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Consumers’ Experience Rooms

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4 Discussion .......................................................................................................................... 49
  4.1 Theoretical contribution .................................................................................... 49
      Design .................................................................................................................. 50
      Atmospherics ...................................................................................................... 51
      Furnishing .......................................................................................................... 53
      Information ......................................................................................................... 54
      Patterns of movement ....................................................................................... 55
  4.2 Practical contribution ............................................................................................ 57
  4.3 Methodological contribution ................................................................................ 58
  4.4 Implications ......................................................................................................... 59

Reference list .................................................................................................................. 62
Foreword

This study is the result of a fruitful cooperation between Per Echeverri, PhD researcher at Service Research Center (CTF), Karlstad University, Sweden and two master students Malina Gustafsson and Rickard Lundberg, Karlstad University. Per Echeverri are responsible for the overall study design, methodology, theoretical foundation and the final structuring and revision of manuscript. Malina Gustafsson and Rickard Lundberg accomplished the empirical data collection, gathered and analysed major parts of the literature. Jointly, these three authors have reflected on and analysed the results of this elaborated study of environmental factors in shopping processes. Outcome of this joint production are, beside this scientific report one candidate and one master thesis. Thanks to the management of Mitt i City for kind contribution and data access.

Karlstad, Sweden, January 2009

Per Echeverri
Summary

Shopping has become one of our most common leisure pursuits. Consumers move freely between stores and their different environments, often in a random manner. The question is how much randomness there actually is regarding how these environments make the customers feel and move. We have chosen to observe consumers in order to see how the environment affects their active and cognitive decisions. From a business perspective the environment must create the correct feelings in the consumers in order for them to enjoy it and return to it.

The service environment is becoming an increasingly key concept for companies, as it is seen as a function for creating the intended feelings by depicting another reality. It is also the case that the service environment reflects and creates meaning for the concept and also creates value for the customer.

The practical aim of this study is to deepen our understanding of how consumers are affected by the service environment of a shopping centre and based on that identify improvements as regards to design. The theoretical background for the study is previous research concerning design attributes in consumption environments and the influence of the environment on consumers. The theoretical aim is to identify what environmental dimensions appear to be important in a real-time purchase situation. This includes a validation of some theories of service environment dimensions referred to in the literature. The methodological aim is to further elaborate on video-supported field observation. Empirical material is gathered at a shopping centre in Karlstad, Sweden, called Mitt i City. Video together with personal interviews in situ are used in documenting consumption processes, patterns of movements and perceptions. We observed and interviewed our informants during three phases; before, during, and after their visits to the shopping centre. These aims lead to a clarification as regards to how the service environment creates an experience, meaning and function for the consumers by means of the concept of the shopping centre.
The study has provided indications of how the service environment creates value for the consumers via the concept of the shopping centre. We have also discovered that consumers create individual experiences and experience rooms by using the service environment in different ways. The study shows that design factors (layout, spatial form, colour combinations, choices of material and character) together with, atmospherics (such as sound, light, temperature) and furnishing are important parameters for consumers in their sensemaking of a shopping concept and the functionality of the shopping procedure *per se*. These parameters clearly affect the consumers in their choice of walking pattern. The design and positioning of information signs are crucial and part of the influential environment.

We realize that it is a difficult task to provide good advice for an ideal physical experience room. However, it is also the case that the more we learn about these experience rooms’ functions for consumers, the more we will be able to influence the course and content of the experiences. It is to this end that the study has sought to contribute.
1 Introduction

The world economy is more and more approaching a service-influenced society (Schor 2000). This trend entails companies developing new management models that reflect the role of the service, the service system, and the environment of the service in order to gain competitive advantage (Collier & Meyer, 1998; Wright et al., 2006). Consumers are demanding satisfaction and, increasingly, something extra over and above the core product or service. For consumers, shopping has become both entertainment and consumption, also called retailtainment (Solomon, 2004). Wright et al. (2006) are of the opinion that consumers feel that they are getting something extra from the consumption process itself, especially noticeable in connection with shopping, which does not solely entail the acquisition of products but also constitutes an experience and a pleasure per se. Shopping is a form of behaviour and does not need to include the transaction itself. The consumers’ perceived value is increasingly dependent on secondary phenomena such as environmental attributes, special events, and support services.

This has implications for entrepreneurs’ endeavours in forming environments for the purchasing and consumption of goods and services. This also applies in the retail trade which for a long time has been trying to design environments around its stores that will be perceived as attractive by visiting consumers. Goods and services are thus embedded into an environment with the purpose of supporting sales and in various ways serving consumers in their purchasing situations. In this case, the consumers’ perceived value also includes, over and above the purchased items and services, environmental attributes. Customer value thus entails the overall perception of such things as in-store environment, service, comfort, and quality (Chu & Lam, 2001). The aim of this study is how environments for the purchasing and consumption of goods and services must be shaped in order to be perceived as attractive by consumers.
One problem is that it is difficult to know more exactly which environmental factors exert an influence and during which phase. It can be assumed that this is down to which environments for the purchasing and consumption of goods and services are concerned, as well as many other contextual circumstances. There are thus reasons to conduct investigations of concrete cases. Findings from such cases can then be compared with other studies and can jointly contribute knowledge concerning the influence of environmental factors. An introductory literature review shows that there is a large deficit of empirical investigations in this area. Anthropological and ethnographic studies of consumer behaviour seldom pay attention to these types of factors (Underhill, 2006). In service research, the phenomenon has been described in terms such as servicescape in order to emphasize that services are surrounded by a ‘landscape’ that is of significance to the consumption of services. However, the majority of studies are conceptual, with either a weak or no empirical foundation.

The present study takes its point of departure in existing literature and important studies in the sector. Attempts are made to paint a picture of the field and its knowledge deficiencies. The theory review is used as a departure point for an empirical investigation of a shopping centre in the city of Karlstad in Sweden, known as Mitt i City. The study includes a further description of the investigation’s arrangement and design. Following a report of our findings, we conduct a discussion on the environmental factors’ impact on consumers, with special emphasis on design, atmospherics, furnishing, information, and patterns of movement.

1.1 The aim of the study

The aim of the study is to describe consumers’ perceptions of a shopping centre environment and to explain why an enjoyable and attractive experience occurs when visiting it. In particular, the focus is on concrete environmental elements, as they are experienced in real time. The aim is also to develop a method which, in a realistic way, is capable of capturing this complex reality. Two comprehensive research questions guide this study: 1.
What is it in the shopping centre’s environment (aspects, elements, dimensions, structures) that the consumers experience? 2. Why do these aspects shape the consumers’ experiences, i.e. what do the influencing mechanisms look like?

The nature of the study is explorative in the sense that we know approximately what we are looking for but still choose an approach that paves the way for a new type of data and other deeper knowledge of the phenomenon under study. The method approach is qualitative with ethnographic elements. We see this as necessary in order to be able to generate fresh knowledge and in doing so fulfil our aim.

By conducting an empirical investigation, we can obtain both practical and theoretical knowledge of the service environment’s effects on consumers. We can achieve deeper understanding of a concrete case, but also the opportunity to verify the relevance of existing theoretical models. On the practical level, we can obtain an assessment of the existing shopping centre as well as some good advice about what those responsible should bear in mind when continuing to develop the environment.

1.2 Theoretical background

According to one investigation, 70-80 percent of consumers’ purchasing decisions are made while they are in-store. Against that background, it is of relevance to companies to develop an environment that benefits purchasing (Schlossberg, 1992). However, previous investigations have confirmed that the average amount of time that consumers spend shopping has fallen. Such knowledge is an argument for designing the environment with the aim of bringing comfort and entertainment, something that results in the consumers staying longer in the store and buying more (Wright et al., 2006). Terms for defining this environmental phenomenon are unclear and varied. There is a need to review and compare, in more detail, the terms used for this phenomenon in the literature.
Different definitions of the environment for purchasing and consuming goods and services

Previous research has noted the importance of the physical environment in services (Mayer et al., 2003). The definition of this phenomenon is diffuse and terms like service environment, servicescape, and experience room are used in the literature and in scientific articles. Swartz & Iacobucci (2000) define the service environment as the physical surroundings of a service. Many researchers are agreed that the term service environment includes the physical complexity of the service’s surroundings, as well as who performs the actions during the delivery of the service where the company and the consumers integrate (Bitner, 1992; Zeithaml et al., 2006; Collier & Meyer, 1998). Lovelock and Wirtz (2004) are of the opinion that the service environment is a part of the service experience which affects consumer behaviour in different ways.

Mossberg (2003) discusses different Swedish translations for the English terms servicescape (tjänstemiljö) and experience room (upplevelserum). Servicescape is the English term for servicelandskap, but she rejects this translation and makes several suggestions such as the stage and the arena, acknowledging the dramaturgical metaphor often used. But this term is also rejected, since the interaction is omitted. The term servicescape is felt to be too sweeping, with too many reinterpretations. Environment is felt to relate to greenery and nature. Architecture and the developed environment are felt to be too physical. Surroundings is thought to turn thoughts away from the mentioned environment to external factors. The room is also tested as a translation but does not seem sufficiently precise. Thus, upplevelserummet and tjänstemiljön are the most familiar and accepted terms in Swedish translation (Mossberg, 2003).

Bitner (1992) is a central reference point in the servicescape area. Her work has provided a framework for the term service environment, where she argues that the term includes all physical aspects of the environment and forms a whole. Together with Zeithaml et al. (2006), Bitner reflects on the
term physical evidence as a synonym for service environment, being of the opinion that it encompasses all aspects of the organisation’s physical facilities. Zeithaml et al. (2006) are also of the opinion that attributes of the service environment which affect consumers include both exterior attributes (signage, parking, and the landscape) and interior attributes (design, layout, equipment, and decor). Physical surroundings include all non-human, physical aspects and can be divided up into both spatial and non-spatial attributes. Spatial attributes embrace physical objects such as products, but also countries, cities, stores, and interior design. Non-spatial attributes include attributes such as temperature, air humidity, noise level, and time (Peter et al., 1999).

Aubert-Gammet (1997) is of the opinion that the consumer is involved in building the experience room, in that consumer behaviour is created on the basis of situational variables that affect consumer behaviour. Aubert-Gammet (1997) divides the surroundings into a physical and a psychological part, similar to what Mossberg (2003) mentions that many authors do. Mossberg (2003) makes a division of the term service environment into physical and social. Social factors are the people in the experience room containing both consumers and staff. Mossberg (2003) also makes a division on the basis of the social and physical surroundings, by dividing the social surroundings up into macro- and micro-social surroundings. Macro-social relates to indirect social interactions with large groups of people, where terms like culture, subculture, and social class frequently occur. The reason is that these factors have a strong influence on individual consumers’ values, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours. The micro-social surroundings include social interactions between small groups of people like families and circles of friends (Peter et al., 1999).

Edvardsson et al. (2007) are of the opinion that experiences and surroundings are created in order to allow consumers to periodically visit and experience another place, time, or reality. We interpret this as experience rooms being created in order to make the consumer aware of another reality. The value of choosing the term service environment thus lies in the physical design of the environment. The purpose of an experience is to create value.
added, in excess of things material, for the consumer during consumption. An experience must provide greater satisfaction than the core product, or service, itself is capable of. Atmospherics that include design, music, and lighting can help to reinforce an experience and make the consumers and staff feel a positive reaction (Mossberg, 2003). Nguyen (2006) is of the opinion that a well-considered choice of environmental aspects will not just benefit the interaction between the consumers and the staff, and be the key to a successful service delivery process, but will also reinforce the service company’s image.

On the basis of this line of reasoning, our reflection is that experience rooms can be seen as the name of the feeling that the environment creates, while the service environment is the image of what we see. The service environment is the environment where the service is realized and where the experience is manufactured (Edvardsson et al. 2007). Experience rooms convey, according to our reflection, a specific feeling, an experience, while the service environment conveys another reality (landscape). According to our interpretation of the phenomenon, a shopping centre, for example, can be understood as a service environment. We are of the opinion that a shopping centre involves several service deliveries which jointly form a service. The task of the shopping centre is to bring pleasure to the consumers in order to benefit the stores trading in that environment. In doing so, the shopping centre per se can be seen as a service environment that influences the consumers.

As shopping centres are created in accordance with concepts, on the basis of which consumers act, the service environment exists to build another reality in the minds of the consumers. Our interpretation is that this perceived reality based on the service environment creates the building blocks that the consumers use to create their own experience on the basis of their own wishes and needs. Visitors to the shopping centre thus consume the environment when they experience and move around in that shopping centre in the way that the experience invites them to do. The interpretation is, in this case, that the visitor who interacts with the environment consumes it and creates his or her own experience room from the service environment.
Parallels can be drawn between shopping centres and leisure services such as amusement parks, concert halls, theatres, health spas (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). These are environments which invite consumers to spend increased time there and which consumers visit both for the environment and for a certain purpose (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). Being in a shopping centre is free of charge, entailing that consumption of the service “shopping centre” commences as soon as consumers step into that environment. In the case of the shopping centre, the service environment is the core service for consumers’ experiences where they interact with each other and with the environment (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004), in contrast to Swartz and Iacobucci (2000) who define the service environment as the physical things surrounding the service. Consequently, that is yet another way of visualizing this. The service environment, in this case, is not that which surrounds the service but the same thing as the service and the experience. Thus far, we have touched upon a number of attempts to define the phenomenon under study. In that the literature presents slightly different definitions, it follows that there is also a somewhat different view of the environment’s functions.

The service environment’s functions

Lovelock and Wirtz (2004) are of the opinion that services consist of non-palpable attributes and that the service is unique to each occasion, entailing that services are difficult to anticipate before they are consumed. The task of the service environment, as a consequence of this, is to transfer the service’s characteristics to palpable attributes that are clear to the consumer (Zeithaml et al. 2006; Grace & O’Cass, 2005). Grace and O’Cass (2005) argue that the service environment is a part of the palpable brand evidence for the specific brand and that these are aspects which jointly influence the consumers’ satisfaction, attitudes, and behaviour towards the brand. The service environment plays a multifaceted role during the service encounter. Zeithaml et al. (2006) argue in favour of the service environment acting like a package, simplifier, socialiser, and separator.
Like a *package* in the sense that the service environment gives the consumers a picture of what quality and capacity they can expect from the service (Bitner, 1992; Zeithaml *et al.* 2006; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004; Swartz & Iacobucci, 2000). Companies can position themselves using the service environment by re-creating the marketing message from the company (Bitner, 1992). Chu & Lam (2001) are of the opinion that the consumers’ expectations and the store’s achieved implementation result in consumer satisfaction, which, according to Bitner (1992), is the first step towards creating a functional service environment using its image. The consumers’ selection process takes place right at the entrance (Bitner, 1992; Skinner *et al.*, 2005).

The service environment is also a *simplifier*. The environment is a tool for showing the consumers how to act (Zeithaml *et al.* 2006). Underhill (2006) sheds light on the importance of designing the service environment in order to make the experience of the consumer comfortable, appealing, and practical.

Additionally, the service environment acts like a *socialiser* which explains to the consumer what role to play, and how to act during the service encounter (Zeithaml *et al.* 2006). According to Collier and Meyer (1998), the service environment specifies the customer’s path through the service delivery system. Bitner (1992) confirms this by asserting that the service environment can be seen as a form of non-verbal communication whereby consumer expectations lead to various feelings, perceptions, and psychological factors that result in the consumers’ actions in the service environment. According to Collier and Meyer (1998), the service system must be designed in order to meet the target group’s will and needs. There are a number of routes for consumers to take through the service system. Collier and Meyer (1998) present two terms: *Customer routed services* involve the consumers themselves choosing their own path through the store. The service environment, with all its attributes, provides an indication of how the consumer can design his or her visit. The companies provide the service delivery system and are thus able to decide on a dominant route. In *Co-
routed services, there are signposts in the service environment regarding how the consumers are to act when in-store.

The environment also has the task of being a separator, an aid for differentiating and creating a unique position for the company by distinguishing itself from its competitors and attracting the right consumers (Zeithaml et al. 2006; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004). It is of great importance to take into account the market segment that the company is addressing when it designs its in-store environment as this must reflect consumer expectations. These atmospherics must be selected on the basis of their target group and what these consumers are to feel and experience (Chu & Lam, 2001; Countryman, 2006).

The service environment, with the help of these resources, creates a space that the consumer enjoys and chooses to remain in (Rowely & Slack, 1999). Bitner (1992) is of the opinion that the reaction to the environment of individuals can mean that they either approach or avoid it. Wakefield and Blodgett (1996) argue that the service environment affects the time the consumers spend in-store. Enjoyment and pleasure create loyalty and contribute towards repeat visits (Bitner, 1992; Underhill, 2006; Chu & Lam 200; Skinner et al., 2005)

If the in-store time increases, so do the amount of purchase (Underhill, 2006). It is possible to directly estimate how the consumers feel when they are in the service environment via dimensions such as pleasure and discomfort (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004). Behaviours that arise are due to the individual’s expectations, momentary mood state, traits, and previous experiences in the service environment. Environmental stimulus affects the emotional state of delight and arousal, which in turn affect behaviours such as approach and avoidance. The stimulus factors are physical characteristics. The emotional stage is affected by the physical environment in terms of pleasure or arousal. The attraction – or the desire – to move around and explore the environment is an approaching behaviour. The opposite is an avoidance behaviour and is the result of negative feelings, about and around the service environment, confirmed by an unwillingness to buy.
The service environment’s multifaceted role can be likened to a product package, designed to describe an image to the consumers and also to arouse a special feeling and reaction, via the interaction with many complex stimuli (Collier & Meyer, 1998). According to Reimer and Kuehn (2005), companies should not just ponder the palpable aspects of the environment, but also the surrounding aspects such as smell and music, when shaping the service environment. The literature indicates the specific environmental attributes, such as colours, design, sound, and smell, that are tools for achieving the image and feeling that the company wants to communicate (Swartz & Iacobucci, 2000; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004; Reimer & Kuehn, 2005). Previous research concerning these attributes is presented in the following section.

The service environment’s specific attributes

Previous research has focused on the effect of specific atmospherics such as music, social factors, light, shopping behaviour, and the level of consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Chu & Lam, 2001). This is in line with Bitner (1992) who similarly asserts that the service environment can be divided up into atmospherics, space/functionality and signs/symbols/artefacts that affect people, who can then react cognitively, emotionally, or physiologically. Factors like sound, light, smell, temperature, and design affect the consumers’ time, behaviour, and pleasure in the service environment (Bitner, 1992; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004). The study by Hoffman et al. (2003) evaluates failing service environments and includes cleanliness, mechanical problems, and facility design. In one study, it emerged that the most serious mistake companies can make is not succeeding in keeping the environment clean. Donnovan & Rossiter (1982) are of the opinion that consumer behaviour in the service environment is basically an emotional response to the attributes that it is composed of. Baker (1986), too, has carried out a categorisation of the in-store environment into surrounding factors that affect all five senses (felt more than they are seen and measured); store design factors are aesthetic and functional in nature and help consumers to find their
way through the store and store social factors which refer to the people who are present in the in-store environment.

A term which recurs in the marketing literature is experiential marketing which is about appealing to the consumers’ senses using smell, visions, taste, hearing, touch, and balance. This has arisen because there is no way of dealing with this in traditional marketing. McCole (2004) is of the opinion that a shift is needed in that way of marketing oneself by means of traditional strategies; his opinion is that segmentation in modern daily life is no longer as effective as it was. If a company makes use of traditional segmentation, it will be difficult to communicate with consumers in the age groups of 25 and 65. Experiential marketing facilitates the process by grouping people according to their values, what interests they have, personality, and social affiliation, and is seen as more effective for creating an emotional bond between companies and consumers. Colours, style, and lighting provide consumers with their first impressions, being the effects of atmospherics (style, design, colours, lighting, and furnishing) (Countryman & Jang, 2006). The attributes we have found to be reflected in previous research are colours, light, sound, smell, temperature, furnishing, signage, and artefacts, but generally speaking, the empirical evidence is thin.

Countryman & Jang’s (2006) study of hotel lobbies shows that colours are indicated as having the most significance. Continually changing and renewing colour schemes over different periods of time creates positive impressions. However, exactly which colours are preferable for achieving this has been omitted from the study. Colour can be described in terms of hue, saturation, and clarity and all of these have been pointed out as influencers of consumer behaviour (Crozier, 1999). Previous research has found that people in low-touch services are drawn to warm colours, which elicit quick decisions and impulse purchases. In high-touch services, when the consumer needs time to make a decision, cold colours are the most advantageous as they have a calming effect (Bateson & Hoffman referenced in Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004). Comprehension of colours is an ambiguous experience. Crozier (1999) argues that cold hues are generally preferable to warm ones. Blue is correspondingly identified as the most liked while orange
and yellow are the least liked, but the latter two attract the most attention (Crozier, 1999).

*Light and temperature* affect how we work, how we integrate, and how we feel. However, there is a lack of studies asserting that light or temperature affect consumers’ purchasing behaviour (Peter & Olson, 1994). Underhill (2004) asserts, however, that natural sunlight sends a message; “it says that we spend money” and is of the opinion that light is of the utmost importance in a shopping centre where the colour scheme has the aim of making consumers aware of what the stores want to display. The right lighting goes unnoticed. Countryman & Jang (2006) are of the opinion that lighting places the consumers in different types of emotional stages.

*Sound* can be used to affect the actions of consumers. According to Lovelock & Wirtz (2004), consumers are affected by music via its tempo and volume. Slow music has been shown to lead to consumers remaining in-store and buying more (Peter & Olson, 1994). Garlin & Owen (2006) assert that consumers stay marginally longer if they are familiar with the music and if slow music is played at low volume, in comparison with a high tempo and sound level or when the music is unfamiliar. Research concerning smell and its influence on consumers is limited (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004). According to the investigation of Hoffman et al. (2003), smell is the most sensitive artefact when it comes to failure in the service environment. Bitner (1992) points out the importance of creating opportunities for the consumers to rest using the furnishings in the service environment and in the service process. When consumers feel relaxed and able to take it easy, there is an increase in the breadth of the process and the opportunities for additional sales and customer satisfaction (Bitner, 1992; Underhill, 2006). Lovelock and Wirtz (2004) discuss how signs work as communicative artefacts by being located within, or on the outside of, the service environment. They are of the opinion that the signs thus act both as an important part of the company’s image and as a brand. Underhill (2006; 2004) emphasizes the consumers’ need for a so called runway, referring to the space the consumers need in order to become used to a new environment. Underhill (2006) asserts that everything located in this space, e.g. signs, passes by the consumers without them noticing it.
Few studies have been presented regarding consumers’ *patterns of movement*. Underhill (2006) is of the opinion that there are reasons for designing a store on the basis of the consumers’ habits of movement if the aim is to be able to influence the consumers, and shows that there are studies implying that consumers generally move to the right. Consumers usually look and walk straight ahead. Turning one’s head entails some effort. Some of the stylised factors of modern marketing consider the fact that shoppers generally turn to the right rather than to the left upon entering a store. This is in agreement with the rational investigation model. Products are perceived disproportionately often on the right-hand side of the aisle. Furthermore, it turns out that products which are located in what Schor (2000) calls the decompression zone of the store, corresponding to what Underhill (2004) calls the runway, i.e. in the entrance to the store, have 30% less chance of being bought, with fewer of them being bought compared with those located a bit further on in the store.

We can establish that research is grappling with a complex phenomenon and that various studies are characterized by the industry in focus. The importance of the various factors in the service environment varies from industry to industry. A clear example of this is the investigation by Minor *et al.* (2004) of music concerts where the sound quality was of the greatest importance, followed by the visual aspects of the concert. The context plays a very important part when one tries to narrow down the important determinants of quality. From the literature review, we see that relatively more has been written about environmental attributes and information than about patterns of movement.

The environment as sensemaking

The focus of this study is consumers’ perceptions of shopping centres. The interiors of shopping centres have evolved from being comfortable to offering something extra, via rich architecture and sophisticated elements of design. This has led to shopping centres becoming places for people to
interact and for interpersonal encounters. Recreational behaviour, i.e. walking round and looking and recovering in shopping centres, has become a consumption of the physical environment per se, beyond all commercially focused activities (Bloch et al., 1994). Underhill (2004) claims that marketplaces, which have now evolved into shopping centres, have been both meeting and trading places since time immemorial. He is of the opinion that it is important that these places are not changed too much as there has to be space in order to freely consume the environment. Consumers interact with the environment, with each other, and with sales staff. He points out that the shopping centre is the place where Americans spend most of their time, after being at home and at work.

Consumers create value through their participation in and visiting of the shopping centre since each visitor sees other consumers as value creators and thus as components of the environment. Hatch et al. (2001) are of the opinion that marketing has gone from product-oriented to brand-oriented in order to create value for the company supplying the products or services. The stores in a shopping centre are thus dependent on the consumers’ value creation of, and in, the shopping centre they find themselves in.

With the support of Underhill (2004), shopping centres can be seen as mini-cities with different districts for different types of people and requirements. Regardless of whether or not this was thought through during construction, the consumers will form associations with environments which are familiar to them, such as a cityscape. Consumers with different needs and different cultural backgrounds will interact in different locations with different contexts within the service environment. The design of shopping centres is reflected in the same system of determined ranking order as cities and their suburbs. Cities are organised into clear zones, e.g. the city centre, the outskirts, the business centre, rich parts etc. Marketplaces which have now evolved into shopping centres have been both meeting and trading places since time immemorial, jointly creating the behaviour that shopping is based upon today, whereby consumers interact with the environment, with each other, and with sales staff (Underhill, 2004).
The studies of Edvardsson et al (2007) indicate that the pattern of movement is key to co-creating experience and value for the shopping centre’s concept. According to Underhill (2003), the culture of the interaction is different in a shopping centre vis-à-vis a city centre, entailing the social factors on a micro-social basis becoming ever stronger in a shopping centre. On a macro-social basis, we can draw the parallel of seeing shopping centres as small cities where different social and physical areas exist, like a city with its districts and various cultures. In cities, we have systems that help us to arrive at where we are. Landmarks like buildings, metro station entrances etc, combined with dynamic references like the sun, streets, and shadows keep us oriented. It is socially acceptable to ask for directions in a city. Being lost is stressful and that stress becomes worse in shopping centres. It is also difficult getting lost in a shopping centre.

Moving around a shopping centre requires choosing routes and reading maps. Once cartographic systems have been formed, they have a tendency not to be of good quality (Underhill, 2004). In the same way as we move in cities using reference points, we want to move around shopping centres, e.g. “the main square is that way” and “the rail station is this way”. It is not particularly strange if people feel disoriented in shopping centres.

Underhill (2004) is of the opinion that, on the basis of the studies conducted in shopping centres, ‘stopping to ask for directions’ in a shopping centre is often perceived to be like an exercise in frustration. There is no tradition of speaking to, let alone helping, strangers in a shopping centre. Underhill continues by saying that this does not mean that people are unfriendly. They are more surprised by people wanting to interact.

Putting a map at the entrance to a shopping centre may seem a simple measure. In Underhill (2004), studies are presented in which consumers have been studied who were standing and trying to make out the illuminated maps in the form of standing or wall-mounted signboards at the entrances of shopping centres. They found that the average time was 22 seconds, which is assumed to be an altogether too long time according to the study. Shoppers cope better when orienting themselves using fixed points, e.g. “shoes straight
ahead” and “lifts this way” (Underhill, 2004). Shopping in shopping centres differs from shopping in city environments, among other things with regard to how to ask for directions when disoriented. Asking for help at a shopping centre information desk means that the consumer is in relatively great need of assistance. In a shopping centre, there are no residents. People are there to do their errands.

Against the backdrop of the theories and arguments regarding the importance of the service environment, which we presented in the previous section, we can establish that few empirical studies have been conducted regarding the phenomenon of the service environment. The theories we have presented in previous sections provide a frame of reference even if this has shortcomings. Despite the fact that companies are constantly changing physical environments, they are often poorly informed about what effect the service environment has. We can establish that there is still a lack of relevant investigations concerning the physical surroundings’ impact on consumption.

Methods of studying shopping centre environments

For studying environments for the purchasing and consumption of goods and services, named using different definitions in the literature, varying methods have been used. As previously mentioned, the bulk of the literature has conducted analyses without empirical examination (Solomon, 2004; Dubé & Menon, 2000; Chu & Lam, 2001; Mayer et al. 2003; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). On the other hand, it frequently occurs that empirical tests are conducted on earlier theories and models. This is conducted, for instance, by means of questionnaire surveys of different varieties (Collier & Meyer, 1998; Andersson & Mossberg, 2004). This means that conceptual frames of reference are reproduced without any major empirical support. The knowledge contribution generated is thus unreliable. Minor (2004), for instance, develops a model based on the literature and use a data type composed of completed scales where the model consists of a number of factors (music, sound, stage appearance, facilities etc.) which the informants
are asked to evaluate the relative significance of in relation to various satisfaction aspects relating to a recently attended concert. The types of questions used were on a four-point scale where 1 was the most important and 4 the least important. Hoffman et al. (2003) can be seen as an attempt to go beyond traditional á priori methods. They utilized an open data gathering method whereby the informants were asked to describe the service experience following the visit.

More divergent from these methods are the researchers who have used observation to gather in their data (Aubert-Gamet, 1996). Rowley & Slack (1999) conducted their study by visiting a number of departure lounges at various airports and checking the characteristics of the service experience in these lounges. Data gathering was achieved via participating observation. The observation data permitted an inductive approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). One of the most cited researchers in this field is Underhill who, in contrast to many others, has utilized video cameras in his work of documenting purchasing behaviours and processes.

There are thus signs that the empirical methods used have deficiencies. We have found few examples, in the existing literature, of observation methods which capture results from the actual moment when the environment is experienced. Many studies are based upon asking the informants about their experiences after their visit to the environment for the purchasing and consumption of goods and services. Against the backdrop of purchasing behaviour in environments being spatial and dynamic processes, there is reason to try new methods.
2 Methodology

In order to respond to the issues, more studies are required. We were given the opportunity to do this in connection with the establishment of a new shopping centre in the Swedish city of Karlstad (Mitt i City [In the Heart of the City]). To introduce the reader and increase understanding of our choice of method, we will first provide a brief account of the shopping centre’s design and concept.

Mitt i City houses 50 or so stores, restaurants, and cafés housed in an area totalling 1,600 square metres (Mitt i City, 2004). Mitt i City’s concept is: shopping and meeting with a big city pulse (Mitt i City, 2004). This concept, all stores and restaurants have to comply with in order to create the intended value and image for the consumers as they move around within the shopping centre. The shopping centre’s surroundings in the building are intended to be of high quality and constitute an exciting design that is trendy, all in order to create an environment to enjoy (Mitt i City, 2, 2005). The store fronts are individually profiled, but are combined using very cohesive design and architecture. The interior design features unhewn stone, stainless steel, and oak. The range of colours used in the shopping centre consists of white, orange, red, wine-red, and black. (Mitt i City, Graphic profile). The aim was to design a bright and airy environment with a feeling of being outdoors. A window has strategically been located in the roof to let in daylight. During the hours of darkness, daylight is replaced by lighting (Mitt i City, 2, 2005).

Four different entrances, one at each compass point, lead into the shopping centre. According to the Mitt i City concept, they must be very visible and prominent in the cityscape.
From all entrances, the walkways lead towards Mitt i City’s meeting and gathering space. The meeting space of the shopping centre is a square featuring a food court consisting of several individual kitchens linked together by a shared seating area in the middle. (Mitt i City, 2004). The square also features a stage and various lounges are located in different parts of the building in order to create meeting spaces for the consumers (Mitt i City, 1, 2005). Mitt i City consists of two elliptical floors (lower floor and upper floor). Additionally, the ‘Clas Ohlson’ electronics and general hardware store is located on a floor of its own which is connected with the shopping centre via the upper floor.

Against the backdrop of the practical and theoretical knowledge deficiencies in the sector, as well as the aim we have formulated, we use a method approach that provides rich data with lots of aspects.

### 2.1 Choice of investigative approach

We have previously touched upon the lack of empirical investigations concerning the phenomenon of the service environment and experience rooms. The field is in need of rich data which captures an array of aspects and enables a contribution to be made to existing theories. On the basis of the aim of the study, we make use of a qualitative approach based on video
observations. On the basis that a qualitative approach results in deeper knowledge concentrated on just a few units, we are of the opinion that this approach will provide us with nuances and contribute towards improved knowledge. The qualitative approach provides the informants with the opportunity to freely be themselves and to specify aspects which they feel to be important.

2.2 Data gathering approach: Video-supported think-aloud protocols

Our investigative design consisted of video observations and personal interviews that were sound recorded. The filmed observations were supplemented with field notes in order to increase their credibility. Jacobsen (2002) asserts that specifically interviews together with observations constitute some of the most important ways of gathering in primary data. Due to the participants’ open and informative participation, we are going to call them informants since they inform rather than respond.

Questionnaires and opinion surveys, according to Underhill (2006), are unclear and inadequate as regards revealing consumer behaviour and reactions during a visit to a store. Lovelock and Wirts (2004) advocate careful observations of the consumers’ responses to the service environment showing how the consumers react and interpretations of this. Echeverri (2000) argues in favour of the possibility of documenting behaviour from various aspects using video observation. Jacobsen (2002) additionally asserts that video observation provides a broader insight into the investigation than a tape recorder would do. We are of the opinion that, in order to obtain rich data material, video observation is preferable. Using video observation, we have captured the behavioural aspects of our informants during the actual consumption sequence, something which can be difficult to reproduce solely using sound or text. The visual documentation provides an authentic reproduction of the sequence of events and the opportunity to revisit the data material in order to see other perspectives.
There has been some criticism of the use of video cameras as an investigative tool (Jacobsen, 2002). It has been claimed that people tend to act unnaturally and change their behaviour when aware of being scrutinized by a video camera. We have dealt with this risk by equipping the informants with wireless microphones, enabling the cameraman to keep his distance from the informant. This distance to the camera has resulted in the informants subsequently pointing out that they did not notice the camera, hinting at a successful outcome. In order to take in all the details during observation, the cameraman had earphones connected to the microphones, making it possible to monitor the course of events and film the relevant aspects.

During investigation and observation, we used a relatively large camera (“TV model”). As all filming took place from a great distance, the camera has been filming right through the entire shopping centre and has thus been pointing into “thin air”. Filming using our camera probably looked like a serious documentation of the environment rather than filming done by amateurs, something which a more basic camera could have given the impression of. We are of the opinion that the chosen camera gave a serious impression and resulted in other consumers in the shopping centre not adopting abnormal behaviour when being caught on camera. We believe that a normal handheld camera could have triggered another reaction in the consumers.

Before carrying out our video observations, we obtained permission from the shopping centre manager. We also had the opportunity of visiting all the informants in their homes prior to filming. This, we believe, contributed to them becoming comfortable with us and the investigative situation. The informants were aware that we were observing them at the time (known as open observation). We wanted to try and avoid affecting the outcome of our investigation and tried to achieve passive participation by not standing out in the crowd. This was a measure aimed at making the informants feel comfortable and to avoid reminding them that they were being observed. It is important for the informant to feel at ease and not behave unnaturally during the investigation (Holme & Solvang, 1997).
In the investigation, our wish was to be able to draw conclusions about consumers’ experiences concerning shopping centre environments, on the basis of their actions and what they convey. In order to produce manageable data and relatively quickly be able to draw conclusions about certain key dimensions, we put six open questions to all the informants. Together with their patterns of movement, we obtained the answers to our questions, but also to questions that we had not asked.

We posed our questions in the form of statements which were open and which invited the informants to think out loud while being observed. We achieved a natural dialogue which was continuously being questioned using comments such as “why?”, “how?”, “explain”, all in order to produce the authentic experience in the informants. Thus the informants’ departure point was being themselves and they provided us with relatively uninfluenced information.

2.3 Selection

The conducted investigation sessions amounted to eight in total. In qualitative theory and Grounded Theory, it is asserted that analytical conclusions and generalisations can also be made on the basis of only a few observations (Danemark et al., 1997). The informants’ backgrounds were unknown to us as we did not deem it relevant to the aim of our study. We did, however, do an estimation and chose people we believed to be within the age range of 20-50. Thus, the selection group was not chosen at random. We used people in our proximity, students and neighbours, but also people completely unknown to us who we asked about the possibility of taking part in our investigation. The observation sessions were individual. In one session, two female informants were observed simultaneously. But we thought we were able to see them making consensual decisions.
2.4 Data gathering procedure

The aim of our investigative method is to obtain an insight into how consumers perceive, interact with, and approach the shopping centre’s experience rooms. Our investigation consisted of three parts; before, during, and after the visit.

Before the visit

The procedure began with interviews, normally in the home of the informant. This measure is to deal with the contextual effect, i.e. that the place where the interview and observations are conducted can exert an influence on the results (Jacobsens 2002). Conducting the interview in a place well-known to the informant contributes towards improved data relating to the experience. During the initial phase, we also provided the informant with information about the procedure of the study.

The following text was read out to all the informants: “This observational study of consumers’ shopping centre visits is a collaboration between Karlstad University and Mitt i City. We would like you to have a purpose for visiting Mitt i City, that you go there for a reason. We will be monitoring your visit to Mitt i City. We would like you to act as naturally as possible. One of us will walk alongside you and listen to your thoughts and opinions. You will be video and audio recorded. Whatever happens, or whatever you feel during your visit, we would like you to be yourself, as you would in normal cases. Think out loud and choose your natural route. When your visit is finished, please leave the shopping centre”.

Questions before visiting Mitt i City:
1. How many times have you visited Mitt i City?
2. What does Mitt i City convey to you? How do you perceive Mitt i City? (Advertising, word-of-mouth etc.)
3. What are your expectations regarding Mitt i City?
4. What do you think of the following at Mitt i City? (sound, light, temperature, smell, colours, furnishing, design, etc.)
5. What information/services do you expect at Mitt i City? (services, toilets, cash points, cloakroom, accessibility)
6. What is the purpose of your visit today?

We posed open questions which we asked the informant to answer using his or her perceptions based on previous experiences of the service environment. The informant was given the subject in order to then freely interpret and answer on the basis of his or her own previous experience. The parts concerned were; sound, light, colour, furnishing, smell, and temperature. When the interview was finished, we informed the informant about how the investigation was to be carried out. We asked them to ponder the mentioned parts that were raised during the interviews in their homes in order to subsequently “think out loud” regarding all the perceptions they felt on the basis of the environment at the centre. Wireless microphones were attached to the informants prior to arrival and the study started in connection with their approaching the environment.

During the visit

During the next phase, the visit to Mitt i City was implemented using video observation. We have divided the tasks during the investigation sessions between ourselves and have had the same commitments on all occasions in order to achieve identical starting points. One of the authors was the one accompanying the informant and keeping the dialogue alive by questioning opinions and lines of thought, in order to obtain as much information as possible. We have fostered natural behaviour in the informants by allowing them to be fully in control of their choice of route, behaviour, and topic of conversation. During the process, we have observed and made field notes of where the informant has looked as well as other things not recorded by the camera. The field notes made during the visit to the shopping centre have been checked against the final footage, confirming connections that we are able to see (Jacobsen 2002). The informants themselves have had control over their choice of route during their visit and observation. Our task was just to accompany them, observe their behaviour, and listen to their opinions.
and comments. Once the informants had finished their visits, they left the shopping centre at which point the camera was turned off.

After the visit

The concluding element of the data gathering procedure was a post-interview, which the informants were informed about when the visit was concluded. This interview took place in a café outside the observed environment. There, we asked once again about the statements that we had asked the informants to respond to during the interview prior to their visit to the shopping centre. We feel that the informants’ unawareness of this post-interview stimulated them into sharing their opinions in an exhaustive way. The informants got the chance to impart every last thing that they had opinions and thoughts about, aspects they had missed or forgotten during their visit. This gave us a chance to summarize the informant’s experience, and it explains what occurred and what use we will have of the various opinions and actions that emerged.

Questions after visiting Mitt i City:
1. The time, without looking at a clock, how long were you in Mitt i City?
2. What does Mitt i City convey to you? How did you experience Mitt i City?
3. Did Mitt i City meet your expectations?
4. What do you think about the following elements of Mitt i City?
   (sound, light, temperature, smell, colours, furnishing, design etc.)
5. What information and level of service did you experience at Mitt i City?
   (services, toilets, cash machines, cloakrooms, accessibility)

2.5 Data analysis

The advantage of video-based data material is that it is so rich in detail. One can also revisit the material and conduct analyses that are rather different. At the same time, this advantage can also be a disadvantage. One obtains an enormous amount of relatively unsorted information that has to be dealt with and analysed. We began our data processing by combining the recordings. We worked asynchronously by initially making a written presentation of all the information in the interviews and dialogues. We then noted the context –
where the observation took place, *participation* - which actors were involved, *activity* – what the individual informant did, and *statements* – what was said. In order to then limit all the information we had obtained, and to find recurrent symptoms, we have characteristic and repeated features. This we have then tried to summarize in a logical and cohesive text. We were then forced to make a further summary in order to gather the specific aspects which are relevant on the basis of the aim of the study. Data processing has also included studying each individual informant’s behaviour and patterns of movement by sketching out the informant’s route on a layout of Mitt i City. The routes of the informants have been mapped out in order to be able to see recurrent and abnormal behaviours. We have also chosen to make notes regarding the locations at which the informant chose to take a break and pause in order to reflect or to look at some particular aspect.

*Figure 2 Matrix of the data analysis procedure.*
The above figure is a visual description of how we proceeded during data analysis. After filming each informant, we wrote down, verbatim, the entire dialogue from each stage of the investigation. Our next task was to summarize each investigation in order to then minimise the summaries in matrices (Appendices 1, 2, and 3). The matrix is a well-arranged way of clearly being able to see general opinions on the basis of the information we have gathered in. If there was any uncertainty surrounding an aspect during compilation, we had the written dialogues to turn to. In this way, we extracted two conclusions which were similar and credible. The informants shed light upon areas and topics that we had not asked questions about, which was also summarized into the two summaries.

When creating the interview questionnaires, we made use of previously-mentioned dimensions of service environments with the aim of both giving the necessary direction to and limiting the study. Dimensions such as sound, light, temperature, smell, colours, furnishing, and design have been opted into our study on the basis of relevant theory (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004; Bitner 1992). We have also chosen to investigate the phenomena surrounding service and information, expectations and experiences; and we have chosen to observe the informants’ behaviours and patterns of movement against the backdrop of previously-conducted American studies (Underhill, 2003).

The inductive approach gave us the opportunity to be open and obtain relevant information about experiences. In the open dialogue, containing statements instead of questions, during the visit, we have invited the informants to think out loud, which has also resulted in unpredictable information of relevance to the fundamental research questions. The study is thus based on empirical data with the potential to develop new theories, or to strengthen or weaken existing ones.
2.6 Discussion regarding credibility

A study’s credibility can always be discussed and a researcher should always evaluate the reliability of his or her obtained results. Measurement errors can arise due to deficient validity and reliability. Within the framework of qualitative method, it may be more relevant to discuss data quality than measurement errors in the traditional sense. We will nevertheless make some comments regarding validity and reliability.

Validity refers to the soundness and relevance of the collected empirics (Jacobsen, 2002; Lekvall & Wahlbin, 2001). Our investigation uses a qualitative approach as its departure point. It has thus been important for us to describe the procedure and thus enable the reader to assess the study’s credibility. The empiric depth that we have achieved via the qualitative, video-based investigative method contributes, we would like to believe, to the data material being authentic and to us measuring what we intend to measure. In doing so, there are good opportunities for knowledge to be renewed and deepened. The selection of informants is a critical point. It is debatable whether or not the informants we selected represent the majority of the consumers using Mitt i City. We have not used a random selection, but striven for maximum breadth in the selection group, in accordance with our aim of capturing different aspects.

Reliability denotes whether or not the data is dependable. Our study’s inductive approach has been confirmed by means of open interviews and observations. This has provided us with relatively uninfluenced material. The reliability aspect must thus be viewed in the method approach as a whole. A critical point often discussed in video-based studies is the issue of “natural” behaviour. Awareness of being filmed can be a problem. However, more and more studies are showing that this problem does not seem to be too great. In this study, against that backdrop, we have distanced the camera from the informant. The informants also say that, in substance, they forget about being filmed. This speaks for the camera not creating any unnatural behaviour. Bias regarding this point could more likely be embedded in the task itself per se, i.e. that they are taking part in an investigation where
certain aspects are required more or less clearly. This complex of problems, however, applies to all research that delimits a studied phenomenon in reality. In our case, the inbuilt open approach and the reproduction of what the data shows both guarantee that the study can be said to have a high degree of reliability. Lekwall and Wahlbin (2001) mention that differences in the characteristics of the informants can affect reliability, e.g. stress, tiredness, and motivation. In the investigation, we were able to establish that there was a relaxed atmosphere during the interviews and observations and that none of the informants were disturbed or greatly affected by the technical equipment.
3 Results

Research concerning the phenomenon of experience rooms and their influence on consumers is, as previously mentioned, thin and there is a lack of, above all, empirical investigations in this area. In this section, we present the results of the study. This section consists of six central sub-aspects, e.g. design (3.1), atmospherics (3.2), furnishing (3.3), food court (3.4), information (3.5), and patterns of movement (3.6).

The informants were instructed to express an opinion regarding the environment at Mitt i City. Due to our inductive investigative approach, our open interviews, and our observations, we have obtained data containing aspects which we wished to shed light on, as well as information that we were unable to anticipate. The observations we made were frequently difficult to categorise as a specific dimension. The responses of the informants tended to touch upon several dimensions at once; e.g. colours were linked, by some, with the chairs in the food court. When we compared what the informants had noted, we found both similarities and differences. Something that everyone touched upon was the food court, which all the informants had reflected upon, in some form and in some context. The category of patterns of movement is something that contributed towards our study via the broad observations we had conducted, also giving us valuable information. On the basis of all of this material, we have sorted and assessed the information we deemed relevant to our study. We saw certain attributes as a cluster, e.g. design, which includes many different definitions and attributes. This has made it difficult to allocate the information and interpret what refers to what. We have chosen to report our results under a number of apt headings which appeared during categorisation work, partly because we had chosen to specially investigate these in particular and test their relevance, and partly because they had shown themselves to be relevant to the informants. Some of the results are also reported in the form of quotes in order to provide the experiences with substance and a connection with their context.
3.1 Design

The question that we posed about design during the investigation was interpreted in various ways by the informants. The shared interpretation was that all the informants referred to the design of the square which opens up Mitt i City; the informants also mentioned the entrances to the shopping centre. Only one informant chose to reflect upon the design of the walkways leading into the square.

“Nice, especially on the outside as it blends in with the cityscape. Large and airy on the inside.”

“The entrance by the Royal is nicely designed, with its older frontage.”

During the initial meeting with the informants, during the interview prior to their visit to Mitt i City, the general opinion was that the design was trendy, open, and modern, but sterile. During the observation session while visiting the shopping centre, the informants perceived more details, e.g. lighting, frontage decorated with wood, seating etc. All the informants described Mitt i City’s design in positive terms as open and bright. The shopping centre’s elliptical area was well-liked. Of importance to the informants was the cleanliness aspect; some of the informants felt that it was important to keep things clean, pointing out shortcomings in this regard.

“The walls are bright, it feels like you’re walking on a city street even though it’s indoors. I like the alleys with their stores.”

Upon asking the same question again, following the visit, the general opinion was that it is an open and easy to navigate layout featuring details that attract attention. Following their visit, the informants toned down their perception that the shopping centre’s design was sterile, mentioning details of the design such as plant pots, rear walls, metal features, etc.

“Nice and clean, but rather plain and nothing that stands out.”
“The design feels well thought-out, it’s a mix of urban environment and big city feel, bright and open. It’s easily accessible. You notice that it’s a completed concept.”

3.2 Atmospherics

Under this heading, we have chosen to report on atmospherics which we wanted to have verified and more deeply investigated.

Light

Mitt i City consists of an aperture in the roof that lets daylight into the shopping centre. The results concerning light in our study may have been affected by the various times of day when we visited Mitt i City with the informants. During the initial interview, the majority of the informants felt that the light at Mitt i City was pleasant and natural. Someone mentioned not having given any thought to the light previously, while someone else felt that it was too bright. When we subsequently allowed the informants to speak freely about their feelings and opinions in the shopping centre, the majority of them felt that the light was natural as it came from above, that the upper floor felt brighter than the lower floor, and that the light at the entrances was dazzling. Reflections during the post-interview, regarding the light, did not diverge noticeably from previous comments; instead, the general opinion was that the shopping centre was bright and pleasant.

“The light is pleasant, you feel that it’s bright but not too bright. I like the feeling that it’s a dome and that the light comes from above. It’s like being outside and inside at the same time!”

Temperature

The study of Mitt i City was conducted during the months of November and December, which may have impacted on the outcome due to the temperature
differences between outdoor and indoor environments, as the informants were wearing winter clothing when visiting the shopping centre. Half the informants had no idea of the temperature inside Mitt i City during the initial interview. Those expressing an opinion regarding the temperature, on this occasion, had the feeling, or were of the opinion, that it was hot inside the shopping centre. Only one of the informants was satisfied with the temperature. These reflections were later confirmed by the visit to Mitt i City when the general opinion was that it was too hot. Following the visit, the opinion of half the informants was that the temperature was about right, but tending towards hotter, though pleasant.

“Where can I leave my jacket?”

“It’s ok in the beginning but then it gets too hot, and I want to take my jacket off!”

Sound

An interesting reflection is that during two of the observation sessions, Christmas music was being played at the shopping centre, while on the other occasions, no music was being played at all. Only one of the two informants who had been exposed to the music noticed it, commenting that it was too loud. The other informant made no comment at all regarding the sound. In the other cases, during the interview prior to visiting Mitt i City, three informants had noticed the sound. Their comments were that the sound level could at times be too loud, especially from the food court. The remaining informants had neither a positive nor a negative impression of the sound, more than saying that it should be a background buzz in the shopping centre. At the time of observation, the majority of the informants confirmed that the sound level was too high both around and at the food court. Three informants chose not to comment on the sound at all while one informant wished for a certain type of music. However, it also emerged that the sound at Mitt i City was not something that the informants had experienced as unpleasant or something making them want to leave the centre.
“I like this background buzz, it reinforces the feeling of life and movement”

The comments of our informants after their visit to Mitt i City were that they felt more aware of sound, but that all sounds at the shopping centre were of a natural character and that this belonged there. Some informants perceived the sound as cosy while one informant commented on it being a good thing that the stores were responsible for their own sound and the shopping centre was neutral.

**Smell**

Smell was one of the least palpable aspects and perhaps the aspect our informants had previously reflected upon the least. None of our informants had any previous perception of smells at Mitt i City during our introductory interview. Comments were made that an informant had recollected that some stores had more distinctive smells than others and that there should be a smell of food from the restaurant. Nobody commented on the shopping centre’s general smell. These nondescript opinions were reinforced during the visit to Mitt i City when there were few among the informants who spontaneously mentioned the smell, instead only mentioning it when reminded to reflect upon it. It was confirmed by our informants that Mitt i City has a neutral or anonymous smell, something that was perceived positively and that it is the stores who are responsible for their respective smells. When we subsequently raised the question again during the interview after the visit, the result was the same; all the informants were satisfied with the absence of smell in the shopping centre.

“The smell is not obvious, which is good!”

“I can smell food at the Järnvägsgatan entrance. Its smells like a duty free shop in the entrance for the Coop.”
Colours

Mitt i City is relatively neutral as regards the colour aspect. It is the stores in the shopping centre that are responsible for the distinctive colours. The colour associated with Mitt i City is the orange to be found in the logo and in the food court. This was not something that our informants were unfamiliar with; instead, the colours they mentioned during the interview before the visit were white, grey, and orange. The informants also mentioned that it was the stores that provided the colours and that Mitt i City’s colour scheme was anonymous. The general opinion of the informants was that the shopping centre’s colour scheme was nice and pleasant. No new opinions were raised during the investigation session at the centre; instead, the informants confirmed their initial opinions of Mitt i City as being vill and bright, and that was considered good. When we subsequently asked the informants to reflect on the colours at Mitt i City, during the post-interview, there were more opinions, but these were of a similar nature to prior to the visit. One informant commented on the orange of the food court trays and felt that these made him think of school canteens. The gist of the colour aspect is that the informants judged the white and bright colour scheme of the shopping centre to be good.

“I like these Burundi-coloured chairs in the food court”

“The stores are like splashes of colour in the bright environment”

“The floor has varying hues, a bit light and a bit dark but mostly white. The chairs in the food court boost the overall impression, as the red tones go well together”

“The colours are very anonymous, which is good, because then the stores which have their own colour schemes become visible. I don’t like the colour of the stone floor and the orange of the chairs in the food court”.

“There aren’t any colours, just white. But that’s nice when it’s dark outside.”
### 3.3 Furnishing

For our informants, furnishing was an aspect difficult to define. In this context, the food court was also mentioned. The environment of Mitt i City is easily accessible and perceived to be sparsely furnished where the consumers move from store to store. This makes it difficult to exactly define how furnishing is at the shopping centre. The comments of our informants during the initial phase were that the furnishing was perceived to be exciting and unusual. Three informants felt that the round seating was nice and smart. The stage was also raised by one informant who saw it as the city’s new meeting place.

“My grandchildren love the large cushions on the upper floor.”
“I’m not too keen about the orange chairs, they make me think of industrial premises.”
“Yes …, there’s one way up and one way down. Then the food court is very open.”

When we subsequently visited Mitt i City, opinions regarding its furnishing were largely directed at the food court (see the section below). One informant spontaneously wondered whether something might be missing which would make the consumers stay even longer at the centre. The informants felt that the open areas with their simple flower arrangements made it feel as if it was bigger than it really was. During the visit, too, the seating was pointed out and commented on positively, while two informants felt that the seating was on the small side as it was often occupied during peak shopping times.

“Escalators, stairs, and lifts are fine. The empty areas around the escalators on the upper floor could accommodate a bar or somewhere that you could sit down and take it easy, a meeting point could be what’s needed to make people stay.”
“I see the stage as a meeting place.”

The opinions raised by the informants during the initial interview and during the observation session at the shopping centre did not differ from the
reflections we encountered during the post-interview. The furnishing was felt to be good but there were no outright opinions. Instead, they gave us a listing of the furnishings they had experienced. The seating was once again commented on as good, but on the small side. The general opinion was also that it is an environment which is sparsely furnished, creating an environment that is easily accessible and where there is no sense of crowding.

“Furnished quite well. The stage, the escalators, and the café upstairs are well positioned.”
“Stairs are needed too.”
“The atmosphere is important. Flower arrangements and cressets would be good outside Mitt i City. The pots and plants inside don’t do anything for me.”
“I’d rather lean on the railing, or stand at a high table in a corner than sit on these couches”.

Figure 3. Couch positioned in the environment.

3.4 Food court
We did not intend to specifically ask about the food court during our investigation session. Thanks to our open investigative approach, the food court stood out as an important aspect of the shopping centre as they spontaneously chose to comment on this part of the centre during questions concerning, among others, smell, design, sound, colour, and furnishing. All the informants reflected on the range, fittings, and design of the shared eating area. We have thus chosen to present this result under a heading of its own. “Clean and bright, but school canteen” was the shared association with the food court for all the informants. The food was perceived to be interesting and inviting, with a concept of having the freedom to choose dishes and the possibility of sitting together. But this environment was felt to be too open, sterile, and stressful.
“You wouldn’t go there just because the food was good”

“The food is really nice, and the design is first-rate. But I haven’t got the strength to eat there after having shopped for a couple of hours, the noise level is too high!”

“It’s new now, people come here, later it will be a matter of keeping people here”

Figure 4 Food court located centrally in the shopping centre.

The opinions were no different when we subsequently visited the shopping centre. We noted comments like: “clean and bright but way too sterile, noisy and open”. It was the variety of the restaurants, rather than their location and design, that acted as the attractive force exerted by the shared eating area, according to our informants. One of the informants disagreed and felt that the food court was a good, open, and pleasant meeting place. During the interview after the visit, the food court was brought up again and the opinions previously mentioned were confirmed. The informants felt that the environment was too sterile and that something like couches needed to be added in order to take away the sterile feel and reduce the noise level.

3.5 Information

Information was one aspect that we asked about during our prior- and post-interviews. This was a measure designed to make the informants aware of this aspect. At Mitt i City, a total of five information boards have been set up; one at each entrance and one on the upper floor by the escalators. None of the informants was able, during the initial interview, to recall seeing any information boards in the centre. However, both before and after their visit, the informants were very satisfied with the street names which are positioned above each respective entrance into Mitt i City.
During the visit to Mitt i City, we were able to observe a recurrent pattern of behaviour in our informants; all of them chose to go straight to the square which opens up the shopping centre, without noticing the information boards at the entrances. Once they were at the square, they began looking for information.

“Mitt i City feels like everything around the square, the other stuff is forgotten about”

“There should be signs saying which stores are in which direction along the walkways”

“The first few times I was here, I had to take a chance on which exit to use”

The informants obviously lacked an information board when they were in the shopping centre’s square. Despite the fact that they were aware that there should be information boards, there was only one informant who pointed out an information board in the shopping centre. This informant, using the information board, found services offered by Mitt i City, e.g. a cash machine, which he had never seen before. This informant also pointed out that the layout on the information board was depicted in the wrong way, making it more difficult to understand the information. Following the visit, the informants also pointed out that information was missing.

3.6 Patterns of movement

Through our video observations of the informants’ visits to Mitt i City, we have been able to study their behaviour and patterns of movement at the centre. We have noted, as previously mentioned in the methodology section,
the informants’ routes through the environment of Mitt i City in order to discern patterns and divergent behaviours.

The choice of entrance into the centre is one pattern we have discovered. With one exception, the majority of the informants chose the same entrance as their exit. The entrance on Tingvallagatan is the one most used according to our study. Naturally, the choice of entrance is down to the direction from which the consumers are coming when visiting the centre. The frequent use of the Tingvallagatan entrance can additionally be impacted on by the location of the Coop supermarket adjacent to this entrance.

All the informants who chose the Tingvallagatan entrance also continued upwards via the escalator to the upper floor, with the exception of one informant who turned right and did a lap of the lower floor before taking the stairs to the upper floor. Further, patterns that we deem of relevance include the informants choosing not to touch the walkways with stores on the lower floor which lead to the other entrances, apart from the walkway leading to the entrance where they came in. However, we encountered some divergent behaviour; one informant who used the walkway leading to the Västra Torggatan entrance. None of the informants used the entrance or visited the walkway leading to Drottninggatan.

During the video observations, we also chose to note the informants’ calling points on their routes through the Mitt i City environment. The majority of the observation sessions show that the informants’ first calling point occurred after passing the walkway, either by the escalators on the square or by the food court, which was affected by which entrance they had used. Among the others, who had earlier calling points along the walkways, we have been able to discern the pattern that they also call at the square or the food court.
3.7 Summing up and reflection on the results

Of the results we have presented, we see that we have obtained a lot of data about attributes. Some which we would not, at the start of the study, have been able to foresee and some which arose through cautious inquiry on our part. The information we have accounted for is only a part of what arose during the interviews and observations of this study. We have been forced to limit the rich data obtained to what is of relevance to the study.

In order to attempt to summarize all the information we have reported, we can see that something which is recurrent is the frequent use of and reference to the open square in the middle of Mitt i City. The walkways in towards the square are not distinctive and are not used to an equal degree. The food court is the part of Mitt i City arousing most feelings in the informants. Discussion concerning this place has arisen during almost all the attributes of all the informants. This concerns as well as upsets. Opinions include that it should be screened off more.

The attributes arising due to our influence, (sound, light, temperature, design, smell, colour, furnishing) should be deemed good as none of the informants left the environment or got considerably worked up over any of these. The information boards were not noticed and the informants were unsure about where things were located at the shopping centre. The information should be reworked, in an effective way, in order to get the consumers to navigate in the best possible way and spend more time in the Mitt i City environment.
4 Discussion

The aim of this section is to discuss the results against the backdrop of the study’s issues and previously mentioned literature. We structure our reasoning in terms of a theoretical contribution (4.1), a practical contribution (4.2), and a methodological contribution (4.3); we also formulate some potential implications of the study (4.4) including suggestions for future research concerning experience rooms.

4.1 Theoretical contribution

The theoretical side of the study is connected with what parameters are perceived by users (the ontological issue) and why particularly these are of significance. By way of introduction, we can establish that speaking of the phenomenon in terms of experience rooms is relevant. What is touched upon, before and after the visit to the shopping centre, by the informants, is more about the concept that the centre is trying to convey than about individual attributes/elements of the environment. We thus have reason to make a certain analytical distinction between the shopping centre as a service environment (cf. servicescape) and the shopping centre as experience rooms. The term service environment captures what the consumers see, e.g. the design and atmospherics in the physical space, while the term experience rooms also includes the actual feel, the association, the sensemaking aspect. The service environment provides the consumer with the material or foundation to interpret and use in order to individually create sense and perception of the shopping centre as a concept. The experience room can thus be said to be a cognitive and emotional experience (momentary or remaining) which is realised in the consumer’s perception and interaction with the environment’s attributes and cultural meaning. The experience room is thus co-produced by the consumer.

According to the results of the study, there are some aspects that stand out more than others. These are discussed in what follows against the backdrop
of the need to enhance knowledge of experience rooms. These aspects constitute important descriptive dimensions and explain why environmental perceptions arise in visitors. Design, atmospherics, furnishing, information, and patterns of movement are discussed in turn.

**Design**

Design is a holistic concept. It connotes the interpreted meaning that different spatial and cultural artefacts have and are given over time. In our interviews with the informants prior to the visit, we have been able to see that the value of the experience room lies in the thoughts and feelings that the consumers bring with them into the environment. They contribute by expectations regarding an experience and the practical benefit of a visit. The design of the service environment is thus crucial as regards how the individual shapes his or her individual experience room. The interpretations of the consumers are guided in a certain direction and the desired concept is shared by more. A homogenous picture takes shape. Since the significance of the experience room is also dependent upon other visitors, including their behaviours, divergent behaviours among consumers create dissatisfaction in other consumers. In this way, the cultural significance of imagined concepts is maintained. Design, interpretation, and divergent behaviours thus jointly contribute towards shaping and maintaining the shopping centre’s concept.

The design dimensions of a shopping centre are the interior’s comprehensive layout, spatial form, colour combinations, choices of materials, and character. This was illustrated in the study by a chosen configuration featuring entrances at the four compass points with an open square (layout), the ellipse (as a spatial form), orange, grey, white (as a colour combination), glass, metal, concrete (material choice), and with an open and airy (character). These particular choices were envisaged to provide, and substantially do provide, the sense of “big city” and “modern”. Signage featuring cityscapes is an important piece of the interpretation. Design dimensions have been noted in the literature but seldom are any distinctions
made regarding the difference between design and, for instance, spatial elements (see, for instance, Edvardsson et al, 2007).

**Atmospherics**

*Sound* creates a feeling of anonymity and also increases the feeling of the concept and the value of other people moving around and consuming the service environment. The gist of the sound in a shopping centre is the sound of the shopping centre itself rather than music, which a great deal of research into consumption is about. In a shopping centre, it is, if anything, *another reality* that is to be created to the large group of consumers using its sound. Sound cannot thus be adapted in such a way that all consumers will enjoy it, quality and volume also being of major significance. Sound in a consumption environment without transactions, such as a shopping centre, could thus consist of a pleasant background buzz. The sound is an element which, according to our investigation, reinforces the concept of the shopping centre. The background buzz, the noise, and the sometimes high sound level are what consumers expect from a shopping centre. In the empirical data we found that the food court was somewhat disturbing. Together with the design of the food court, the feeling of a school canteen came across. There is an issue of matching sound and concept.

*Light*, according to Underhill (2004), must be as natural as possible in order to encourage natural behaviour among the consumers. Spotlighting will draw attention to stores in the environment. According to Bitner (1992), it is important that no factor is mentally difficult for the consumer so as not to contribute towards reduced shopping. Peter and Olson (1994) assert that not enough studies have been conducted showing that light affects the consumers’ purchasing behaviour. We see, in our investigation, that entrance lights are noticed, which could mean that the gradation is too great between the natural light and electrical lighting. An innovative solution in order to light in a good way, with the aim of making people experience time at the centre, could lie in having a sun-like lamp which moves around above the centre, with the aim of creating a feeling being outdoors.
Research concerning how temperature affects consumer behaviour is rare. Bitner (1992) is of the opinion that it is one among all of the attributes impacting on enjoyment and purchasing. According to our study, no informant had directly reflected on temperature prior to the visit. However, during the visit, the bulk of the informants thought it was too hot in the centre. A cloakroom was mentioned as a solution to the temperature difference, but no one thought they would use this service if it were introduced. Though, our study could validate temperature as a relevant factor but it is not to be perceived as critical for the consumers.

Lovelock and Wirtz (2004) are of the opinion that smell influences consumers’ moods and impressions. Few studies have been conducted focusing on smell in service environments. Our study makes no further contribution to that area. The informants do not reflect on the smell at the shopping centre, so this notion could not be validated in our study. This is said with the fact that there is a food court placed right in the centre of the shopping centre. However, not perceiving a smell at the shopping centre could be viewed as a good thing. If the informants had perceived a clear smell of something, this would have given rise to many reactions. For shopping centres, a guess might be that a neutral or nondescript smell is to recommend.

Colours, according to Lovelock and Wirtz (2004), impact upon consumers’ feelings and behaviour. The studied shopping centre has consistently white and grey hues, with the noticeable food court consisting of red and orange hues. It is, additionally, the colours that our study indicates that the consumers perceive. Our investigation shows that orange is perceived most strongly by the informants, as opposed to the other bright colours. In that orange also occurs in the shopping centre logo, it is associated with the shopping centre per se. Lovelock and Wirtz (2004) are of the opinion that orange is a warm colour which gives rise to feelings in the consumers. In our study, this colour is continually being mentioned, but we are unable to validate its effect. Crozier (1999) is of the opinion that cold colours are preferable to warm ones. Previous research has found that people in low-
touch services are attracted to warm colours and that this leads to rapid decisions and impulse purchases. Blue is identified as being the most liked, while orange and yellow are the least liked, but with the latter two creating the most attention (Crozier, 1999). Orange can be a contributory factor towards the school canteen feeling of the informants. The bright, white colours are perceived to be predominant and these bright colours provide the consumers with the perception of being new and fresh, which in turn is seen as big city environment. It may be the case that orange is not a frequent sight for the consumers and that it is thus linked to the shopping centre in the same way as Countryman and Jang’s (2006) study, that constantly changing and renewing colour schemes over different periods of time creates positive impressions; however, exactly which colours are preferable in order to achieve this is omitted from the study.

**Furnishing**

Both Bitner (1992) and Underhill (2006) are of the opinion that seating is an important part of the furnishing of the service environment. The studied shopping centre has succeeded well in setting out what it calls loungers for consumers to make use of. The furnishing interplays with the concept. However, how furnishing is to be defined as continues to be difficult to comment on, in that different attributes were used by the informants to define the furnishing.

The food court is a recurring topic in our account of the results, probably due to the fact that it is positioned at the centre of the building. The terms frequently used by the informants to describe the eating area are school canteen and factory canteen. As such, according to the informants, it is perceived as being cheap, noisy, and arduous. The food court is also mentioned under questions concerning, among others, smell, design, sound, colours, and furnishing. Bitner (1992) claims that informants who enjoy the environment provide a more positive picture of the experience than if it is a disturbing environment. According to our study, the food court is an important part of the shopping centre. All the informants had opinions about
the food court, as well as suggestions for making it more attractive. This concerned solutions regarding the location of plants, couches, muffling the noise, and screening off the eating area.

Information

According to Zeithaml et al. (2006), the service environment must be a simplifier in order to show the consumers how to act. We can, in accordance with our investigation, see interesting patterns in the informants regarding the need for information. The information boards are unnoticeable, the stores along the walkways are not noticed, the informants find it difficult to navigate in relation to the entrances and the informants do not know where the toilets and cash machine are. The consumers do not notice the information signs at the entrances. This could be due to the fact that consumers need a runway, that a consumer needs to become acclimatised to his or her new environment because sound, light, and smell, among other things, have an effect on him or her (Underhill, 2006). During acclimatisation, the consumer will not be available to the same degree as when fully interacting with his or her environment. Our video observations show that the information signs are located in a position where the consumers have not had time to acclimatise to their environment. We conclude that it is not self evident were a shopping centre starts. It was thought of as the square that opens up the shopping centre. Most of them went directly to the square; from there, they started to think about and commenting on the character of the centre.

If a shopping centres’ frontage merges into a cityscape then the consumer might need a longer runway in order to fully interact with his or her environment. The impression of an emphasized entrance could, in our opinion, make the consumer’s interaction quicker and the information signs which currently go unnoticed would be seen when the consumers, in all probability, become acclimatised to their environment and the concept earlier on. An emphasized entrance creates a sharper boundary; the feeling of entering a shopping centre will present itself to the consumers earlier on. It
will give the consumers a greater feeling of being in the shopping centre, even on the walkways leading to the central square.

In order to strengthen the concept and solve navigation problems, signposts could be set up at strategic places similar to road signs. Specific parts of the building could also be named and so be given a symbolic identity, reflecting and reinforce the concept of a shopping centre concept. There are several ways of making the consumers notice information signs. They can be moved to the location where the consumers initially try to find the information they require or they can be moved into the consumers’ consciousness so that they consciously see the information signs. Allowing the shopping centre to begin outside the building (measures such as illuminating the entrance on the outside, setting out flower arrangements, and maybe having a coloured carpet leading the consumer) can prepare the consumers for the environment they are approaching.

Patterns of movement

When we observe the patterns of movement of our informants, we discover that only one informant visits the walkways and, as mentioned earlier, the informants tend to stop for the first time at the square. This is critical information for those shops placed at the walkways. The walkways act like passageways leading to the square, which is interpreted as the shopping centre. According to Underhill (2006), consumers need a runway in order to adapt to and register the environment.

With our study, we can see that various informants evaluated different parts of the centre more highly, and that they felt pleasure within “their” zones in a better way. This is in accordance with earlier research identifying zones or district of shopping centres. In order to simplify the pattern of movement through the environment, many shopping centres are divided into the same type of clear districts as a city, with its various quarters and suburbs. These districts are attractive, to varying degrees, to the different consumer groups and the synergy effect of competitors being wall-to-wall is great, thus
enhancing the attractive force of the zone in the shopping centre that these competitors occupy (Underhill 2003).

Our study indicates that the pattern of movement plays a key role in co-creating (Edvardsson et al., 2007) the experience and the value of a shopping concept. There are few previous studies of the patterns of movements of consumers in service environments, as well as its significance for experiencing its concept. The service environment’s design and attributes affect patterns of movement, requiring the design to be implemented using signposts rather than boards in order to avoid unpleasant behaviours of disorientation. From our study, we have seen that informants easily lose their feel for directions and reference points outside the shopping centre, i.e. that navigation within the environment works flawlessly until the consumer is about to leave the environment in the right direction.

Consumers in shopping centres navigate in the same way as generally everywhere else, using buildings, street names, and the environment. This makes the need for information pictorial rather than textual. Our reflection is that the behaviour and pattern of movement can be simplified if the service room is designed geographically with the inspiration of a small city. The pattern of movement also gives us indications that it is the open and large areas that are linked to the shopping centre and that, in doing so, this becomes a natural meeting place. We also know that meeting places, since time immemorial, are dependent upon a clear landmark, which could be reinforced by a well-known name in order to simplify and strengthen the feeling of being a meeting place.

Shopping centres’ service environments are normally a place where there is no natural feeling of home (Underhill, 2006). In that sense shopping centres can thus be seen as places which consumers visit but never feel at home in, in contrary to a city or town which can arouse feelings of being at home. The gist of this should be, among other things that behaviours like asking other people the way hardly occur in shopping centres, in contrast to urban environments, thus strengthening the importance of easily comprehensible
information or strengthening the symbolic meaning of different shopping zones.

Design factors explain why consumers move around as they do, which in turn creates sensemaking between them and their environment. As such movement pattern can be an important mediating variable in explaining the consumer experience.

4.2 Practical contribution

Our study of the shopping centre Mitt i City in Karlstad indicate that it is something more than a trading arena. There is value in the service environment. There is value in the experience of being in, and consuming, the environment. Each store, each artefact, and each design element need to be in congruity with the concept. Shopping centres are seen as the entire array of their stores plus the environment within this trading and meeting place. Profiling and creating a shopping centre could be likened to town planning. Each store, for the shopping centre’s consumption environment, is a sub-concept which has to fit into the shopping centre’s holistic concept.

Problems arise when stores do not match the concept such as when, in this case, a traditional store like Clas Ohlson (general electronics and hardware) wants an outlet in the shopping centre. Mitt i City solved this by using a third floor to accommodate this store in particular. The value of the word City makes people think of something new and international, with a big city pulse. The sub-concept Clas Ohlson, which today does not match the holistic concept of Mitt i City, would fit in better if the shopping centre were instead called Mitt i Stan (In the Heart of Town). The difference between the terms stad and city (as two concepts in Swedish) lies in how emotionally charged they are. Mitt i City, with its partly English terminology and its translation of stad as city rather than town, seeks to turn people’s thoughts to shopping and meeting each other where they will find the pulse of a big city.
Using a specific connotation, another reality is conveyed. The aim is thus for the service environment to mirror the shopping concept but also to get consumers to adopt the concept as they want to be a part of this image that the company display. This is to see and to be seen in a specific environment. They thus seek, using the service environment, to make consumers feel at ease with being seen in the environment. A concept dictates what we are supposed to experience and how we are supposed to behave in order to fit in with this reality. The value for the consumers are symbolic.

In that consumers are searching for satisfaction and, increasingly, something extra besides the core product or service, shopping has become as much about entertainment as it is about consumption among consumers, also being called retailtainment (Solomon, 2004). For the shopping centre, this means catching sight of the value inherent in satisfying the consumers’ “leisure time” with attractive shopping.

4.3 Methodological contribution

The methodological aim of the paper is to investigate the use of video observation as an investigative instrument. It is of relevance to comment on some of the problems we have encountered during this endeavour in order to make things easier for others who want to follow our method.

The advantage of video observations is the opportunity to revisit the material and to discover fresh information, as well as make discoveries that we did not initially seek. Most importantly however is the fact that this method unearths critical information perceived during use. It is in the very situation of experience that important aspects are realised. This could be illustrated by the following finding. The informants indicated, before visiting the shopping centre, that it was clean and fresh, in turn confirming theories about the importance of cleanliness for the quality of the service. For instance, Hoffman et al. (2003) are of the opinion that it is mainly cleanliness that determines whether or not a service is perceived by consumers to be good. In that sense, our study validates the importance of this factor. Interestingly
though, it could to be pointed out that during the visit to the shopping centre, several of the investigation participants saw and pointed out dirt and litter in certain places. An interesting fact here is that this information was unearthed during the walking inside the centre. What informants report in beforehand is not the same as during the very experience. The chosen methodological approach contributes with new information.

A weakness of the method is that the informants can behave unnaturally if they know they are being observed on camera. We deal with this by attempting to conceal the camera and by having a person follow the informants in order to note their behaviours. A methodological contribution lies in the adjustment of this in situ-based method. In fact, letting the camera man to keep the distance to the informants limited the bias of the camera.

We have been loyal to the informants’ possibilities of conducting the investigation at a given point in time, due to the time requirement. We have thus conducted our investigations at different points in time under different circumstances across the shopping centre’s opening times and weekdays. Problems that have arisen during the investigation include not having been able to obtain concrete answers in all areas from all informants. The answers we have obtained from single informants have occasionally been conflicting and sometimes entirely divergent, when the informants have chosen to steer their answers in another direction. However, we see this as a natural component in personal interviews based on non-á priori frameworks. Eliciting information from informants is influenced by environmental stimuli. The choice of having the interviewer walking beside the informant could in a sense be seen as a contribution.

4.4 Implications

We have obtained answers to many questions and we are able to formulate some implications of this study. On a practical level, we can establish that the consumers have a slow acclimatisation process upon entering the shopping centre. This leads to them not noticing the information signs
located at the entrances. It also contributes to limited patterns of movement on the part of the consumers who do not move around on the walkways to the same extent as in the rest of the shopping centre. When the consumers are in the shopping environment, they enjoy the service environment. We can see that concept is associated with the square which opens up the shopping centre and that the walkways are overlooked. In our study, a recurring topic is the food court which does not match the concept and should be changed in order to reinforce the big city feel.

The concept that the shopping centre has designed is not being experienced to the full. The shopping centre is experienced by consumers as a holistic concept where each store with its range and demand must be in congruity with the concept of the entire centre. Consequently, stores must be seen more as sub-concepts than as individual stores. Besides the stores having to match the concept, they must also fit into the specified part of the shopping centre. On the basis of this we draw four different conclusions regarding why consumers want to visit the service environment. Sensemaking at the shopping centre is of major importance as regards creating the pleasure, patterns of movement, and image that the centre aims to achieve. Sensemaking is a part of the consumers’ well-being as they are a part of the concept, with their individual pleasure. The value to the consumers regarding shopping centres lies in the concept and its value-creation.

*Theoretical implications* of our study include the service environment being a key part of the consumers’ experience. Our study also shows that there are many parts of the service environment which affect the consumers. All elements should work in concert in order to reinforce the feeling and the concept that the shopping centre seeks to convey to the consumer. The thing that primarily explains the experiencing of the shopping centre’ spatial aspects is its design dimensions. The design also expresses itself through furnishing, partly replacing certain information, and controlling the consumers’ patterns of movement. Theories about factors that explain experience rooms thus need to be supplemented with the design dimension.
Methodologically we have attempted to capture the phenomenon in a new and different way, *in situ*. Our method of filming the informant using a wireless microphone has provided us with information about his or her thoughts, opinions, and patterns of movement. By filming the informant at a distance, he or she has not experienced the feeling of being filmed, providing us with a more natural picture of his or her actions and opinions (Echeverri, 2005). This approach is very fruitful and has worked particularly well during this investigation. The method could probably be refined and used in a range of similar investigative situations.

Our method of interviewing the informants before, during, and after their visit to the shopping centre yields information about their perceptions of the concept, the environment, and the experience room. We see advantages in hearing the informants’ thoughts and opinions *in situ*, where they are free to think, have opinions, and physically point in order to show, in this way, how and where feelings are created. The method emphasizes the value of the service environment and how the personal experience room is co-created by both the consumer and the service environment. In other words, we see sensemaking being realised in the situation.
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Shopping has become one of our most common leisure pursuits. Consumers move freely between stores and their different environments, often in a random manner. The question is how much randomness there actually is regarding how these environments make the customers feel and move. We have chosen to observe consumers in order to see how the environment affects their perceptions.

The practical aim of this study is to deepen our understanding of how consumers are affected by the service environment of a shopping centre and based on that identify improvements as regards to design. The theoretical aim is to identify what environmental dimensions appear to be important in a real-time purchase situation. This includes a validation of some theories of service environment dimensions and design attributes. The methodological aim is to further elaborate on video-supported field observation. Empirical material is gathered at a shopping centre in Karlstad, Sweden, called Mitt i City. Video and audio recordings together with personal interviews in situ are used in documenting consumption processes, patterns of movements and perceptions. We observed and interviewed our informants before, during, and after their visits to the shopping centre.

These aims lead to a clarification as regards to how the service environment creates an experience, meaning and function for the consumers by means of the concept of the shopping centre. The study shows that design factors (such as layout, spatial form, colour combinations, choices of material and character), together with atmospherics (sound, light, temperature) and furnishing, are important parameters for consumers in their sensemaking of a shopping concept and the functionality of the shopping procedure per se.

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