their fluorescent lights and transparency intensify this feeling.

Roaming the floor, we soon encounter benches built to resemble the air-support technology that has given Nike one of its distinctive competitive advantages. The bench is in effect a deliciously visual oxymoron that renders the corporation's distinctive technology transparent: we experience visible air. By encouraging consumers to see and feel on a grander scale what benefits design delivers to them, NTC facilitates a *being-in-the-shoe* experience. Consumers are quick to seize on the cue, and they grow increasingly alert to the affordances designers have built into merchandising fixtures. They are pleased to discover shelving that consists of basketball goals and backboards, or to recognize and learn from the

⁸ Those riding the elevator—itsself summoned by logo-emblazoned buttons—encounter display cases within as they shuttle between floors. Even the bathrooms contain exhibits, such as the Hollywood-style shoes made by Nike for Elton John.

head-to-toe merchandising strategy that dictates sartorial propriety from sport to sport. Squeals of delight and a summoning of witnesses accompanies the discovery by children and adults alike of door handles and railing support struts cast in the shape of the distinctive swoosh. Almost universally, this visual detection prompts a fondling of these fixtures, as if a palpable grasping of brand essence were to make the experience of NTC tangible. Design promotes the hands-on philosophy that corporate vision seeks to instill in consumers. Such tangibility is self-consciously showcased at the pinnacle of the consumer's journey, as I describe in the upcoming section.

While other sports such as aerobics, tennis, and golf are featured here (captured often enough in the soundscape itself), and while the memorabilia of Nike celebrities from sports such as baseball are on display, the focus of the second floor, and arguably of NTC at large, is the half-court basketball unit that serves a number of functions. As a sales floor, it periodically houses temporary shelving for shoe displays. It provides a realistic opportunity for customers to field-test footwear under consideration for purchase. It is the site of the occasional pep rally to celebrate the victories of the Chicago Bulls basketball team. Indeed, the team introduction music is audible in the background. Perhaps most importantly, its scale and soundscape encourage the mystical participation of visitors in the lifeworld of Michael Jordan.

As consumers wander the court, or sit on benches whose seat pads bear the jersey numbers of Nike endorsers, or jump, feint, and pivot, they are dwarfed by a multistory fantasy photograph of His Airness soaring through the clouds behind the net, in his iconic Jump Man pose. A caption appended to the photo is an epigraph taken from William Blake:

No bird soars too high,
If he soars with his own wings.

The epigraph ceremonializes Jordan's near-mythic abilities and legendary work ethic while at the same time encouraging the projective fantasy in individual consumers of infinite perfectibility, of

effort rewarded by success.⁹ The words are a denial of hubris, the image one of a divine messenger, if not an avenging angel.

More than one young consumer advised me, as we gazed at this picture, that "Michael Jordan is God." Adults would often murmur, "Amazing!" in response to both the built environment and Jordan's presence. That Jordan embodies "flight" is ironically, and perhaps even mechanically, undeniable. That he embodies the virtuous face of "pride" is also apparent. Consumers' behaviors in this half-court room range from hushed reverence as they regard the wall display, to noisy exuberance as they squeak soles on the hard court and leap for the rim. The disinhibiting effect of the servicescape extends to adults as well as children. Sometimes it's irresistible to laugh in church. Especially, in the reflexively self-referential adcult (Goldman and Papson 1995; Twitchell 1996) instant where we try to "be like Mike."

The second-floor experience is encapsulated for consumers in their being surrounded by the memorabilia displays and their attaining the same physical heights as the suspended statues of the superstar endorsers. We are literally immersed in a milieu of accomplishment, whether we make eye contact with the soaring

⁹ "God bless the child that's got his own," goes one song. "Angels in the architecture," goes another. The allusions in this wall display are dizzying in their multistrandedness. The biblicality of Blake's poetry and the woodcuts gives the display a cosmological significance. Jordan's ethnicity gives the display a sociopolitical presence. Jordan as bird. Jordan as angel. Michael the Archangel. Blackbird. Jim Crow. Stealth bomber. Basketball as a black man's game. Mobility tied to athletics. Even the dangling statues commingle in this cosmology. Alabaster African-Americans homogenized in obverse minstrelsy and hanged in effigy in parodic lynching, hover as so many marionettes on the strings of the felt yet unseen presence of the corporation. And still, recall that binding animated cult statues of the archaic world, the bonds making manifest the divine life in the images (McEwen 1993, 5). Jordan sacra—golf clubs, clothing worn in commercials, images, etc.—are everywhere on display. Jordan products are NTC's bestsellers. At the time of this writing, the athlete has breached the boundaries of the cosmetics industry to launch a fragrance labeled—what else?—"Michael Jordan," to remind us of the revival of interest in the synergy between sexuality and athletics (Guttmann 1996). Chrism? Holy water? Aqua vitae? Ergodisiac? Whether we invoke P. T. Barnum or David Copperfield to account for brand extension, we can only marvel at the oxymoron that is Jordan's bottled essence: liquid air.

likenesses of Scottie Pippen and David Robinson or place our own hands and feet into the casts of those of Charles Barkley and Penny Hardaway. Consumers tell me that NTC is the best place to “learn” about NBA superstars, that “the history is important,” and that here “it feels like you get to know them [the players] personally.” A momentary merging of consumer with consumed is achieved. Looking back into the half-court room, where other consumers become a tableau for us, allowing us to enjoy a bit of the improvisational theater that we had only moments before provided for others, we are reminded by design of the interactive nature of the products the corporation desires us to desire. We are literally the stuff of which dreams are made.

Third Floor

The pinnacle of the building is notable for the aerial views of the store it affords, its birdsong soundscape, and its diorama-like sign fixtures. The Air Jordan Pavilion—a shrine to the Jump Man—is here. The kids’ pavilions are here. Consumers can prowl the catwalks, gaining a perspective of all they have seen, or contemplate a ceiling display of our solar system, composed of orbiting planets tricked out as sports balls. Sports become the fabric of the universe. On this floor, exhibits of sports memorabilia and cinema paraphernalia confound the distinction between athletics and movies, work and leisure, and artifact and experience.¹⁰ T-shirts and posters, framed like prints and displayed as if in a gallery, give some pavilions the feel of a museum gift shop. In these pavilions reside the most affordable of NTC artifacts, to which consumers are drawn in search of a souvenir to commemorate their pilgrimage. It is in these pavilions that products are perhaps most dramatically aestheticized. But the most public proclamation and visible enactment of commodity aesthetics at NTC takes place at two third-floor sites in particular: the design exhibit and the video theater.

¹⁰ It will come as no surprise that *Space Jam*, the first genre-bending movie-made-from-a-commercial, starred Michael Jordan and Bugs Bunny.

In a cased exhibit resting atop a large cut-block-letter acronym N.T.C., “The Dimension of Nike Design” is displayed in elaborate fashion. The case holds three-dimensional architectural models, artists’ renderings and blueprints, early merchandising concepts, and other assorted artifacts that illustrate the corporation’s commitment to an integrated design philosophy. Graphics inform the viewer that every element of Nike Town is consciously *designed*. Everything the corporation produces—products, fixtures, displays, buildings, and all—springs “from the Mind of Nike Design”¹¹ and is intended to embody a corporate vision. Nike artifacts are described as “tangible examples of innovation” and a “testament to team thinking,” resulting from the teamwork that is the collective “effort of every Nike employee.” The exhibit is an explicit recognition and promotion of the role of design to the distinctiveness of the corporation. It is also an affirmation of the heroism of production reflected in wall murals viewed earlier by consumers. It is ultimately a dramatic staging of the “Just Do It” attitude that drives heroic performance to great achievement.

The exhibit both reminds and reveals. Consumers (re-)discover what NTC is designed to produce in them: a confluence of cosmology and technology that inspires faith in the brand and enflames desire in the direction of purchase, no matter how delayed. Insightful design captures the ways in which artifacts mediate between mythological and material worlds (Krippendorff 1989).

Adjacent to the design exhibit is the video theater, built to simulate an open-air structure more like a drive-in or living room than a conventional cinema. The video screen curves to follow the contour of the wall in which it is embedded. Advertising for Nike products plays almost continuously across the screen, as some consumers linger to watch and listen, while others amble through en route to the next pavilion. Signage notifies us that the commercials portray products “in their natural habitat,” working for and through athletes who pulse with a “primitive rhythm” that the corporation

¹¹ Not like Athena, full-blown from the head of Zeus, but rather painstakingly and incrementally evolving through the “ambition” of architects and the integrity of the “design process.”

has sought to embed in its offerings. A rock video format is used to help capture this pulse. "Products in action" are enfolded over time into the "performance" motif that the theater's signage now proclaims. Once again, as in any museum or gallery, visitors are reminded in text of what they've (not) experienced in person. Further, the setting produces discussion among viewers. At any given moment, parents classify images for children, as do children for parents. Presentation sets didacticism in motion, here just as at the display cases.

As consumers move across the catwalks and wander through the setlike pavilions, the frontstage/backstage contrast of wandering through a dramatic production is reinforced. The music, the visuals, the soundscape, the vantage points, and the constant parade of other consumers taking in these same servicescape elements makes the third-floor experience both a summary or closure occasion and an opportunity to make further discoveries upon descent. By the time we have attained the third floor, we are used to seeing sales personnel interact with consumers, joking with them, providing tourist as well as product information, allowing children to push delivery tube buttons, and in general contributing to the built environment of the store.

Interpretive Summary

The Nike Town concept has been described as a "brand-building, 3-D commercial" whose theatrical embrace is reminiscent of a "1939 World's Fair" and whose inspiration stems in part from "The Jetsons" and *Back to the Future* (Katz 1994, 95, 272). It is, however, much more than just a curious hybrid of infomercial and edutainment, jointly produced by marketers and consumers. In Table 4.1, I characterize the mythopoeic merchandising that makes the NTC servicescape so engaging. In Table 4.2, I unpack some of the design features that contribute to this engagement. The intent of these efforts is to reveal the world as a company store (Idris-Soven, Idris-Soven, and Vaughn 1978), that is, to describe a phenomenological lifeworld contained in microcosm by a local marketplace, and to explore the mechanisms that animate that microcosm.

TABLE 4.1 Mythopoeic Merchandising at NTC: Experience by Design

Phenomenal Realm	Experiential Dimension*	Servicescape Venue	Analogues and Variants	Cues and Affordances
"Supernatural"	Sacred	Museum	Pantheon Cathedral Basilica Church Shrine Reliquary Grotto	Nike Spirit Invisible fourth floor Windows/lighting Suspended statues Vestibule Lamps/altars Memorabilia/sacra
				Interactive exhibits Bas-relief sculptures Display cases Diagrams Statues
design	Gallery	Gallery		Extramural banners T-shirt displays Poster displays Banner/blind paintings Geographic location Frontstage—sets Backstage—catwalks/lights Improvisation Living tableaux Video screen Commercials
			Theater Cinema (TV/living room)	

TABLE 4.1 (continued)

Phenomenal Realm	Experiential Dimension*	Servicescape Venue	Analogues and Variants	Cues and Affordances
"Cultural"	design	Playground	Stadium/arena Ball court	Hardwood court Basketball goal Jordan photo Soundscape arena
			Theme park Mall Category killer	Cross-promotion (Warner Bros.) Spot merchandising
		Marketplace	Boutique Gift shop Open-air market	Booths Kiosks Displays Design exhibit Socialist realism murals Ethereal music Transparent escalators Computer terminals Soundscape: hammers
			Factory of the future	Pneumatic tubes Neon lighting Escalators
design	Street		United Airlines terminal <i>Our Town</i> "Sesame Street" "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" "Toon Town" "Wacky Warehouse"	

Phenomenal Realm	Experiential Dimension*	Servicescape Venue	Analogues and Variants	Cues and Affordances
"Natural"	Profane	Outside	Epcot Center Gotham City <i>Blade Runner</i> Town square	Rough brick facades Windows Balconies Sewer covers
			Water Aerie Heights Promontory	Pond Aquarium Vertical space Open sight lines Clouds Natural light Soundscape: birdsong

*This is less a continuum than a dialectic, since all dimensions may be sacralized. It resembles more a Möbius strip, where the "natural" may be either base or exalted.

TABLE 4.2 Discovering Delight

<i>Servicescape Artifact</i>	<i>Design Feature</i>	<i>Sensory Engagement</i>	<i>Experiential Impact</i>
Doorknobs	Swoosh logo	Visual/tactile	Threshold fantasies; tangibility of brand essence
Railing supports	Swoosh logo	Visual/tactile	Brand stability and integrity
Bench cushions	Air support; shoe skeuomorph; endorser numbers	Visual/tactile	Transparent tool; <i>being-in-the-shoe</i>
Signage	Sport-specific	Visual	Draw flaneur through pavilions; naturalism
Artwork	Socialist realism; macro-photography	Visual	Labor-value musings; WPA-esque inherent dignity of work and effort
Sewer covers	Nike logo	Visual/tactile/aural	Groundedness; permanence
Aquarium fish	Color-coordinated with products	Visual/tactile	Aesthetic engagement; wonderment, speculation
Video theater	Nike commercials	Visual/aural	Edutainment
Merchandising fixtures	Pavilion-specific decor (shelves, sport benches, etc.)	Visual	Organic unity; muted didactics
Statuary	Celebrity sculptures; body parts	Visual	Veneration; cathexis
Soundscapes	Birdsong; music; street noise; court noise	Aural	Immediacy

<i>Servicescape Artifact</i>	<i>Design Feature</i>	<i>Sensory Engagement</i>	<i>Experiential Impact</i>
Exhibit displays	Museum cases; local material	Visual/tactile	Historical grounding; sacral-aesthetic engagement
Sales personnel	Youthful; knowledgeable; athletic attire	Visual/aural/tactile/olfactory	Humanity; relationship
Video pond	CRT hard water	Visual/tactile	Awe; Christ/Narcissus
Catwalks/lights	Interrupted sight lines; inaccessible scaffolding; spot-/klieg-light effect	Visual/tactile	Theatricality(director/performer/audience)
Ball court	"Jordan"	Visual/tactile/aural	Physicality; biblicality
<i>Sports Illustrated</i> covers	Celebrity endorser champions	Visual/tactile	Historicity; veneration
Blinds/banners	Optical illusion	Visual	Stability/change dialectic
Delivery tubes	Transparency; velocity	Visual/tactile	Atemporality

NTC, like the ancient city, is a symbol of the cosmos (Tuan 1974, 247). Perhaps more vividly than many buildings, it "condenses culture in one place" (Casey 1992, 32). Its theatrical underpinnings draw from ancient and contemporary dramaturgy (Fletcher 1991). Its architecture is a merger of Hestian and hermetic traditions—centered, self-enclosed curvilinear space abuts rectilinear, decentered, outward-reaching space, inviting simultaneous experience of the stationary and the mobile—that foster empathic connection (Casey 1993, 132–142). NTC is an interesting example of "design that begins and ends with the lived-experience of the users for whom the place is being transformed" (Dovey 1993, 260). More often than immediate sales, its ambience promotes alternation between a hypervigilant mode of exploration and a species of meditative bliss that has been christened "commodity Zen" (Fjellman 1992, 310, 401).

If we understand marketing to mean primarily the shaping of consumer experience, and consumption to mean the creative interpolation of marketing mix variables with extraeconomic concerns, then NTC is kind of a commercial Biosphere II of cosmological significance. NTC is a world where children hopscotch on water and ride or resist stairways to heaven, while products emerge from some invisible source of plenty and fly through inside/outside space in transparent arteries, in sync with the music of the spheres. It reminds children of their favorite television haunts: "Toon Town," the "Wacky Warehouse," "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," "Sesame Street." It is a world where adults worship athletic idols, pontificating and proselytizing as they wander about, fondling fixtures, brailing product, vetoing extravagant economic demands, and occasionally feeling sheepish about living in a culture that appears to have too much time on its hands. It reminds adults of Gotham City and Epcot Center. NTC is ultimately an unfolding experience, where regression and exaltation work in tandem in the service of brand equity. NTC is both surreal and hyperreal. NTC is "awesome," "amazing," "fantastic," "futuristic," "incredible," "unbelievable," and positively "cool," but most especially, it is *here*. It is Nike Town Chicago, where the word is made flesh and dwells among us.

Given his belief that "being number one is not very cool" because it breeds risk aversion, Gordon Thompson, the force behind

Nike design (and the author of this chapter's second epigraph), has become "obsessed with going beyond Nike Town" and intends to explore the "new frontier of retailing" by creating such outlets as "hands-on sports environments," "sports bars inside digitized environments," and "interactive TV technologies" that would permit customers to measure their feet on a home screen and place orders for digitally customized shoes (Katz 1994, 273–274). Nike is in the process of building a global "event marketing" division charged with the task of "possessing control of how its brand is presented and perceived," and intends to explore opportunities "from the sublime to the ridiculous" for "creating experiences that will tangibly communicate the brand's values and U.S. mystique" (Jensen 1996a, 2). As the corporation seeks increasingly relevant vehicles for tangibilizing the brand's essence—emplacing it in vessels consumers will in turn decant—the strategy of building local showcases remains firmly entrenched.

Nike Towns have recently arisen at the intersection of Rodeo Drive and Wilshire Boulevard (the "spiritual center" of Beverly Hills) and in the Union Square area of San Francisco, as the "entertainment retail" trend spreads to more traditionally "chic" shopping districts (Pacelle 1996, B1). The newest Nike Town at the time of this writing has been installed in New York (Lefton 1996). As history attests (Leach 1993; Monod 1966), such retail spectacle is linked as inextricably to the growth of consumer culture in the United States as it has been in Europe (Sack 1992). We can imagine exporting Nike Towns to other international centers of commerce, as we have witnessed the cross-cultural diffusion of McDonald's, Disney World and the Hard Rock Cafe.¹² It seems quite likely that

¹² Whether Michael Jordan's persona would prove crucial to international success, it appears not to have driven domestic diffusion of Nike Towns. Local heroes are featured locally, as emplacement might dictate, and as quick-turnover merchandising might demand. While Jordanworld may be rooted in Chicago, its essence may travel well to emerging sports markets outside the United States, as basketball, entertainment genres, and fashion diffuse globally. Where Al Capone's persona all too recently caricatured the city for its foreign visitors, Michael Jordan's now promises a semiotic urban renewal (Gallagher 1993). Worldwide, Nike strives to "make the brand part of the cultural fabric" (Jensen 1996b, 16).

Nike Towns will be the outposts from which the frontiers of retailing will be exploited. In that sense, NTC is both a site magnet and a beacon product (Sherry 1996, 359), drawing consumers to the source of the brand's production.

Let me conclude this section with a final field note excerpt that returns the reader to informants' perspectives:

I have encountered relatively few skeptics or ardent critics over the course of these interviews. Most of these seem to be young women or mothers acting as family financial officers. [Note: Is the masculine feel of NTC as gendered space my own idiosyncratic reaction, or does it reflect a corporate reading of U.S. cultural sportways?] And still, even criticism is muted, or framed in terms of the sunk cost of delight. "They spent a lot of money on this place—I wonder if it was worth it," speculates one young woman on a sight-seeing stroll. "Do you think they spent too much money on all this?" a teenage boy wonders aloud to his mates, as they take a break from Rollerblading down the boulevard to explore the building. "Can this spectacle be profitable?" is the unspoken subtext of these queries.

Prices for most items—T-shirts excepted, given their unique designs and parity prices—are contrasted with those found in less opulent settings, and suffer in comparison. "Get your ideas here, but buy stuff at Sportmart" is a common observation. One mother advises, "It's like FAO Schwarz. You go there to look, but you buy at Toys 'R' Us."

Metacriticism—of capitalism, commercialism, materialism—seems similarly restrained, transmuted perhaps through the aura of Michael Jordan. Again, it is young women who have told me things like, "It [NTC] doesn't impress me too much, but I like the Jordan posters," and, "It's strange . . . I don't see why people get so excited about a brand name. But I do like Michael Jordan, and I like to see the exhibits."

CONCLUSION

Let me return finally to the notion of emplacement to summarize my experience of the NTC servicescape. Nike brand essence is both embodied in the built environment and realized in apprehension, in an act of cocreation transacted by the firm's stakeholders. Consider

some of the root meanings of *technology*: to build, to give birth, to allow to appear (McEwen 1993). Consider as well how meanings are gathered to an artifact. In Heideggerian perspective, a thing "things" in a provisory carrying out of itself; it is a genuine happening. When we dwell in the world, we experience the "living out of openness specifically in relation to things" (Lovitt and Lovitt 1995, 173, 187). The design of NTC conspires to imbue artifacts with the "particulate sensuousity" that gives goods their "fetish quality" in consumer culture (Taussig 1993, 23).

Like drama, sport has its roots in religious ritual, but sport has long been suffused with a sense of erotic pleasure (Guttman 1996, 172), which arguably makes athletics and its requisite equipment the most eminently suited vehicles of sublimation that retail theater/therapy could imagine. Consumption at NTC is ultimately about "tactile knowing" and "proprioception"; the servicescape engages what Benjamin called our "optical unconscious" (Taussig 1993, 25, 97). Our imaginative fondling of the sacra/erotica that these props of retail theater have become—branded products, exhibits, fixtures, and the like—impels their literal handling. NTC evokes the kind of "simultaneous perception"—utter watchfulness, split-second attention to innumerable variables, fluid body boundary—that disrupts and alters our everyday consumer experience by encoding in its servicescape such dimensions as legibility and mystery, refuge and prospect (Hiss 1990). Not only is the superfluous stuff of consumer culture fetishized at NTC (Debord 1983), the retail inscape of NTC works to invest all objects housed there with enduring cultural values. Not only has Nike harnessed air, it has transmuted this base element into gold by designing its quintessence into every aspect of the servicescape.

The conflation of commerce with other domains of cultural experience—the transformation of commodities or brands into increasingly complex polyvocal artifacts and back again by filtering them through novel cultural institutions—is at the heart of the NTC servicescape. Our experience of consumption is recodified in ways that ramify beyond exchange but bear ultimately upon exchange. The aura of the outlet (like the spirit of the gift) drives future sales at other outlets; a species of immersion advertising

works to recontextualize, validate, and sacralize products at a distance. NTC becomes a numinous link in the distribution chain, part of the totemic circuitry that makes the brand iconic. The sensory rhetoric of the place, and its confounding of categories, keeps stuff interesting.

At the time of this writing, the architecture critic of the *Chicago Tribune* is lamenting the fall from grace of the Magnificent Mile to the "Mediocre Mile," as designers seek ineffectually to transcend the "mold of the sterile urban mall" by razing hallowed older structures and replacing them with "mixed use behemoths" that repeat the "overdesigned" and "garish" mistakes of trendy redevelopment without capturing any of its "extraordinary" triumphs (Kamin 1996, 12). The 600 block in particular is the site of contested meanings, as the forces of historic preservation clash with the demands of marketplace immediacy. In the critic's estimation, the "showroom approach" to retail design is destroying the aesthetic appeal of the Nike Town neighborhood.

During the course of my fieldwork, companies such as Eddie Bauer and Levi Strauss have established flagship brand sites on this block, providing consumers with the spectacle so central to the being-in-the-marketplace experience that entertainment retail engenders (Debord 1983). An inversion of guerilla theater, retail theater becomes a public enactment of retail therapy (Cushman 1990). Where mise-en-scène is merchandising, search is sensually choreographed. Consumers are encouraged to cathect commodities, infusing them with a kinetic libidinal energy summoned from energy's dormant potential as much by the built environment as by desire itself. If the external edifice of the Michigan Avenue marketplace is in decline, its internal artifice is in ascendancy.¹³ Being-

¹³ A young female informant provides the following anecdote:

The essence of Nike Town definitely follows you out the door. I bought my brother's fiancée a Michael Jordan T-shirt at NTC. The salesperson wrapped it in nice Nike Town—emblazoned tissue and put it in a shopping bag. Feeling completely accomplished, I strolled down Michigan Avenue carrying the Nike Town shopping bag on my wrist as if it were a Louis Vuitton handbag. Anyhow, when I got home, I had to pack the T-shirt in my suitcase for San Francisco. I pretty much

with-brands in situations simulating the natural through the supernatural, under cultural conditions from low- through highbrow, is the experience this artifice invokes, in the service of secular prayer. Like a latter-day Euhemerus, we realize at some deep level that toys are us. I have titled this chapter (with apologies to Tennessee Ernie Ford) in ironic and allusive recognition of the reciprocal relationship of commodity fetishism to self-actualization.

Economists have estimated that Michael Jordan's presence annually generates in excess of \$600 million for Chicago's economy (McCarthy 1993). One-third of these dollars is linked to tourism. I have described NTC as a site magnet for secular pilgrims. Among the retail trends afoot in Chicago that have drawn popular attention—destination merchandising, service-with-a-smile, clutter busting, designer private label, next-generation shopping, novel promotions, and surprising product placement (Spethman 1995)—each is in evidence at NTC. Just as revealing, a recent *Brandweek* survey of 12 influential young (under 40) marketers identifies Nike as the "favorite marketer" of 5 of these managers, who cite such factors as iconic equity, risk taking, authenticity, attention to details, execution, and consumer identification in their admiration of the brand (Khermouch 1996). Each of these factors is also in evidence at NTC. Where an entire line can be merchandised in ways that designers intend (Kuntz 1995), marketers can influence the shape of consumer brandscapes more precisely than in the past. Further, sheer abundance, if not cornucopian display (Sherry and McGrath 1989) of products, contributes to the immediacy of the marketplace. As a

refused to take the shirt out of the bag for fear that some of the essence would escape. Somehow I packed it in my suitcase completely intact.

When I got to San Francisco, I gave the intact gift to my brother, who was packing his own suitcase to visit his fiancée. Then he did the unfathomable. He proceeded to pull the T-shirt out of the bag and out of its nice Nike tissue paper and put it in his suitcase. Not only had he unwrapped the gift for her, but he had stripped her of the Nike Town-ness of the gift. Of course, I told my brother he was completely wrong and that it must be rewrapped (a minor consolation). Unfortunately, you see, my brother is an engineer. It was a question of utility (a lighter suitcase—by a whole two ounces), and I was irrational. I think we ended up settling on putting the tissue around the shirt.

stage for such merchandising, NTC is unparalleled. The company itself has been honored as the 1996 Marketer of the Year by *Advertising Age*, which claims the brand to be a "cultural icon" more "recognized and coveted" than "arguably any brand" (Jensen 1996b, 16).

Nike. Mikey. Mike. Here prosody prevails. By aural rhyme and by sight rhyme, the words and their adcult essences (Twitchell 1996) converge upon one another at NTC. The site is, after all, Mike Town.¹⁴ He is the soul of the company store. Let me conclude by returning to the emplacement conceit with which I began this chapter. Once meanings are emplaced in artifacts, these artifacts in turn contribute "to our definition of the spatial situation, and the reciprocal amplifying effects that occur when artifacts resonate with space" (Sherry 1995, 360). As work in environmental and architectural phenomenology suggests (Seamon 1993; Walter 1988), our relationship to objects is often geomantic. Artifacts situate us in a "moral geography of culturally significant quality space" and help foster among visitors—in this case, liminoid pilgrims sharing a communitas of psychophysical, commercio-aesthetic origin—a groundedness rooted in air. While the essence of Nike Town is ineluctably local, the experience of *Nike World* travels as far as the products and images of the firm diffuse.¹⁵

As marketers attempt to forge a retailing agenda for the twenty-first century (Peterson 1992), it is painfully apparent that we lack both a theory that comprehends the obvious world and a chorography that accounts for and taps the spirit of the place (Walter 1988). In our era of hyperconsumption and image-driven search, where the boundaries between marketplaces and other public forums blur, we are beginning to understand "cognitive acquisition," but we have no true feel for its ethos, which may simultane-

¹⁴ Again, allusions are alluvial. Boys Town. Boyz'N the Hood. The Island of Wayward Boys. Boys will be boys. Boy toys. Here in this commodity kiddie land, play is the thing. Regression in the service of fantasy enables us to be like Mike. For one brief, shining moment, life is nothing but net.

¹⁵ Like seeds, spores, starter dough, or the theft of fire (Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1995), Nike will be everywhere you want to be. Whether its brand equity—in this case, the authenticity of any particular Nike Town as a pilgrimage site—is diluted in extension remains to be seen.

ously stimulate and sedate (Crawford 1992, 13–14). Venues such as NTC are especially fertile field sites for the kinds of discovery that humane social scientific inquiry can facilitate. Perhaps this chapter will provide encouragement for just such discovery.

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