Andreas Kofler

CITTÀ NON-STOP.
COMODITÀ COME
FERTILIZZANTE URBANO

NON-STOP CITY.
CONVENIENCE AS URBAN FERTILIZER

Abstract

Molto probabilmente chiunque si sia sintonizzato su MTV nel lontano ottobre 2002, sarebbe capitato sul video musicale del primo single post-boyband di Justin Timberlake. Il videoclip mostrava il cantante che danzava e flirtava davanti ad un minimarket 7-Eleven sul Pacific Avenue di Virginia Beach. Circondato da muscle car, BMX e adolescenti gironzolanti, l'ambientazione suggeriva un'urbanità suburbana molto americana, che per alcuni, per alcuni, rappresentava forse il primo incontro con la catena minimarket. Però, mentre il videoclip dipingeva il 7-Eleven come un luogo di scambio sociale, il suo edificio in mattoni...
lo classificava come una tipologia piuttosto superata. Una sorta di distributore di benzina ben-attrezzato ma senza benzina, capace di poter essere inserito in qualsiasi tessuto urbano che potrebbe offrire abbastanza spazio per accomodare un parcheggio fuori misura?

Al contrario: se Timberlake fosse sceso qualche centinaio di metri lungo Pacific Avenue su una delle bici presenti nel suo video, si sarebbe ritrovato di fronte ad un’altra filiale 7-Eleven, seguita, ad intervalli regolari, da numerosi altri minimarket – ripetendosi come in uno sfondo dei primi cartoni animati della Disney. Una vista su una mappa più grande dimostra che l’equazione che definisce questa trama viene da una strategia commerciale che cerca di dominare le aree riducendo la distanza fra i siti dei negozi ad un raggio di un miglio e mezzo per siti indipendenti sort of well-equipped gas station without gasoline, posed randomly into the urban fabric wherever it offers enough space to accommodate an oversized front parking lot?

Quite the contrary: if Timberlake had cycled down Pacific Avenue a few hundred meters on one of the bikes featured in his video, this would have led him to just another 7-Eleven branch, followed at regular intervals by several others – iterating like the background image of early Disney cartoons. A view on a larger map reveals that the equation defining this pattern is derived from a business strategy that aims at area domination, ultimately minimising the distance between the store locations to a one-and-a-half mile radius for free-standing sites (like the one featured in the video clip). A gap reduced to only a quarter of a
But in order to fully implement and refine itself on this second, smaller scale, 7-Eleven had first to turn the back to the American “Autostadt” in search of a suitable urban fabric elsewhere. Ultimately Japan would prove itself being the fertile urban hotbed 7-Eleven was in need of. There, it installed itself in November 1973, opened its first store half a year later, launched 24-hour operations in 1975, attained already 1,000 stores at the end of 1979, acquired its meanwhile bankrupt American holding in 1991 and continued its steady growth which at present marks a total of 18,000 stores – one third of its global branches.

Although in Japan 7-Eleven is the leader of its market segment, operating virtually 1 convenience store out of 3, the franchisor has been rapidly flanked in its ascension by other chains such as Lawson, FamilyMart or Circle K Sunkus. Collectively they operate 55,000 stores (1 per 2,320 inhabitants), totalling 5% of Japan’s annual retail market sales.

In Japanese convenience stores are called “konbiniensusutoa”, accorciata in konbini, una parola di
Nato negli USA, perfezionato in Giappone: un tipico negozio del concorrente di 7-Eleven, Lawson. Fonte dell'immagine: Lawson, Inc. / Born in the USA, perfectioned in Japan: a typical store of 7-Eleven’s competitor Lawson. Image source: Lawson, Inc.


Advantages of Dominant Strategy

- Greater Familiarity with Customers
- Increase in Frequency of Customers’ Visits
- Efficient Construction of Distribution Structure
- Effective Sales Promotion
- Improvement in quality of store operation consulting services
- Differentiated product development is possible

Diversified Store Opening Styles according to the Locations and Customers

Through 7-Eleven stores’ ability to attract customers and a product assortment meeting the characteristics of commercial facilities and customer needs, the overall convenience and image of the entire facilities can be further enhanced. Collaboration with diversified business sectors benefits the town in many ways.

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prestito traslitterata e pronunciata nella sintassi della lingua giapponese dall’inglese “conveni(ence store)”. La loro “giapponesizzazione” ed espansione rapida, è stata favorita dall’alto numero di pendolari di mezzi pubblici, dallo sviluppo precoce della logistica altamente computerizzata, dal basso tasso di criminalità nel Paese (un prerequisito per orari continuati) e, alla fine, anche dal suo tessuto urbano molto specifico. In effetti, anche se le città giapponesi sono sinonimo di urbanizzazione, possono sempre offrire momenti meno “fitti” – quindi tranquilli e confortevoli. Un tipico isolato a Tokyo è circondato da palazzi alti per abitazioni e uffici, che nascondono una complessa rete capillare di vicoli stretti affiancati da abitazioni mono-

language syntax from the English “convenience store”). Their “Nipponization” and rapid expansion, has been favoured by the high number of public transport commuters, the early development of highly computerised logistics, the country’s low crime rate (a precondition for 24-hour opening times), but ultimately also its very specific urban fabric. In fact, even if Japanese cities are synonym for urbanisation, they are still able to offer less dense – hence calm and comfortable – moments. A typical city block in Tokyo is surrounded by tall apartment and office buildings, which conceal an intricate capillary network of small alleys flanked with detached houses.

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This hybrid condition is the result of fire prevention regulations, notably those introduced after the two major burnouts of Tokyo: the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 and the bombings of World War II. By learning from these disasters, the government designated the main streets as routes for evacuation in case of emergencies and the resulting border zones as commercial areas. By allowing an increase of the floor area ratios of these buildings, the resulting “pencil towers” form a sort of city wall, encircling the low-rise residential areas and preventing the extension of fire from one area to another. Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, co-founder of Atelier Bow-Wow, compares the morphology of these urban villages with “cream-filled pastry”, called shūkurūmu in Japanese – a transliteration derived from the French (pâte à) choux and the English cream.

This hybrid word describes two very different spatial qualities: a hard outer one (the chou) that is at once fast and characterised by inner city car traffic, and a soft inner one (the cream) featuring a slower and more human scale that has been amplified over time by the increasing subdivisions of private parcels. 7-Eleven approaches such a neighbourhood by “creating community-based stores that accommodate the characteristics of the trading area”. Through this contextualisation, the stores’ design and sizes (30–250 m²) are determined and their flexible inventories adjusted to the neighbourhood’s demands. The fulfilment of a Metabolist’s dream, as the architects Hiromi Hosoya and Markus Schaefer argue: “They are subject to a strategy, not a form; a network, not an architecture; an algorithm, not an ideology. Their urban presence is pure process.”

This results in a highly “vitaminized” suburban urbanity, in which the Konbini’s seem to have contributed in levelling out the paradigm of collective and individual living. If über-compatibility was a premise for their installation, their contribution in...
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formalising and consolidating these “creamy”, but still metropolitan, environments also acted as facilitator for a certain type of architecture. There’s rarely a day passing on which “architectural broadcasters” like ArchDaily or Dezeen aren’t greeting us with a new Japanese house. And while we can explain ourselves the size, the location and extravagance of these projects based on historical and cultural grounds, the design of many would still be unimaginable elsewhere, where individualism and self-sufficiency still determine more hysterically the elements of suburban houses: garage, pool, garden, forecourt, etc.

Evidence for a mentality that learned to outsource certain “essentials” of individual living can be in fact found in some of the most known Japanese houses of the last decades. While Shigeru Ban’s Curtain Wall House (1995) still limited itself to address and merge the antagonisms of the private and the open, Ryue Nishizawa’s Moriyama House (2005) already explodes the volumes that costituiscono una “casa”, mentre la Casa

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Fujimoto (2010) proceeds in dissolving interior and exterior spaces. Projects that have as a precondition that the city with its amenities is always in reach, always opened, always offering exactly what one is looking for. With their flexible inventory, 7-Eleven-like stores are a kind of pragmatic climax of omotenashi, a term at the core of Japanese hospitality, describing the anticipation of the guest’s needs by its host.

Besides food, Konbini’s offer ATM services, postal and delivery services, payment services (for utilities and taxes), ticket services, and recently also city services enabling customers to get residence certificates (juminhyo). By theoretically being exactly what one needs it to be – whether as tourist, inhabitant or worker of an area – the Konbini also anticipates the needs of an entire city, both on micro and meso scale. While places for casual social interactions like the German kiosk, the French boulangerie, the Italian bar or the Polish “milk bars” are limited to one function and restricted opening hours, the Konbini have the surplus of making “the metropolis” available 24-hour a day, at a few meters from each inhabitant’s doorstep. A peak of activity is possible anytime and anywhere, the metropolis always ready.
Note

1. Although 7-Eleven is the world's largest operator of convenience stores, it is only present in 16 countries.
2. Strategic Retail Management, Zentes, Morschett, Schramm-Klein, 2nd edition 2011
3. Annual Report 2014, Seven & i Holdings Co. Ltd.
4. lawson.jp/en/about/business/
5. A frequently necessary maneuver for the successors of landowners, due to the high inheritance taxes applied in Japan (up to 50%).
8. Two Sou Fujimoto houses are within the Top 10 of the Most Visited ArchDaily Projects of All Time. Its more design-oriented counterpart Dezeen is even featuring an own archive of over three hundreds such delights: #japanese-houses.

Notes

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2. Strategic Retail Management, Zentes, Morschett, Schramm-Klein, 2a edizione 2011
3. Annual Report 2014, Seven & i Holdings Co. Ltd.
4. lawson.jp/en/about/business/
5. Una manovra spesso necessaria per i successori di proprietari terrieri, dovuta alle alte imposte di successione applicate in Giappone (fino a 50%)
8. Due case Sou Fujimoto si trovano la controparte sul Top 10 of the Most Visited ArchDaily Projects of All Time. La sua controparte più orientata al design, Dezeen, presenta persino un suo archivio con più di trecento di queste delizie: #japanese-houses.