

# Research Plan

Rethinking our ways of being, producing,  
consuming and designing

Polina Yudina  
ExploreLab Graduation studio

# Prologue

My fascination towards the topic of consumption comes from my hobby of doing ceramics. While creating ceramic pieces that are carefully crafted for hours with my own hands I am confronted by the pressing question of their value in a realm dominated by mechanized replication and mass consumption. How do my creations hold significance when machines can replicate them in diverse shapes and styles at an industrial scale? While my pottery does not significantly differ in style or shape, it does convey a distinct meaning to me personally. I observed a more careful attitude towards my own ceramic objects, they hold greater value to me. They encouraged me to utilise and acquire more consciously. Given that ceramics after firing are no longer recyclable, I find myself more conscious of what I am creating, its value and meaning to me and its worth.

A good representation of this attitude can be seen in a Japanese technique of repairing broken pottery pieces. A creator invests more time into carefully polishing, glueing and applying golden powder to the glued edges. Thus increasing the value of the piece and giving it new meaning and beauty. Desire to repair and give it a second life requires a certain attitude towards an object. Repair requires time and dedication and is given to something meaningful and valuable. Repair and maintenance imply care at the basis of the attitude. Care for the object, care for its production process and care for the environment.

Consumerism partially implies that things are being replaced and upgraded, and the frequency of it is dependent on the extent of maintenance and care for owed things that potentially need to be replaced. There is a connection between consumerism and value of stuff. The more value an object holds for us, the more we try to maintain it. However, consumerism is also about what we define as our need. We owed less things in the past, we needed less

things in the past. What drives us to want more, to need more? This is where I define my entry point to this topic and where I see the potential for a designer to step in.

This approach to the topic made me fascinated to explore how our attitude towards objects has changed over time. And more importantly what role did architecture and space play in perpetuating the culture of consumption? How did architecture facilitate and shape the changes in consumer behaviour in our society? Seeing examples of major shifts in our cities characterised by integration and dominance of retail within urban context made me question our modes of designing as well. With this investigation I invite to rethink our current ways of being, producing, consuming and designing.



# Introduction

We inhabit a world characterized by perpetual growth and progress. Our population is expanding, our economy prioritizes growth as a natural objective for our existence and consumerism is ever increasing. Over the past century, we have seen a drastic rise in consumed goods by an ordinary person. Meanwhile, the climate crisis escalates, the way we consume does not align with our objectives of ensuring the longevity of human existence and preserving our environment. Scientists have been sharing their warnings that our planet will not be able to withstand the economic growth we are steadily pursuing<sup>1</sup>. Although, we seem to struggle to imagine another way of living, we need to look for alternatives. Addressing our consumption habits strongly correlates with the revision of our economic system, namely capitalism. Antony and Fiona believe that many problems we are facing today are irreversible and to change something we should start by modifying our beliefs and values. As a consequence, we might be able to adjust our way of living, producing and consuming<sup>2</sup>.

It is clear that our current way of consuming works against our survival. However, it is believed that it also works against ourselves on a more personal psychological level. As Marcuse put it, "...in the act of satisfying our aspirations, reproduce dependence on the very exploitative apparatus that perpetuates our servitude."<sup>3</sup> By consuming more we in return want more, which builds continued feelings of dissatisfaction and incompleteness.

To understand this problem we can relate to the notion of desire explored from the

1 Higgs, Kerryn. (2014). Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet

2 Dunne, A. and Raby, F. (2013) Speculative everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming. MIT Press.

3 Marcuse, Herbert. (1970). Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics and Utopia. London: Allen Lane cited from Higgs, Kerryn. (2014). Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet.

perspective of why we desire something that weakens us by Deleuze and Nietzsche in their essays. We often associate desire with lack. However, Deleuze believes that desire is a positive occurrence and does not correlate to lack directly. He says that what we want and what we put our energy into wanting is shaped by society. Feeling like we're missing something only happens when we start caring about what society tells us to care about<sup>4</sup>. Edward Bernays saw these desires being triggered and shaped by PR and marketing, as political tools to control the masses and gain certain attitudes from the population. Our consumer behaviour in actions to buy and possess is a 'compensatory substitute' for desires which we have been encouraged to obey. Things that we purchase are desired not for their essence as objects, but rather their meaning and symbol that is perpetuated by society. Often it conveys proof of our success and social status that social forces reflected on certain items<sup>5</sup>. The cultural ideology behind consumerism that penetrates our society with a set of values and beliefs, promotes that "human worth is best ensured and happiness is best achieved in terms of our consumption and possessions."<sup>6</sup> To understand consumption and its motives, it is required to understand the underlying values and beliefs of our society, as well as their continual formation influenced by mechanisms of our economic system. Therefore, the values need to be recognised, framed and elaborated at every stage of this research.

Desire is fundamental to our social and economic structures and is deeply intertwined within. An established political economy and economy of desire, the so-called libidinal economy, are interdependent and sustain each other. Deleuze recognizes the differences in how these economies operate. In economics, there's a clear distinction between what's produced and the means of production. But in the economy of desire, what's produced is always tied back to the process of production itself. In other words, the things we want and the way we want them are influenced by the systems and processes that shape our desires. In the libidinal economy, there's a constant loop where the product feeds back into its production process.

4 Smith, D. (2012) Essays on Deleuze, Edinburgh University Press, Essay 11: Desire, pp. 175-188, p.186

5 Bernays, Edward. 2005 [1928]. Propaganda. Brooklyn, NY: IG Publishing.

6 Sklair, L. (2010) 'Iconic architecture and the culture-ideology of consumerism,' Theory, Culture & Society, 27(5), pp. 135-159, p. 136. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276410374634>]

This means that the «desiring machines,» which are essentially mechanisms driving our desires and emotions, can only keep functioning if they're repeatedly breaking down. This ultimately explains our increasing consumerism behaviour and reveals how capitalism is sustaining itself<sup>7</sup>.

The continued development and growth of consumer desire is usually referred to as 'progress'. Increasing demand and responsive production of new goods serve as an engine for capitalism. Progress therefore is the constant replacement of old with new, new needs, new trends, new products, new technologies, new ways of production and new desires<sup>8</sup>. Political economy is working to respond to the breaking of the libidinal economy, moreover, it looks for ways for the libidinal economy to break at greater frequencies. Businesses continually produce new and 'better' advertising by exploiting all the available mediums and tools to sell us an 'improved' and more desirable way of living and position in our society. While it is the lifestyle that is being sold, there are multiple material objects that are consumed.

What role does architecture play in it? If one's desires are shaped by the social context it is placed within, what role does physical space play in it? Architecture has evolved in response to the desires of the masses, but it also shaped and catalysed them. Retail architecture specifically has evolved resulting in the emergence of new typologies and a greater presence in our cities. The transition from markets and bazaars to expensive boutiques and shopping malls shows attempts of architecture to facilitate, shape and respond to shifts in social, cultural and economic contexts. Nowadays, commercial architecture is a platform for channelling those messages of 'new', 'better' and 'improved' to people in order to feed the desires and drives to buy more. Retail space is more than a place to shop, it embodies those promised lifestyles and social successes. It conveys the image, personality and style of living. When it comes to fashion and clothes it inherits the identity of a designer and the values that a brand

is assigning to customers<sup>9</sup> (Vernet & De Wit, 2007). Architecture is in between. Architecture is one of those links and channels between libidinal and political economies. Therefore, it facilitates, shapes and enforces drives that feed consumer culture.



This thesis aims to explore the relationship between retail architecture and consumer behaviour. It seeks to understand how architecture contributes to the formation and acceleration of drives and desires for 'new'. It is relevant to highlight that this thesis is written from the view of a designer, it does not aim to find solutions to those issues but rather explores how architecture can mediate desires and relations/interaction between libidinal and political economies. This thesis seeks the prospect of how architecture can interfere with and facilitate alternative ways of producing and consuming in our society.

7 Smith, D. (2012). Essays on Deleuze. In Edinburgh University Press

8 Higgs, K. (2014). Collision course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet. MIT Press.

9 Vernet, D. and De Wit, L. (2007) Boutiques and other retail spaces: The Architecture of Seduction. Routledge.

# Questions and methods

The research question that tackles the concerned problem is:

*How can Architecture interfere with and facilitate alternative ways of production and consumption?*

To define the approach to seeking answers to this question, it is broken down and further interpreted:

**how:** method or approach to understanding the cause-and-effect relationship

**architecture:** medium (transduction)

**interfere:** the potential of challenging and altering existing patterns and norms

**facilitate:** supporting, enabling and creating conditions

**alternative ways:** different to what we do now; encompassing ideas of sustainability, circular economy principles and human well-being

**production and consumption:** processes involved in creating, obtaining, purchasing and utilising goods, centred around human behaviour.

Using these terms, the question can be paraphrased into:

*How can the medium support and challenge different ways of obtaining and utilising objects?*

To answer this question, this thesis will be structured to respond to the following subquestions:

1. How did consumer culture develop resulting in the current state? Understanding the patterns and paradigms of desires and drives through historical events with an aim to define conditions in which architecture had to adapt and respond.

2. How did architecture develop in relation to the evolution of consumer culture? Understanding the tools, patterns and mediums of architecture through historical events with an aim to define the potential of architecture in mediating and amplifying consumer desires and drives.

3. What are the effects of evolution on architecture and consumer culture in synthesis at the present time?

4. What are the probable future trajectories of consumer culture and architecture facilitating it? Mapping out potential development of consumer culture and architecture, facilitating it, with the help of the question 'What if?'.

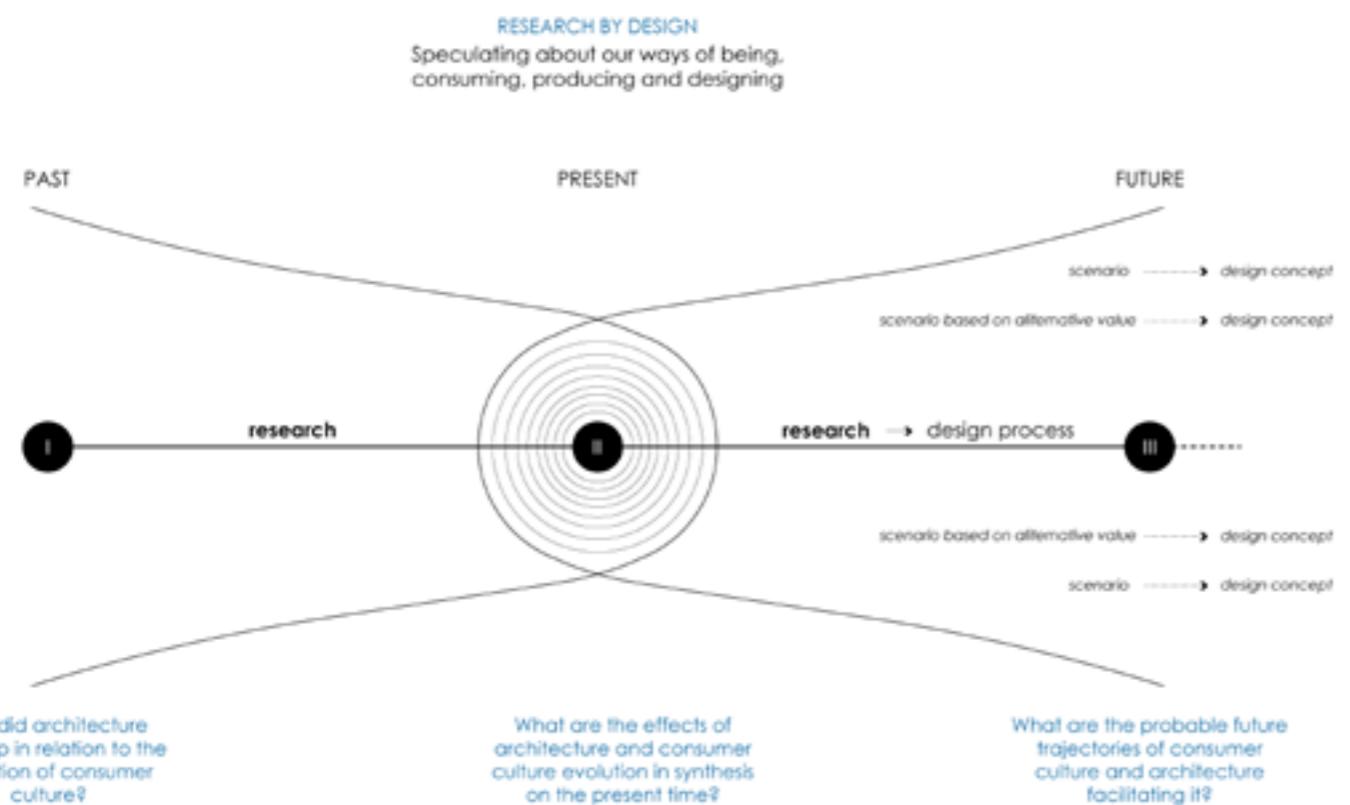
5. <main research question>

The research question entails that findings will indicate or lay the ground for 'different to our current' ways of living; it has an orientation towards the future. For this reason, this text is going to be structured as a timeline in itself. It kicks off with learning the evolution of consumerism and the development of retail architecture facilitating it. Gradually, an understanding of how we got to the current mode of living and designing is constructed and grasping the present tendencies of consumer culture and retail architecture is resolved hereby (followed). From that ground, the line of narration is redirected towards the future, or, more correctly, probable futures. The division into Past, Present and Future is made to make a clear separation between sub objectives of this research. First, the research aims to explore the relationship and patterns between consumerism and retail architecture through key events in the past. Secondly, the present time addresses the effects of that relationship on the present time, as well as defines current tendencies and directions of its further development. Regarding methods used to achieve this transition 'past-present-future', three

main methods can be distinguished: analytical literature study with the help of theories, speculation and interpretation drawing.

#### First Phase - Past.

Firstly, the range of literature is examined to explore the rise of consumer culture and retail architecture evolution. At this stage, the sources related to the history of architecture and sociology form the basis for the results while continuously linked to and concluded with the help of theories related to the interconnection between human behaviour and space. This link is necessary to achieve the objective of this stage - understanding the relationship between architecture and consumer thinking: how did architecture shape/respond/adapt to the evolution of consumer culture? Thus, understanding the formation of our values and beliefs.



#### Second Phase – Present

Further, the present time and current tendencies are covered with a literature study of various opinions and theories related to consumer culture and retail environments. To establish the results and place a later design (informed by those results) in a certain context, the phase of 'present time' will be narrowed down to the context of the UK. The reason why the thesis is not placed in the context of the UK in the first place is explained by the relevance of historical events around the whole world on the evolution of (most importantly) retail architecture, and consumer culture. I believe that relationships between architecture and consumer behaviour are best understood through the scope of historical events worldwide, which can also later give a better understanding of how the current state of consumerism and retail is informed by those events in the UK. This phase defines the current values and effects of previous events on the current state of UK retail architecture and consumer culture.

#### Third Phase - Future

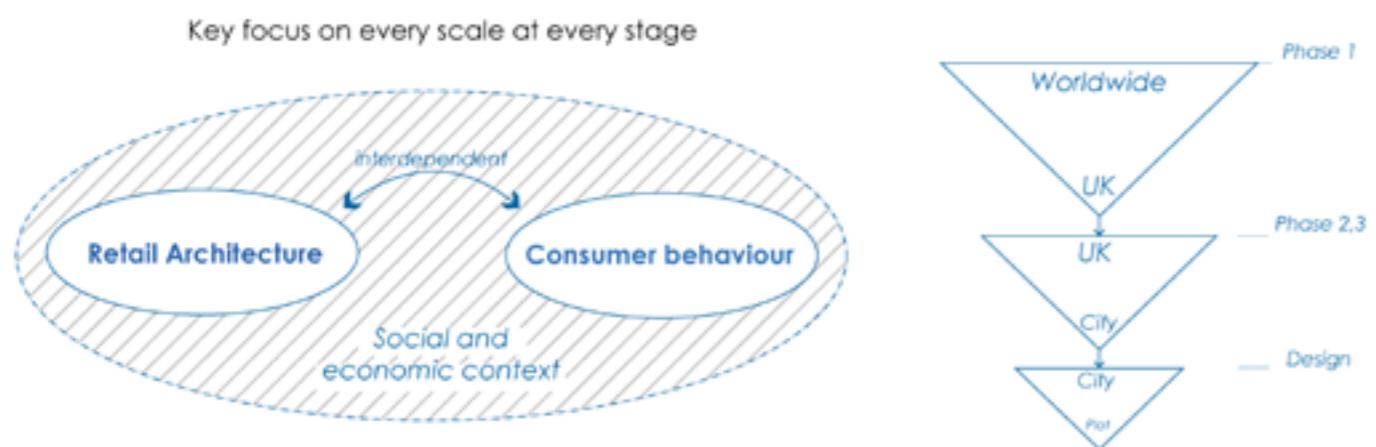
With the extensive analysis of the relationship between architecture and consumer behaviour through time, as well as insight into current trends in the UK, the third phase of this research starts. Speculation as a method is used to construct a set of scenarios, and probable futures on how our consumer culture can evolve depending on what actions we start taking differently from now on. These deliberately utopian, extreme, or fictional scenarios act as provocations designed to stimulate discourse and prompt a profound re-evaluation of our conventional modes of being, producing, consuming, and designing. Speculative design implies research by design process in its essence. While the standard design process involves five steps: idea generation, research, ideation, iteration, and testing, speculative design integrates exploration and visualization as well. During the exploration phase, the potential futures (scenarios) are written down using the theoretical knowledge of the first two phases. These explorations subsequently lay the groundwork for initial design concepts<sup>1</sup>.

Each scenario will start with the question "What if?" that will moderate our current set of

<sup>1</sup> Dunne, A. and Raby, F. (2013) Speculative everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming. MIT Press.

values as a starting point. A scenario intends to develop an 'alternative way' of consumption and production. Based on the previous findings related to architecture shaping and responding to changes in our consumer behaviour (way of living), speculation about how architecture (space) would respond to and mediate those alternative ways will be integrated within a scenario. The hypothesis is that architectural evolution in the form of new typologies and configurations is strongly tied to shifts in our cultural, societal and economic systems. With the help of the speculative method this objective is hoped to be achieved: understand what the most desirable future we, as a consumer society, want to come to be and \*understand if an architect can make that first step towards that desirable future\*. What if we as architects start designing those architectural typologies or qualities required to achieve those desirable futures before the shift of consumer behaviour within our society? Can we invite and enable that shift with the design?

Each scenario will be initially speculated in the form of an essay and later summarised in a detailed drawing representing extreme scenarios related to physical space and user/consumer behaviour. This will signify the first translation of speculated alternative ways of living and designing into something more practical and visual. The drawings and essays will form the groundwork for initial design ideas and concepts. They will serve as conclusions of this thesis and serve as a bridge between the research and design process. I believe that thanks to the speculative method, the design will be supported by the research resulting in a 'research by design' approach to this project. After completion of this written piece of work, speculation will continue into the design process, and as design becomes more concrete, speculations will concretise as well.



## Potential Design

After reading and exploring the problem of consumerism I have found some similarities in the field of Architecture. That is something that resonated with me because I had that underlying problem with our ways of designing even before delving into the topic of consumption. I found those similarities with help of seeing consumerism as a decision made by one again and again against repair and maintenance with insufficient care for one's possessions at the basis. Exploring the topic of why things hold less value to us and how our desire to obtain more is shaped, I observed some parallel occurrences in the construction industry. We have achieved a disposable mindset towards things we produce, consume and design. The topic of modularity and designing for later deconstruction appears as a good solution at all times, while it holds the danger of creating architecture of disposable quality. Why do we barely talk about permanence and the creation of value for future generations? This intention and motive can be seen through all of the historical builds that we now intensively try to repair, maintain and preserve. We care for our heritage and legacy, we care for our history since knowledge, architecture and artefacts are what we have left from it and what we can relate to as our roots. Architecture speaks of its time, and leaves traces and clues of that time, it reflects the values and beliefs of that time. If we design with the idea of total demountability in mind, the history of our time will be demounted. I do not criticise the demountable principle itself, but rather insufficient attention towards creation of history and value. We demolish buildings that do not hold value for us, that lack character, quality, craft and meaning. Perhaps to tackle the problem of demolitions, we can design with the principle of creating value. Not every building has to be taken completely apart and recycled, some can have a more permanent outer layer holding value for future generations while allowing flexibility and change inside.

This is one of the principles I believe I will bring to my design. Of course, it needs further elaboration and examination, this is just a first insight among all ideas and explorations that yet to be discovered. More principles will be produced with help of my speculative work of this thesis that will learn and analyse the values we have had and have now, and revise those values through the speculation of probable futures. The speculative scenarios based on rethought values will serve as a source for design principles.

It will be situated in a central location in a city, potentially the city of Newcastle Upon Tyne. Newcastle is an appropriate location because it is situated in the UK where this research partially situates itself. It also has a rich history of retail that reflects the values of the past due to the large transformation of the city in the 19th century (as an adaptation to reviving consumer culture and capitalism). The transformation happened according to the first commercial masterplan for a city centre in the whole of the UK. The centre was designed for commerce in the first place, leaving the plinth of buildings solely dedicated for retail and supplementing housing from the top. In the 20th century Newcastle has undergone another significant redevelopment. A plan called 'The Brazilia of the North' intended to transform the city by large-scale infrastructure projects, high-rise buildings and creation of 'skywalks'. The execution of the plan faced challenges leading to incomplete realisation. However, one part of the plan related to construction of routings and bridges connecting all the shopping centres in the heart of the city was completed. That was a groundbreaking and innovative to that time project that is still present till these days.

In the modern times, retail is facing its challenges in Newcastle. A large number of shopping malls are being demolished due to a reduced number of visitors and the High Street of Newcastle has lost its value. This presents a potential for me to situate my project in this location with a rich history of retail architecture and, awaiting radical changes, the present state of retail.

The design will hope to reshape and invite the users to rethink our ways of consuming and will aim to enable different, to what we know now, physical and functional constraints.

