

Sporting Sensation

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Over several years and several publications, my colleagues and I have explored the carnal kindergarten of ESPN Zone Chicago, the quintessential postmodern sports bar reprised as male preserve, where physical exertion and virtual exhaustion whipsaw the consumer from the intimate immediacy of playing field to the projective pixilation of telepresence, rocking the sensorium to its very roots

The retail theatrics of this spectacular shrine to America's civil religion, to which the faithful flock in search of the elixir of youth – the lived experience of play, served up Disney-style through the mediated screen of ESPN authenticity – produces an amazingly uniform response among its pilgrims: sensory overload. The Zone is a two-story sensory inundation tank,¹ in which immersed consumers are so bombarded with sensation they have labored mightily to co-create that they often exit the premises reeling, marveling at the spectacle-induced variant of phantom limb syndrome felt long after departure.

The threshold of this eatertainment venue is redolent of brew and pub grub and thrums with the beat of mixtape music pumped out onto the street, luring lookers into the Atrium. Once inside, the gaze is engaged by ubiquitous batteries of video monitors,² most larger than life, enticing viewers into the epicenter of sportsworld, by scoreboards

and tickers and crawlers reminiscent of sports books, by luminous signage of corporate sponsors and, most of all, by fellow travelers on the gaming odyssey that makes every player a performer,³ every spectator a participant. The glance caroms from monitor to arcade screen to ball court and back again, marking play and crowd in its sweep, accompanied all the while by a frenetic soundscape of electronic sportnoise and the cheers, jeers and commentary of patrons. Drawn ever upward to field and screen, the gaze gives way to a haphazard haptics of navigation, as consumers meander from Atrium to Arena to Throne Zone, brailing exhibits, tossing balls, breaking sweat⁴ more often on the virtual skis, motorcycles, skeet and bowling than the “real” games, and bumping into one another in the crowded communitas of the play space, even as they try to avoid spilling their beer while washing down buffalo wings.

The sanctum sanctorum of the Zone, the Ultimate Viewing Area, is the promised land of the true sports fan,⁵ a dream come true both figuratively and literally, where all the senses are enlisted in the service of an in-to-body experience of immanence. Enscorced in a luxurious leather La-Z Boy, enveloped in surround-sound audio feeds of dozens of live sports matches broadcast on a bank of enormous screens and controlled by a finger panel on the arm of the recliner, served by women who ensure constant delivery of food and drink, the rapt consumer may experience many a slip between cup and lip as the images wash over him, or as an eerily authentic crack of a bat and the reflexive expectation of a line drive to the head startles him from reverie.⁶ The experience of the Throne is the apotheosis of the Zone’s tagline challenge to the consumer: “Eat. Drink. Watch. Play. What More Could You Want?”⁷ Provision of the staff of life, couched in



Ice palace of 1889 as it was intended to be. From the exhibition *Sense of the City/ Sensations Urbaines*. Gift of the Hon. Serge Joyal, p.c., o.c. Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/ Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal

the imperative, clinched in the rhetorical, delivered while you're sitting down. The good news and the bad news is just that simple.

In this intriguingly imagineered reverse panopticon,⁸ synesthetic sensation (the tactile dimension of vision, the visual quality of sound, the aural reverberation of smell) shapes experience in highly nuanced fashion for individual consumers. Sweat cuts cologne and returns someone to the echo of the locker room. Pebbled texture of a ball viewed in flight returns another to the leaden feel of a critical charity stripe. Butt on recliner returns some to home, and others to Momma. Intersense modalities magnify the impact of the built environment on consumer experience. Consumers leave the Zone while in the zone, both energized and enervated, buzzing and buzzed.

As themed flagship brand stores move beyond their 3-D advertising origins to become the emplaced brandscapes that ground our experience economy, a telematic aesthetic increasingly engages our senses. The artifactual and the electronic fuse in a way that permits the site to inhabit us. Understanding the sensual circuitry of this fusion is an exciting challenge for twenty-first century social science.

Notes

1. To borrow a phrase from Stephen Colbert, whose notion of "truthiness" is so in sync with the entertainment economy ethos that spawns such themed flagship brand stores.
2. Yes, even in bathrooms, where collegiate fightsongs provide an urgent aural aide de toilette.
3. Even those overserved patrons in overstuffed easy chairs asleep in the Screening Room.
4. Visceral feelings of motion(-sickness) are widely reported for arcade games.
5. Etymologically, "fan" and "fanatic" are cousins with the same liturgical roots.
6. Pick your favorite Freudian regression – phallic or uterine – and find it represented in our informants' fantasies.
7. The answer, of course, is not "Sex" (which abounds here in heterosexual fantasy, homoerotic sublimation and general carnal sensuosity), but, simply, "More."
8. Managers watch you watch them watch you while you watch others watch you watch them...

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