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(Re)defining luxury

Perspectives on experiential design

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The atmospheric sunlight of the Royal festival Hall, London, Robert Matthews, Leslie Martins, Peter Moro and Edwin Williams. Photo © Valerie Mace.

In his book, 'The Emergence of the Interior. Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity', Charles Rice (2007) draws on the writings of Walter Benjamin to express the notion of experiential duality. He explains that there are two types of experiences, long experiences and instantaneous experiences. Long experiences develop over time, they are linked to continuity and may thus allow us to feel grounded. Instantaneous experiences on the other hand are dynamic, possibly ephemeral. When presenting this concept Rice was primarily focusing on the domestic interior. However, experiential duality can also apply to other contexts, notably to the recent experiential turn in design.

In 2018, I had the opportunity to visit 'The Flipside', a temporary exhibition and multi-sensory experience located in the Old Selfridges hotel in London. The exhibition explored altered states of luxury and took visitors on a journey through a series of installations created by artists for luxury brands. The exhibition aimed to deliver a conceptualised view of radical luxury defined by the values of the brands it showcased. It surprised and delighted as each installation was revealed. The contrast between the raw concrete of the original interior architecture and the gloss of reflected lights against a dark background created drama and a perfect stage for luxury. The attention to details, the exclusive space and sometimes lavish designs suggested a desire to make the experience of the exhibition in itself a form of luxury. It stood out as radically distinctive. Yet, unique experiential events and pop-up

brand experiences have become increasingly common in recent years and in this context, it seems that experience supersedes commodity. The luxury is not in the product but in the experience of the brand narrative. As such, 'Flipside' belonged to the domain of instantaneous multi-sensory experiences. It was enjoyable, memorable but also short-lived. Luxury was staged for our sensuous pleasures.



Staged lighting from the Flipside Exhibition. Photo © Valerie Mace.

What about long experiences? How can design also foreground the values of more stable and long-lasting forms of multisensory experiences, and consider how the ordinary, the everyday, can also create luxury? A number of architects, designers and scholars argue that, when transposed in the design of the built environment, the hegemony of vision in Western culture can distance and even alienate people from their surroundings. The dominance of one sensory modality over others creates impoverished sensory experiences. In their book, 'Sensory design', Joy-Monice Malnar and Franck Vodvarka (2004) ask us to consider what it would be like if we designed for all the senses. Arguably, as we develop our knowledge of the world through our senses, a paucity of meaningful and rewarding multisensory experiences in everyday environments could mean that becoming immersed in an environment attuned to human sensibilities feels like a luxury.

Thus, luxury can also be experienced in spaces where everyday activities unfold. In London for instance, the Royal Festival Hall has become a popular destination and this popularity is partly due to the way people experience its public interior. Built in 1951 as concert hall, in 1983 this cultural venue generously opened its interior foyers to all, all day, seven days a week. In his book 'The Public Interior as Idea and Project' Mark Pimlott (2016) characterises the public interior of the Royal Festival Hall a 'people's palace', referencing the real-life performance of the interior. Peter Moro, whose practice was defined by a sensitivity to human sensibilities, was the architect responsible for the interior and head of detail design development. Post-war austerity measures meant that quality fittings were unavailable at the time and in response to these constraints, Moro and his team decided to design

most fittings themselves. This included light-fittings, door handles, handrails and the distinctive 'net and ball' carpet, now ingrained in the identity of the Royal Festival Hall. In doing so they exploited functional requirements for their multisensory experiential potential, creating long-lasting luxury and placing this interior in the domain of long experience.



Handrail detail, Royal Festival Hall, London, Robert Matthews, Leslie Martins, Peter Moro and Edwin Williams. Photo © Valerie Mace.

Today, visitors can still experience the atmospheric sunlight streaming through windows, the seduction of natural materials, the comfort of empathically designed fittings, or simply find the perfect space for a conversation. Such sensory delights are deceptively simple. They can actually be quite complex and difficult to realise. They are often meaningful, rewarding and powerful forms of luxury that can sustain emotional wellness.

Rice explains that ultimately long and instantaneous experiences are two sides of the same coin. They both bring their own dimensions and values, and as such, the notion of experiential duality can frame our understanding of experiential design today. Interestingly, the Royal Festival Hall also runs free events in its public interior, bringing together long and instantaneous experiences into one context. Most importantly however, the design of this interior also foregrounds the integration of iterative multisensory experiences, making luxury an intrinsic part of everyday life.

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