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Social Construction of Consumptivism, and the Role of Architecture: A Perspective of Architectural Sociology

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ABSTRACT

This essay summarizes a study on exploring theory, that takes 'integrated sociological paradigm' as a starting point — a paradigm with subject on the micro-macro integration in sociology — and concentrates at the ladder of 'micro-subjective' — 'the social construction of reality'. To direct the study at constructing theory or postulate, the discussion is focused at the role of architecture in social construction through the perspective of architectural sociology. The basic assumption of this study is that, consumptivism is constructed through 'new means of consumption', in which architecture plays the important role. Besides studying about social construction of reality, consumptivism, and the 'new means of consumption', this essay also describes the concept of 'power' and 'discourse', and role of architecture in it. The final description is a synthesis that shows how architectural symbolic environment constructs the ideology of consumptivism, which could be postulated as follows: "every architectural design — that containing the discourse of postmodernism — especially at common commercial buildings, would bring the visitors into dialectics situation through the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, and finally guide them at consumptive behavior which then would lead them to ideology of consumptivism".

Key words: social construction, architectural sociology, new means of consumption, discourse, architecture postmodernism

The development of social sciences in twentieth century and the early of this century, has fertilized the growing of systems progressively differ with architecture purposes that have been triggered till this latter. For example, Wilson, Keenberg, & Loerke (1990: ix) express that architecture has to find an exact idea to express the esthetics, social, economic, and technical change. In the same way, Mayer (in Attoe, 1979: 32) also expresses "Building is nothing but organization: social, technical, economic, psychological". Both of the statements, however, imply that, social aspect in architecture, which formerly tended to be disregarded, now is getting important attention in considering various architectural designs. Lately, it has emerged a new idea concerning the purpose of architecture, specially about the interconnection between social reality and architecture. Architecture works are lately progressively seen as means or medium for social construction of reality. One of the social realities is the appearance of consumptive behaviour. The studies in postmodern social theory show that,

consumptivism is a social reality, it does not fully base on individual factors. However, the reality is the result of global capitalism operating system in a process of accumulating the capital (see Lash, 2004). The social reality, according to George Ritzer, is constructed in a process of rationalization through the *new means of consumption*, namely the means where people can easily consume anything. The role of architecture, in this case, is to create the certain design image of the medium, so that can make the medium conduciveness becomes the effective medium for any extension of consumer culture and contemporary consumptions. Bourdieu's conceptual framework explains also about the new middle-class group appearance into dominant class, especially which happened at urban society. In fact, the new classes coming into the dominant class or the middle-class appearing in most of all cities in the world lately, according to Scoot Lash (2004: 252–3), was created designedly for the shake of, and as prerequisite for capital accumulation. Lash also has a notion that the new class has two sides,

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namely material enthusiasms (economic) and ideal enthusiasms (cultural), or with other word, one side is economics, while other side is symbols, precise as an object with two sides. For Lash, architecture could be seen at two sides: material, and cultural. At material side, it has the principle to arrange its cultural form, and at cultural side it has principle to arrange its material form. Thereby, an architectural building could be viewed not only as a medium (material), but also as a symbolic environment (culture). It means that an architectural environment has two objective values, cultural and material. The question appearing here, is: "how architecture environment, as objects of cultural and material, socially, constructs a reality of consumptivism?". To answer that question, some theoretical ideas and concepts need to be traced, as to be discussed at following parts.

Social Constructivism and Social Construction of Reality

A social construction or social construct is any institutionalized entity or artifact in a social system "invented" or "constructed" by participants in a particular culture or society that exists because people agree to behave as if it exists or follow certain conventional rules (Wikipedia, 2008). In philosophy view, the beginnings of this idea on constructivism was started by Giambattista Vico, an Italian epistemologist. In fact, this idea has emerged even since Socrates found the soul inside the human body, and since Plato found 'idea' and 'mind'. The idea progressively was to be concrete, when Thomas Khun expressed that the universe is the result of social construction. Emile Durkheim, then theorized about social construction in his anthropological work on collective behavior, but did not coin the term. The first book with "social construction" in its title was Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, first published in 1966. Since then, the term found its way into the mainstream of the social sciences (see Wikipedia. 2008).

The central concept of the Berger and Luckmann's book, is that actors interacting together form, over time, typifications or mental representations of each other's actions, and that these typifications eventually become habitualized into reciprocal roles played by the actors in relation to each other. When these reciprocal roles become routinized, the typified reciprocal interactions are said to be institutionalized. In the process of this institutionalization, meaning is embedded and institutionalized into individuals and

society knowledge and people's conception of what reality 'is' becomes embedded into the institutional fabric and structure of society, and social reality is therefore said to be socially constructed.

Any component of social reality, according to Peter Berger, is a 'dialectical phenomenon'. Thus, while the component emerges out of human beings as part of an ordered and meaningful social reality, human — at the very same time, emerge out of this socially — constructed world and, indeed, are only human because of such emergence (see Knepper, 2001). This dialectical phenomenon then is parsed out by Berger in terms of not two, but rather three concepts: *Externalization*, *Objectivation* and *Internalization*.

Externalization is a process — which emerged from a human instinctive motivation — creating the 'world' by an individual, and creating himself or herself inside the 'world' he or she creates. Externalization of a meaningfully ordered world view is compelled by the nature of human biological constitution. Berger explained that the weak instinctual nature of human beings necessitates the externalization of a social world.

Objectivation is the process where the reality is constructed as a facticity. World created by the human becomes something outside himself/herself — becomes an objective reality. Therefore, Berger argued that, the society is constructed in a dialectical phenomenon.

Externalization and objectivation are steps where the dialectical process happen, and *Internalization*, according to Berger, is phase where the objectivated world is reabsorbed into the subjective awareness structure of the individual. Individual studies the objectivated meaning, so that the objectivated meaning is re-formed by the individual, then to reidentify himself or herself with the objectivated world. The 'meaning' of the object then come into the self of the individual, and the individual accepts it as his/her own property. Moreover, the individual is not only merely owning the object's meaning, but also represents the object's definition. In short, through the process of internalization, 'objective fact' of social world is reconverted by individual to become 'subjective fact'.

Consumptivism as a Result of Social Construction

In the studying of postmodern social theory, we could find two concepts which seem interconnected

each other: First, the concept of '*consumptivism*', and the second, the concept of '*new means of consumption*' (Ritzer, 2002, 2004, 2005; Ritzer, G. & Stillman, T., 2001; Ritzer & Goodman, 2004). But, before discussing both of the concepts, we need to differentiate between '*consumptivism*', and '*consumerism*'. Simply, consumptivism is understood as consumptive life, or luxuriant life style, or consumption culture. This clearly differs from the understanding of '*consumerism*' — which is the movement to fight for the importances of consumers. Even though, in various references, the term of consumerism is still often used to explain everything concerning the consumptive culture and life style, which is more precise to define consumptivism. (as a note: In my articles published previous to this, even I still used the term of '*consumerism*'). This article would discuss consumptivism as an ideology or an concept of the consumptive life, and as a social reality.

The first concept, consumtivism, can be traced from Jean Baudrillard's explanations. According to Baudrillard (1991, 2004), modern culture lately has entered into the consumption era which is yielded from West World (see Rapport & Overing, 2000). Consumptivism is a contemporary life style and culture which is socialized among the urbanist clans in this time in most of all metropolises or cities in the World. In many things, consumptivism is absolute condition for continuity of life style and status business. Competition to obtain the status, and status legitimation has become an important factor in life of economics, which strengthen the consumptive behavior and the ideology of consumptivism. Thus, the fundamental issue of consumptivism is the ownership of status, comfort, and self confidence (see Tumenggung, 2005: 68; see also Korten, 2002: 38). Consumptivism is not only concerning the process of socio-psychologies, but also can be viewed a symptom of economic-politics. At the study on neoliberalisme and global capitalism, consumptivism is considered as global capitalism product, that is an market strategy of global capitalists for selling their abundant products.

The second concept, '*new means of consumption*'. By starting from the view of World System theory, a contemporary sociologist, George Ritzer, explained about the appearance of *new means of consumption*. This concept is one of three paradigms forming what is defined by Ritzer as '*structures*'. That is a structure to streamline extension of cultural of contemporary consumption and consumer culture. Besides '*new*

means of consumption', the structure is composed and formed by two other paradigms, namely, '*Fast Food Restaurant*', or '*McDonaldization of Society*' and '*Credit Card*'. Paradigm of '*Fast Food Restaurant*' is more familiar and conceived as the paradigm of '*McDonaldization of Society*', because processes of McDonald's franchise restaurant network, for Ritzer, is the most precise to represent the paradigm of '*Fast Food Restaurant*'. (see Ritzer, 2002; 2005). At this paradigm, Ritzer focuses his attention at formal rationality. But the formal rationality he defines exceeds the Max Weber's version for it — namely bureaucracy. In this case, Ritzer developed four dimension of formal rationality: *increasing efficiency, calculability, predictability, more emphasizing at quantity then at quality, and control through the replacement of human with non-human technology* — these dimensions tends causing something irrational from something rational (the irrationality of rationality). Similarly, a strong case can be made that, Visa is the paradigmatic credit card company (Ritzer & Stillman, 2001: 83). Processes such as *increasing consumer debt, fraud, invasion of privacy, and rationalization*, that forming the paradigm of "Credit Card" are best exemplified by Visa. While shopping mall, the mega mall, (e.g. Minneapolis's Mall of America), the Superstore (e.g. Toys R. Us), the cruise ship, and the theme park (e.g. Disney World) show the processes formed the paradigm of *new means of consumption*, namely: rationalization, disenchantment, re-enchantment, spectacularization, implosion, and manipulation of time and space (see also Keel, 2006).

At some stages, the term of *New Means of Consumption* is also conceived as *Cathedrals of Consumption*. Both can be exchanged each other. (see Eisenring, 2008a, 2008b). In George Ritzer's explanation, *new means of consumption* or *cathedrals of consumption* has been existed since mid of last century, in final of World War II. The *means of consumption* that Ritzer defines is a medium or means refer to environment setting where people could consume easily and comfortable. In correlating the both concepts — *consumptivism* and *new means of consumption*, the question can be asked is "how is a new means of consumption construct behavior of its visitor up at consumtivism?". To answer that question, we can use the perspective of architectural sociology that focus on study concerning of how designed physical environment influences and influenced by society and human behavior (see Smith & Bugni, 2002a: 1; see also Beaman, 2002).

Architectural Sociology and the Role of Architecture

As one of the new sociology areas, Architectural Sociology tries to answer out the questions of what disregarded in fields of sociology and architecture, such as: "what is the relationship between the individual and his or her designed environment or social setting?"; "what is the relationship between an organization and the building wherein it resides?"; and approaches these questions in examining how architectural forms both influence and react to sociocultural phenomena (see Beaman, 2002-a: 1).

Ronald Smith, chair of the sociology department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Valerie Bugni, an organizational and social researcher for Lucchesi, Galati Architects, Inc., in Las Vegas, are two figures who are developing the studies on architectural sociology nowadays. They define architectural sociology as:

"...the study of how designed physical environment influences and is influenced by society and human behavior. Sociological theories that focus on cultural patterns, social relationships, and social psychology are especially used to explain and interpret architectural design" (Smith & Bugni, 2002a: 1).

The definition indicates that, architectural sociology can be studied as a pure science or an applied science. At the aspect of applied science, architectural sociology assists architects to comprehend the social behavior of human and to lay open the clue about the social interaction that happened in various social settings (see Smith & Bugni, 2002-b; see also Beaman, 2002-a & 2002-b). But, at the aspect of pure science, it implicates an basic assumption: "a designed physical environment or an architectural environment can influence and be influenced by society and human behavior". The assumption might be able giving a new direction for various research on sociology science and architectural science (see Eisenring, 2006; 2007-a). Hereinafter, starting from this assumption we also get the picture of how architecture, at *new means of consumption*, constructs a consumptive behavior. One of the ways to comprehend deeply how architecture socially takes a role in construct the reality of consumptivism at a new means of consumption is, through Michel Foucault's work about relation between 'power' and 'discourse'.

Discourse, Power, and Architecture

The term of discourse, in fact, is not as simple as ordinarily it is used. Foucault, has used the term with new way. In explaining the masterpieces of Foucault, Piliang (2003) tries to define 'discourse' as follow:

".....a certain way in conceptioning and act to social objects, that generating an implication at subjects. It is manifested into social practice of physical formation (or structure) and also in the form of oral and writing. For example, usage the body, usage the space and object, transferring the knowledge, forwarding the information" (Piliang, 2003: 106/translation).

In Foucault's opinion, discourse and power are complementary. On one side, 'power' creates some discourses to make the 'power' continue, on the other side 'discourses' might shape new powers. In his book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault explains that discourse is not exist in a history continuity context, but in discontinuity context. According to Foucault, every period in history is arranged by what he call '*episteme*' (see Adian, 2006). *Episteme* he intends is to express periods of history, and to explain with reference to, the world views and existence of certain discourses. *Episteme* is distinguished by various institutions, discipline, knowledge, order and activities the consistence with the certain world views. The ups and downs of *Episteme* do not chime in with any idea concerning the natures of continuity, progressing or growing, rather it emerge at unforeseen circumstances and random (Dahaner, Schirato & Webb, J., 2000). By referring to Foucault's concept on '*Episteme*' and 'discourse', we can easily to comprehend about the separation of two periods of time (or *Epistemes*) between modernism and posmodernism, especially in the fields of art and architecture. Herein after we can study of how discourse and power operate in the both *Epistemes* of modernism and postmodernism. Symbolically, some pioneers of postmodernisme architecture idea claim the date of July 6, 1972, at 15.00 o'clock — when some blocks of housing of Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, Missoiri (United States) was demolished — as the birth of new movement in architecture. Thus, it was the starting point of postmodernism era in architecture. In this era, any masterpiece of postmodern architecture seems to be existing in an *episteme* inside the World history, where the 'discourse' of postmodernism ideas sticks

(or be stuck) in it. There is a significant difference between modernism discourse and postmodernism on architect authorities, and authenticity of their works. In modernism discourse, a masterpiece in architecture is often considered as the result of the architect's genius or intelligence. *Sidney Opera House*, for example, is inseparable with Jorn Otzon's big name; Frank Lloyd Wright, has been very famous because of his masterpiece "*Falling Water*"; Alvar Aalto was recognized by many of junior architects clans in his periode, because of his personal techniques which creating the certain forms — such as seen at his *Town Hall*, in Seinäjoki, Finland; or Le Corbusier that expressing his mind content and his specification in sense of architecture finally resulted a typical style at his masterpieces, such as seen at *Ronchamp Chapel*, French.

The concept of *architect's authority as subject*, in the periode of modern architecture, likely had taken the philosophy idea of Rene Descartes. As we know, Descartes (1596–1650) has been very famous until now with his 'modern philosophy', that is "subject's authority, as a thinker, as a sparker of ideas, and as a creator", and remember of his famous statement: "*cogito ergo sum*" — I think, hence I exist. According to Descartes's philosophy, subject is the center of minds, ideas, and knowledges. The model of subjectivity like this then was become an ideology for importances of the West capitalism during the *episteme* of modern age, and this gave the certain prestige space and authority in any individual's field, especially for the professionals.

That way also architects took discourse of architecture in their works at the period of time. In postmodern condition, an architect shall no longer have any space in discourse. Today we will very often to meet various of aesthetics language codes at various masterpieces in architecture, without attendance of the architect. For example, at *Tea & Coffee Piazza* (1979–83) — an architectural building designed by Charles Jencks, a sparker of postmodernism ideas in architecture — seen is not Jencks who converse through the object of his own masterpiece, however the language that emerge at the masterpiece are aesthetics language of Doria, Ionia, and Korintia — they are former languages. In this case, Jencks is not a true architect as we recognize in modern architecture era, he is only an operator gave the opportunity for these languages to converse (see Piliang, 2003: 119).

A postmodern architecture masterpiece now can no longer be categorized the same as at understanding of modernisme that owning the intact and single

meaning. In postmodernism era, architecture emerges in multifariously of the fragmented language, giving the opportunity for its "readers" to yield various meanings defined plurally under the postmodernism discourse. This plural definitions then drags the "readers" to a dialectic situation, looking for the truth, something impossible to be found at the fragmented design like that. As the result, it is formed pseudo-opinions, pseudo-values, and opinions which finally generating the social differensiation that oriented at selfregard and prestige.

Thereby, at the *episteme* of postmodernism, the discourse operating at architectural works — especially at common commercial building — has no longer been predominated by the architect, as at *episteme* of modernisme. Postmodernism doctrine, as a part of discourse from the global capitalism, continually look for, dig and explore the new power forms, namely the power of commodity, the powers of sign and symbolic, and through these powers they construct the society at the ideology of consumptivism.

The second thing can be drawn from Foucault's concept concerning 'discourse' is that at the other side of disclosure or uttering, or more special, at the other side of the arrangement of space and architectural object stem from the idea of postmodernism, there is a certain form of power that operate. Architecture in capitalism era lately has taken the vital role in creating the social differentiation system through its signs and symbols. The social differentiation itself, in fact, is one of the power forms created through arts and also architecture. The mixed style at postmodern architecture is oftentimes interpreted wrongly as the new freedom for architects the living in the 'reflection society'. Modern architecture is often considered as giving the space for architects to secede from norms or rules of modern architecture with stiff philosophy doctrine, drag on, and which handcuff freedom to create. However, intrinsically they oppositely have been re-tied by a new doctrine that come from postmodernisme discourse, as shown by Robinowitz's statement as following:

"In the privat sector, there are a number of large-scale economic and social forces that influence the potential for development and even the type and shape building" (Robinowitz, 1979b: 100).

This statement implies that a number of large-scale economic and social forces would limit the movement space for architects in developing their own ideas. As one of the mechanisms in the global capitalism discourse, the role of architects in creating

their architectural works has been intervened, manipulated and defined by powers operating in the global capitalism society, without caring about the norms and the rules of architectural that very recognized at modern architecture. On the contrary, applying the architectural design at various *new means of consumption*, results the new powers. They are the power of commodity, and the power of signs and symbols that can construct individual socially into the order of consumptivism ideology.

Wheale (1995: 34) depicts that, postmodern, on one hand as the movement to blur or to wipe out the differences between the cultural hierarchies, but on the other hand — according to his assumption — this movement is followed by introducing and also inculcating the prestige into the theme and image of mass/popular culture, or consumer culture in the form of art and architecture. In their essay about architecture postmodernism, and seen from the perspective of architectural sociology, Smith and Bugni (2002-a) express that, Las Vegas's postmodern image depends even on the architecture, which have been created to promote its important industry. In the eyes of postmodern social theory, the birth of posmodernisme idea in architecture refusing the aesthetics and artistic style of modern architecture era, can be related with importance of global capitalism power. At one side, the design style of postmodern in architecture and art stimulates the growing of new life style of society refusing the bore modern culture (see Sachari, 2005: 124). And on the other hand it constructs consumptive life style in society, that beneficial for effort of extension the market for capital accumulation.

Architectural Symbolic Environment and Consumptivism

People not only see the physical environment of buildings and react to what they see, but they also have memory images of the environment, and their behavior as strongly affected by these images (see Moore, 1979: 60). Images can be created by the architectural symbols. These symbols is used by people to communicate the message concerning themselves, their economic background, their social status, and their 'world view' toward the others (see Lang, 1992: 15). The statement implies that, symbols in architecture can be arranged in such a way by the party taking the control on a '*means of consumption*', and communicate the messages to construct people at consumptive behavior and construct a social reality

— ideology of consumptivism. By using some basic assumptions of the theory of symbolic interactionism, we would understand this phenomenon in micro context (see Eisenring, 2007-b).

Symbolic interactionism theory rests on three basic. First, social reality as it is sensed, known, and understood as a social production. Interacting individuals produces and affirms the definitions of their own definition of situations. Second, humans are assumed ready to involve the behavior of self-reflexive in their mind. Third, in specifying their own standpoint and fitting that standpoint to the behaviors of other, humans interact mutually. Interaction is seen as an emergent, negotiated, often unpredictable concern. Interaction is symbolic because it involves the manipulation of symbols, words, meanings, and languages (see Denzin, 1989: 5).

The perspective of symbolic interactionism views individuals, as living in a symbolic environment and constantly interpret any symbol or sign existing around them. Each person develops the meaning of symbols that existing at the surroundings. Hereinafter by connecting themselves with a certain symbol, people can depict their self-concepts with others (see Mowen & Minor, 2002a: 271). In broader understanding, architectural environment or designed physical environment is also a symbolic environment where people can depict their self-concepts with others. Since early its constructed, the theory of symbolic interactionism has referred at the important of non-human objects and the place for "self". In his essay, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, Georg Simmel — who often also is called as a symbolic interactionist — several times try to relate between "self" and "space". Simmel's efforts then become the starting point for the forming of achitectural sociology study area (see Smith and Bugni, 2002b: 4).

Among several special contributions of symbolic interactionism in giving the understanding of meaning, especially which related with architectural design, Irving Goffman has also focused the usage of the meaning attached at designed forms. He mentioned that "status symbols" at a building, an object, and the place laid open the prestigious life style, the status symbols represent a high social position of a person or a group and it also can be used to eliminated other groups or other individual.(see Smith & Bugni, 2002b: 13).

Thereby, an architectural building is also a symbolic environment, in which, people can depict their self-concept with the others in the interacting. By entangling the architectural building into the

interaction, then someone's self would be easier to be reflected by other's self. In this process, signs and symbols at a certain architectural building would stimulate the behavior change of an individual or a group through the phases of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. At this way, architecture plays its role in social construction of consumptivism.

Conclusion

By the theoretical exploration above, could be developed the idea in two dimension of sociology, micro and macro. The idea at macro dimension refers to the concept of '*new means of consumption*' (George Ritzer), and the concept of '*accumulation context*' (Scoot Lash). Concept of postmodernism that applied into the architectural design of a '*new means of consumption*' such as a shopping mall is inspired by discourse of postmodernism in architecture related to the new power of global capitalism, that is the power of commodity, the powers of sign and symbolic. Discourse of posmoderisme in architecture implying the power of sign and symbolic at the common commercial buildings, is a form of the process of rationalization, in Ritzer's concept. That is process of rationalization of the paradigmatic structure for the extension of contemporary consumption and social construction to the ideology of consumptivism, while the final purpose is to accumulate capital and distribute the abundant production results.

Micro dimension, explains what is not explained at macro dimension, that is how the power of sign and symbol from architectural discourse influences human behavior toward consumptivism. To explain this phenomenon, the environment of a consumption means such as a shopping mall has to be viewed as an architectural symbolic environment influencing the society and its visitor's behavior (architectural sociology assumption). How symbolic physical environment influences visitors behavior, is determined by how visitors subjectively define the meaning of architectural symbols existing at the the designed environment. Social interaction, taking place inside or outside the architectural environment, in this case, creates the processes objectivation and internalization on the meaning of the symbols and signs at the environment. Architectural design creating the symbols at the environment designed by the inspired of postmodernism discourse then guides the visitors into dialectics situation the process of

externalization, objectivation, and internlization, then guide the visitors at consumptive behavior.

In the same way, the other '*new means of consumption*' — and also the other '*paradigmatic structure*', namely *McDonaldization of Society* and *Credit Card* — togetherly construct society at the consumptive behavior, then to become a life style and so on, finally, to make it become a social reality.

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