

## **Outlet City Metzinger** **An Urban cultural identity based on consumption**

### **Introduction**

Metzinger is a small city of Southwest Germany, with about 21.800 inhabitants, which has been for the past 6 years the stage of deep urban transformations. Those large scaled changes in the urban scape brought the predictable social consequences for its inhabitants, which have built a new relation, not always pleasant with the city.

Metzinger is the city where the family company Hugo Boss started in the beginning of the 60`s. After the 70`s when its big world boom took place, the group, in the meanwhile in the hands of the Holy brothers (which in its turn sold the company to the Italian Marzotto-Group) became Metzinger`s nr.1 real-estate investor.

The 80`s brought the big growth on the search for luxurious items at cheaper prices, was the beginning of the outlets phenomena, and in Metzinger took in shorter time bigger proportions than those its inhabitants would wish. The city saw the growth of visitors increase from a medium of 3-5000 visitors to 10-15 000 visitors each Thursday, Friday and Saturday (the more important shopping days).

Shoppers come today from all over the world in busses full with people eager to spend money on branded articles.

It was on 2000 that the big transformation of the city, in terms of urban growth image and function, begun. The initiative of the Holy AG to broaden the offer of outlets presented a master plan to the city, which was accepted and lead to the change of the municipal plan for the whole area adjacent to the old town. And today, at their home page, the city calls itself the Mecca of the bargain hunters.

As always, opinions on the new image of the city are varied and always subject to discussion, and to arise strong feelings among people who have seen a totally new landscape take place at their front door.

In this paper, it is intended to explore at some extent the extension of the “thematic city phenomena” in some of its aspects, like the sociological changes attached to the new urban image and function.

### **Image / Cultural identity**

Before starting elaborating on the case study, it matters to introduce some definition for what is understood as cultural identity. According to Tomlinson cultural identity is defined as the result of years, centuries of a community living and interacting in its own geographical surroundings, which means, it was formed from its natural continuity with its past, a natural result of an undisturbed existential possession that people simply “had” (Tomlinson, 2003). And this concept became the flag of those resisting the advances of global equality, as Castells (1997) puts it, “...a challenge to globalisation... on behalf of cultural singularity and peoples control over their lives and environment”.

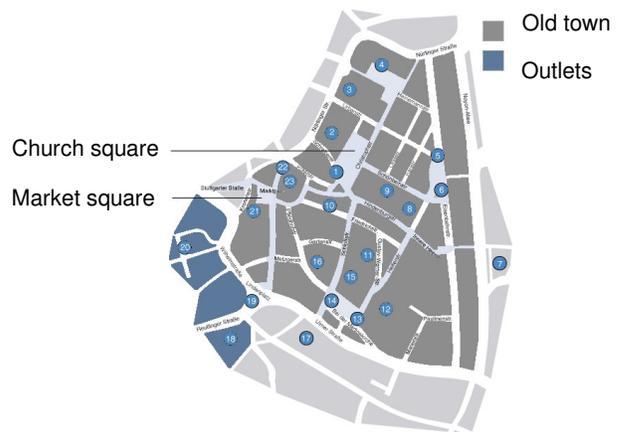
But before any more consideration on Cultural identity, one has to keep in mind that the concept of culture is in constant mutation, just like the concept of other very familiar terms like Integrated economy, globalisation, social integration, multicultural society, this are on the verge of suffering from saturation of meaning, as they are used in so many different contexts. But it is their meaning when it comes to impact the city growth and transformation that is taken in consideration for this specific case study. How to define a city`s its level of integration or disintegration is attempted with this study for the specific case of Metzinger,

recurring mainly to empirical observations, as well as informal conversations with some locals.

The population of Germany is mainly dispersed in small sized cities like Metzigen, with a small centre identified by its main market square where the important events for the community take place, and were important buildings like the town hall the banks are located. Curiously, the church has a close but different location on the city, as to separate geographically both powers. Metzigen has in the meanwhile a 3<sup>rd</sup> power, The Holy A.G. Before becoming the “Mecca for bargain hunters”, Metzigen was a city like others who’s origins date back to the beginning of the X century, was spared to destruction during the II World War and in 1990 was elevated to district town, under the administrative district of Reutlingen.



aerial view of the city of Metzigen



schematic map of “both city centre’s”

The well developed textile industry of Metzigen was the main factor that pushed forward the transformation of the city. Today they announce with pride the over 40 outlets located on the centre. And they are responsible for Metzigen`s new identity.

Like A. J. Scott refers, a heavy part of today’s economical activity is dedicated precisely to the production of “cultural outputs” goods and services with high levels of aesthetic or semiotic content. The phenomena of this newly immersed industry of culture have found a new ground to thrive among the outlet shops. Brands like *Puma*, *Hugo Boss*, *Escada* are status synonyms, they of Metzigen follows to the point of re-inventing itself.

The new centre, separated from the old one by the road to Reutlingen, assumes this gap from the rest of the city both functionally, as well as visually (with its modern, bold and shiny buildings). In that way, Metzigen practices its own identity in the constructions of the city’s cultural offer, it’s not the typical “Disney land” phenomena where movement of people in the open space is physically limited by urban elements (walls, gates...) but its functionality is what conditions those movements. People just won’t go to a part of the city where they know nothing is happening.

Consumption and selfhood are the cultural outputs of our days, and the main incentive to bring people into this city. And those two are well taken care of in Metzigen.

### **Contributions to Integration between Visitors / Inhabitants - Conflicts of interests**

The well taken care architectural objects that placed in a more or less pleasantly arranged open space, allows very few breaks in the whole scenario, where real public life takes place. The main, as not to say the only pedestrian movements observed only take place during the

opening ours of the shops, where people satiate their consumer instinct on the attractive prices or brands.

Apart from the rush of the consumption spree one just has to walk through the shopping area on a Sunday afternoon to sense how “ignored” this area is by the inhabitants of Metzinger, who prefer to sit on the Market square or on the cafés of the old neighbourhood, as to rest on the shadow of *Puma*.

Still, every detail was taken into account by the designers, urban furniture, new information signs, pavement textures... but everything revolving around the pilgrimage of going in and out of shops, carrying the famous paper bags sealed with a red tape, while rushing to the next promotion.

On a Saturday morning or during one of the “Late – Night shopping” events, one can fully experience the meaning of the expression “shop till you drop”: busses full of bargain hunters coming from places so far away as Japan, USA, Saudi Arabia walk into Bali, Hugo Boss, a truth democratic activity where the only conditioning is the size of ones wallet.

Its inhabitants don't all share the same opinion on the changes. The new restaurants and bars that brought more agitation to the night life, appeal to the young people. As for the older generations, they don't identify with the town anymore, in the words of a 52 year old inhabitant “the atmosphere became very impersonal; one sees more tourists and strangers, as the old familiar faces of Metzinger”. The city doesn't belong to them anymore; they don't participate of its new life and keep to the old places that remain unchanged since their youth like the market square, old pubs and the bakery.

“Identity is peoples source of meaning and experience” (Castells, 1997), and in that sense, a big part of Metzinger's population feels lost in their own town, as for them identity has to have a territorial, physical expression.

Transformations such the one here related, collide directly with the late twenty-century quest for a meaning which brings the nostalgia for the cities of the past, which brings the memory of times when everything was simpler and slower, nothing like the rush of today's complex technological advances. Deep and fast changes in a city's image and function disturb the way people relate to their atmosphere in a way that only the following generations will be able to make peace with.

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