

Design characteristics in outdoor seating areas – A study of coffee shops in Hong Kong and Copenhagen

Münster, Mia B.

School of Design, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong
mbmuens@polyu.edu.hk

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Transitional spaces, or ‘in-between’ areas, those connecting the interior and exterior spaces of shops, cafés and restaurants—these are spheres of interaction between commercial and public spaces. In them, through the use of design elements, stores communicate the nature of their offerings, their services, and their values to the outside world; consumers, in turn, decode these elements as a part of their decision to patronize the store. Increasingly, these transitional spaces incorporate areas for outdoor seating. In these areas, parts of the surrounding neighborhood are pulled into the store’s sphere, while the store’s sphere is simultaneously projected into the surrounding area. Utilizing data from outdoor seating areas in over 100 specialty coffee shops, this paper presents and discusses a trend for the implementation of outdoor seating areas, and how this trend has manifested itself differently in Hong Kong and in Copenhagen.

Keywords: *coffee shops; transitional spaces; outdoor seating; interior and exterior spaces*

1 Introduction

Store fronts are the interface between interior and exterior spaces (McIntyre, 2016). They are the visual surfaces of buildings, revealing both style and structure. They contribute to the atmosphere of streets and neighborhoods, while also conveying information about a building’s occupants. Store facades, including windows, entrance areas, and branded design features, are especially important for retail brands. They provide distinctive visual anchors in streetscapes, and suggest what consumers will find inside, both in terms of atmosphere and products (Haug & Münster, 2015; Kent & Petermans, 2017). Transitional spaces, connecting the interior and exterior spaces of cafés and restaurants, are spheres of interaction between commercial and public space, and are rich with potential for study. In these spaces, through the use of design elements, stores communicate the nature of their offerings, services, and values to the world outside; in these same spaces, consumers decode these design elements to decide whether or not to patronize the store. Views to the outside and access to natural light add to the customer experience, and research shows that the most preferred seats in coffee



shops are those offering a view of the outside and the opportunity to observe passersby (Waxman, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, outdoor seating in fact became the only option for coffee shops in many countries, due to regulations aimed at controlling the virus (Waxman, 2022).

Places where coffee is consumed are valuable for the study of social interactions (Oldenburg, 1989), and also as places where an atmosphere is used to facilitate a particular kind of consumption (Kotler, 1973; Shiao, 2014). Coffee drinking originated as a practice in Ethiopia. By the 15th century it had spread to the Arab world and made its way to Europe by the beginning of the 17th. Coffeehouses began appearing in Europe soon after that (Broadway, Legg, & Bertossi, 2020), and have continued to serve as informal gathering places, where ties are established, ideas debated, and communities formed (Broadway & Engelhardt, 2021; Oldenburg, 1989). Habermas (1991) traces the origins of the so-called public sphere to the coffeehouses of 17th-century London, where current affairs were debated, and citizens jockeyed for political influence. Since that time, the nature of coffee shops has changed in myriad ways, influenced by globalization, by consumption trends, and by coffee's tremendous growth as a commodity. Nevertheless, the essentially social nature of coffee shops has remained among their key characteristics. This social aspect is, in turn, influenced by their design (Barber & Münster, 2022, 2023).

The present study is part of a larger, ongoing research project aimed at understanding the significance of today's coffee shops for users, their societies, and their environments, and at the same time exploring the role design plays in these projects. This study is an investigation of one of the findings to which the larger project has drawn our attention; namely, outdoor seating areas. In this paper we will explore the boundaries between the interiors and exteriors of coffee shops, identifying design features that link them, and create transitions. We will be guided by the following questions: What are the most significant design characteristics in outdoor seating areas in coffee shops in Hong Kong and Copenhagen? And, What are their similarities and differences, and how might these be explained? Empirically, the analysis considers data gathered through observation studies at 135 coffee shops in Hong Kong and Copenhagen. The remainder of the paper is organized into four sections: first, background information is presented, including a brief review of coffee shops as a research topic, the contemporary setting of coffee shops in Copenhagen and Hong Kong, and the emerging trend to incorporate outdoor seating areas. Second, the methodology is described, including criteria for case selection, and on-site observation. Third, design features in the space between interiors and exteriors are analyzed and discussed, and typologies of outdoor seating areas in the two cities are presented. Finally, a summary and discussion of the significance of the findings is presented, along with suggestions for future research.

2 Specialty coffee shops in Hong Kong and Copenhagen

2.1 Three waves of coffee

The development of coffee consumption is often described in terms of waves. The first wave is characterized by inexpensive mass consumption, typically instant or industrially produced machine coffee, consumed either at home or in unembellished café formats. The second wave is kicked off by the successes of what are now major, brand-name coffee shops, which capitalized on leisure aspirations by offering higher quality products, a wider variety of coffee products, and comfortable interior spaces—Starbucks is a prime example. The third wave, now in progress, is associated with the various features of the so-called specialty coffee market. These include: traceability of the coffee bean

to its origins; local and customized roasting; barista craft; and carefully branded, design-conscious consumer experiences. Varying iterations of this evolution can be found in different markets around the world (Ferreira & Ferreira, 2018; Tucker, 2017).

2.2 Coffee consumption in Copenhagen and Hong Kong

Denmark is among the top five of the most coffee-drinking countries in the world (Dansk Kaffeinformation, 2022). Since its appearance in the 17th century, coffee consumption has been a gathering point for Danes. Coffee consumption has social implications, and is not simply the drinking of hot, caffeinated beverages (Moat, 2018). In recent years, interest in specialty coffee has grown in Denmark, and, as in so many other places around the world, specialty coffee shops have begun to appear. This activity is, however, mostly limited to larger cities. Compared with Hong Kong, the number of shops focusing their business exclusively on specialty coffee in Denmark is limited, although a number of exclusive bakeries (Juno, Hart, Lille Bakery, Lagkagehuset, and Emmery's, for example) have introduced specialty coffee as a supplement to their bread and pastry offerings, and have created café areas with seating in their shops. Denmark has a long-standing tradition for high-quality baked goods—consumption of pastry is another example of a cultural practice that brings people together in Denmark (Moat, 2018). The combination of bakery and coffee is not widespread in Hong Kong, where instead there is a tendency to offer freshly prepared meal items, primarily salads and sandwiches, whose ingredients are carefully chosen to match the coffee.

Coffee culture in Hong Kong, on the other hand, is relatively young. It has nonetheless recently experienced remarkable growth (Barber & Münster, 2022, 2023), becoming one of the specialty coffee industry's leading centers, with hundreds of new and independent coffee shops opening in recent years. Due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, Hong Kong was extremely isolated from 2020 to 2022. Remarkably, coffee shops have thrived during this period. The reasons for this trend are multifaceted, but in part reflect conditions imposed by the pandemic. The economic downturn pressed building rents down, allowing new entrepreneurs access to properties. At the same time, travel restrictions caused Hong Kong residents to seek out local experiences (Barber & Münster, 2022). While the exact number is difficult to pinpoint, informal counts by local coffee enthusiasts suggest that in 2021 alone—a year in which many other retail businesses struggled or were forced to close their doors—between 220 and 300 new coffee shops opened in Hong Kong (Barber & Münster, 2023).

2.3 Consuming places

In *Consuming Places*, Urry (1995) describes how places are increasingly being restructured as centers for consumption, providing the context within which products and services are evaluated, purchased, and consumed. He also describes how places themselves are in a sense consumed, particularly visually. This can be the case for tourists, for locals, or for both, and can manifest in local enthusiasm, social and political movement, repeat travel patterns, or simply the pleasure of strolling around in a particular area. Urry calls for research that engages with the relations between the social and the physical environment, and with the interdependencies between consumption of material objects and of the natural and built environments.

What is particularly interesting about outdoor seating areas is that they relate themselves just as much, if not more, to their urban surroundings as they do to the café itself. These areas may serve to attract interest from the street, but they also offer customers a vantage point on the city. As such, they are examples of interdependency between consumption and the built environment in which it takes place, and also of the interdependency between a store and its surroundings. Recently, in both Hong and

Copenhagen, an increasing number of coffee shops have opened in areas that did not previously house them (Barber & Münster, 2023; Münster, 2023). These places often attract a new demographic to different neighborhoods and might therefore be considered a point of entry for this kind of neighborhood consumption.

2.4 Location characteristics: Copenhagen

Specialty coffee shops can be found in many different areas of Copenhagen. Shops are often small, and are often located in popular, older, mixed-use residential areas, or on side streets close to shopping areas in the center of the city. The City of Copenhagen has set itself the goal of becoming the world's best city to live in. A close dialogue with business owners, in order to ensure a thorough understanding of local needs, has in recent years resulted in a relatively simple application process for permission to build outdoor seating areas in public spaces outside shops. Rules require simply that furniture be movable, that it not interfere with accessibility, and that its design must be in accordance with the area's aesthetic character (Københavns Kommune, 2022).

But the demand for consuming specialty coffee in attractive surroundings is not limited to the center of Copenhagen. A trend observed in many European cities is that businesses have given new life to buildings in outlying areas, often of an industrial character. This tendency is highly visible in Copenhagen. For example, the area that used to be its Meatpacking District has been transformed into a cultural hotspot, with numerous restaurants, galleries, nightclubs, and cafés (Visit Denmark, 2022). Several hotels are located in repurposed buildings, and coffee shops have been opened in abandoned buildings outside of the city's center. For those willing to spend the time and energy to get to them, these places offer unique aesthetic experiences and larger, more spacious outdoor areas.

2.5 Location characteristics: Hong Kong

Specialty coffee shops have opened throughout Hong Kong in recent years. There is a tendency, however, for them to be located in older, mixed-use residential areas. These areas are often quieter, with less traffic and lower rents than in commercial districts (Barber & Münster, 2023; South China Morning Post, 2021). Shop locations themselves are typically small, independent, carefully designed, and visually appealing businesses, offering more pleasant interactions between interior and exterior than those on busier thoroughfares. Shops are typically located in renovated ground-floor spaces, often in buildings dating from the 1960s and 1970s. The spaces are usually narrow and deep, with limited store frontage (Barber & Münster, 2023). In Hong Kong, open or transparent facades have traditionally been uncommon in restaurants and older café formats. In newer specialty coffee shops, however, transparency between interior and exterior has been identified as a key design element (Barber & Münster, 2023). This could be a result of design inspiration from other regions, and it could also have to do with the location of these shops on quieter streets, where it is not necessary to block out surrounding noise and activity. Transparency in the facade design also serves to attract interest from the street, while at the same time offering customers a vantage point from which to take in the surrounding neighborhood.

Outdoor seating is still relatively unusual in Hong Kong, probably because of the city's climate, noise level, and pollution levels. Nonetheless, it is a growing trend, perhaps taking its inspiration from other places (Barber & Münster, 2023). Incorporation of public spaces by adjacent shops is, in principle, not allowed in Hong Kong. Being one of the world's most densely populated cities, sidewalks and passages are kept free in order to allow for accessibility and traffic flow (HKEL, 2022). Interest and demand for outdoor seating areas is present nonetheless, and especially for specialty coffee shops, a tendency

has appeared to create seating areas within the boundaries covered by the rental contract. The trend identified above in Copenhagen, where abandoned industrial buildings are repurposed for coffee shops, is not as visible in Hong Kong, but the establishment of coffee shops in older, formerly industrial neighborhoods can be seen as a similar movement, one that alters the retail ecology of the area. The existence of newer coffee shops in these neighborhoods, which are often promoted on social media and other platforms, attracts people to the area who might not otherwise have come there (Barber & Münster, 2022). Particularly during the pandemic, interest among local people for exploring unknown districts and neighborhoods of their own city seems to have increased.

2.6 Climate

Climate naturally affects the way that facades and outdoor areas are shaped and designed; it is therefore relevant to point out the differences in climate between the two cities. Hong Kong's climate is subtropical, tending towards temperate for nearly half of the year. In the summer, temperatures are normally between 26 and 31°C, which means that people tend to remain indoors, in air-conditioned environments. There is also a good deal of rain in the summer months. Large sections of the city's public space are connected by a system of elevated and covered walkways, which allow pedestrians to remain protected from sun, rain, and traffic while moving from place to place. The Danish climate is temperate. Summers are cool and pleasant, with day temperatures rarely exceeding 22°C, and night temperatures down to 10°C. Winters are cold, with average temperatures around 1°C. These cooler temperatures make outdoor seating areas perfect during daytime in the summer, but often too cold to use at night even in the summer. Use of these areas is limited in the spring and fall, and especially in the winter.

3 Method and analysis

This study employs a qualitative mixed-methods approach, including place and environmental observations of the shops and their surroundings (Gifford, 2016) and semi-structured interviews. Data originates from several datasets and consists of photos, short videos, interviews, and notes from observations.

Observation studies were conducted at 135 specialty coffee shops, 80 in Hong Kong and 55 in Copenhagen, from December 2020 to December 2022. The shops were selected because of their core focus on specialty coffee; in Copenhagen, bakeries that serve specialty coffee were included as well. All 55 shops in Copenhagen have outdoor seating areas; 59 of the specialty coffee shops in Hong Kong have outdoor seating. Our first dataset includes photos, videos, and field notes from location and environmental observations of the 114 included shops.

Place and environmental observations provided insights about location, design elements, layout, and factors related to furniture and decoration at each of the cases. Observations focused on the design of outdoor seating areas, particularly factors that connect these areas to both the interiors of the cafés and to the surrounding areas. These data were analyzed to identify themes and patterns. This analysis was then used to identify design features that can create transitions from interior to exterior spaces. Facade elements were considered, as were layouts, furniture arrangements, and the surroundings of the coffee shops, including the neighborhood, the café's location on the street, and neighboring businesses. These observations provided some insights into the real-life contexts of the outdoor seating areas.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 store representatives, six in each city. This small sample is not intended to represent all coffee shops, but simply to identify some of the considerations and intentions behind the design of outdoor areas. The interviews included questions about the current wave of specialty coffee shops and store managements' motivations for including outdoor seating areas.

Identification of design characteristics led to analysis of the qualities of the outdoor areas. In some cases, Interviews with store representatives helped to confirm these observations, in others, the interviews provided new insights about the factors involved in outdoor seating areas.

4 Findings

This section will present and discuss findings from the observation studies. Layouts, design features, and the relationship of these to interior and exterior spaces were coded in order to identify significant design characteristics in the two cities (RQ1). Four typologies of outdoor seating areas emerged from this analysis. These typologies do not represent actual stores, but are based on characteristics identified in the two cities. Each of the typologies are described individually, followed by a discussion of their similarities and differences (RQ2). Insights gleaned from interviews with store representatives are also introduced in these discussions.

4.1 Typologies

Analysis of data revealed four distinct typologies of outdoor seating arrangements in specialty coffee shops in Hong Kong, and four in Copenhagen. In the following, these typologies will be described, and their designs discussed in relation to climate, architecture, legislation, location, and social and psychological aspects. The four Hong Kong typologies are introduced under the names HK1, HK2, HK3 and HK4, and the four Copenhagen typologies are introduced under the names CPH1, CPH2, CPH3, and CPH4. The chapter concludes with a section discussing similarities and differences in the two cities. Typology 2 (HK2/CPH2) and typology 4 (HK4/CPH4), had similar characteristics in both cities. Typology 4, however, is rare in Hong Kong. In fact, the dataset revealed only one example of this typology in Hong Kong, and therefore it cannot rightly be classified as a typology; however, because of its similarities with the characteristics of typology 4 in Copenhagen, it was decided to include it for the sake of comparison.

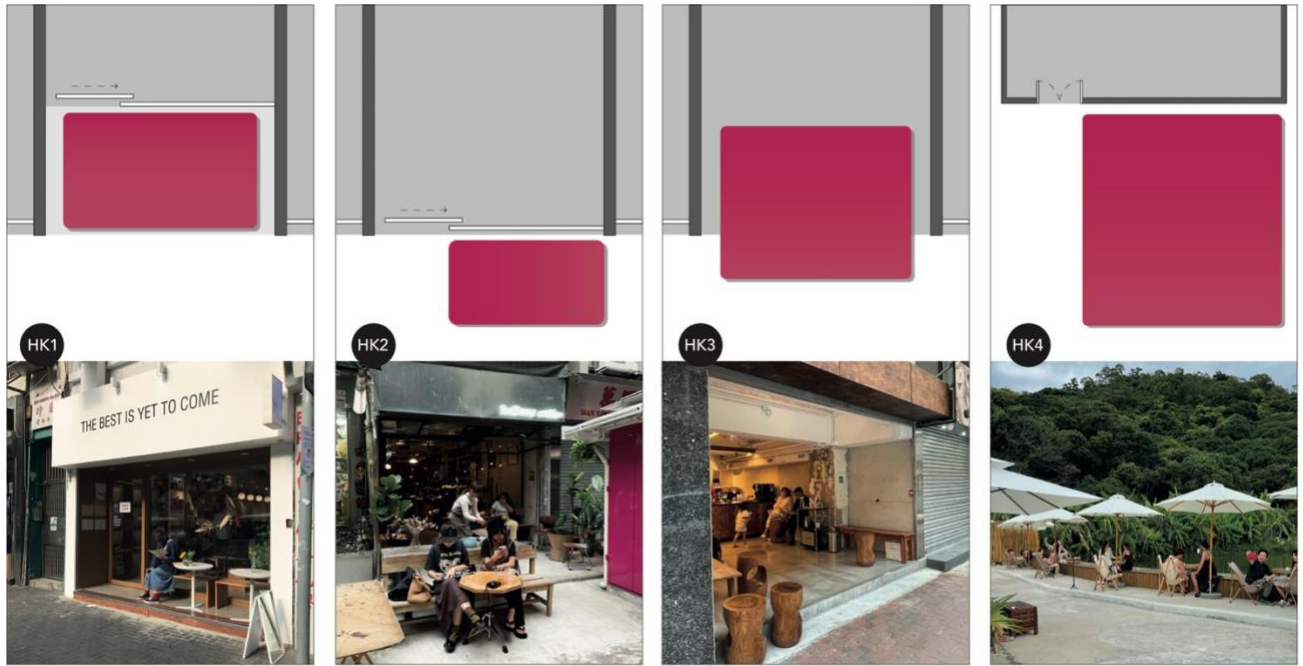


Figure 1. Typologies of outdoor seating in Hong Kong. Illustrations of top view above and photo examples below. From left to right: Typology 1, HK1, Typology 2, HK2, Typology 3, HK3, Typology 4, HK4.

4.1.1 HK1: recessed niche

The recessed facade, where a glass facade is recessed from the street to allow for the creation of a small outdoor seating area or an outdoor ‘niche’ within the premises of the store, was the most common type of outdoor area found in specialty coffee shops in Hong Kong.

In this type, the outdoor area is placed within the boundaries of the store’s rental property, and is therefore in compliance with rules prohibiting the placement of furniture in public zones (HKeL, 2022). The glass facade is pulled back from the front of the building, creating an area between the shop and the street. At night, or when the shop is closed, the area is closed off with a metal shutter, which is flush with the facade. Because the bottom floor of buildings in Hong Kong is often elevated a step to alleviate the risk of flooding, these outdoor areas also function as a kind of podium, raising guests above the level of the street. This solution exists in a wide variety of sizes. The photo in typology HK1 shows an example where the niche is approximately one meter in depth, while the illustration shows a larger example, where there is room for considerably more furniture.

The niche solution is typically seen in shops in renovated ground floor spaces, in buildings dating from the 1960s and 1970s. These spaces are usually deep and narrow and have limited store frontage. Their locations are often quieter, with less traffic than commercial districts, and they therefore potentially offer more pleasant interactions between interior and exterior than those located on busy streets.

Buchanan (2019) contends that niches in buildings provide both prospect and refuge. The prospect and refuge theory, first articulated by Appleton (1975) refers to physical spaces in both landscape and architecture. From an evolutionary perspective, there is reason to believe that the environmental signals that eventually gave rise to what we now think of as aesthetic judgments might in fact be born out of those that regulate biologically fundamental behaviors, such as approach-avoidance decisions. According to Appleton, the aesthetic satisfaction that humans derive from contemplating a natural landscape is proportional to the extent to which its physical features signal environmental conditions

favorable to survival, like being able to observe possible danger from a position of security. As such, the niche might, on a biological level, appeal to fundamental survival instincts, by offering a view to the neighboring surroundings from a position of security. Buchanan also describes how safe environments in niches can help to transform unfamiliar surroundings into more well-known environments.

By designing the outdoor areas in small niches, the outside (be)comes inside, and consumers, particularly those not already familiar with the neighborhood, may enjoy their coffee, while familiarizing themselves with the neighborhood from a 'safe' vantage point.

4.1.2 HK2: continuation of shop

Seating areas that immediately continue the shop outside its actual boundaries are unusual in Hong Kong compared to Copenhagen, but the solution does exist in suburban areas, on the surrounding islands, and in some older neighborhoods, where the streets are too narrow for traffic. Photo, HK2, is from the so-called 'Mid-Levels' on Hong Kong Island, an area built on terrasses on a steep hillside. These quiet streets, free from heavy traffic, are popular excursion spots, especially on weekends. Consumers are more exposed in this typology than in the niche, HK1; the furniture, however, is often arranged in a manner similar to that in the niches. Benches or chairs are placed with backs to the facade, providing customers with a view to the street, and plants or other objects are often used to frame the sides of the area.

4.1.3 HK3: fully open

This version resembles the niche, HK1, in that it provides the option to sit inside and observe the neighborhood, but it does not have a glass facade enclosing the interior. When the metal shutter is opened, it reveals a fully open facade in this version. This design is non-traditional for restaurants and cafés in Hong Kong, since most of them use air-conditioning to cool down the customer areas, and therefore need to keep the cooled air inside. The fully open facade does, however, recall the traditional design of many smaller, local shops, a design still in use today. These shops were, and are, entirely open to the street, allowing customers to select items without entering, and providing natural light and air circulation. Open areas in these traditional shops are, however, intended for product display, and not for consumers to linger and relax in (Barber & Münster, 2023).

In the summer, high temperatures make outdoor seating areas in HK1 and HK2 basically unusable. In HK3, the shop's interior will be partially cooled by air-conditioning, so that the seating area near the open facade will be more comfortable than the outside. This solution, however, obviously entails high energy consumption. Barber and Münster (2023) explain that store owners are tempted to implement open facades in spite of this energy consumption, because they are appealing to users. In some versions of this solution, the open facade is combined with a folding glass door, so that the facade can be closed on especially hot days and opened when the temperature is lower.

4.1.4 HK4: outdoor

Coffee shops with their main serving areas outside are not common in Hong Kong. The reason for including this typology is solely for comparison with the corresponding typology in Copenhagen, where this type of café is popular. Photo HK4 shows an outdoor coffee shop on Lantau Island. A wooden fence surrounds the area, creating a boundary with the natural environment. Seats are placed under parasols, where ventilation is arranged to cool the air somewhat. The most popular seats face

a small lake, while additional seating is under a larger canopy, which provides both shade and some additional cooling.

4.1.5 CPH1: bench or row of chairs

A bench or a row of chairs placed directly outside a store's front window is the most typical outdoor seating arrangement in Copenhagen coffee shops. According to legislation, store owners are not required to pay rent to use the first 80cm of the public space in front of their stores, which makes this type of store extension inexpensive. Seating is arranged with backs to the facade, so that customers look out on the neighborhood. Planters or other objects are often placed in order to frame the area, as indicated along the facade in photo CPH3. Observations indicate that this type of outdoor seating area is used year-round, also during seasons when the weather does not allow for outdoor seating. Blankets are sometimes provided when temperatures are cold.

4.1.6 CPH2: continuation of shop

If space allows, shops can apply for permission to use a larger area directly in front of the store. These areas are typically directly in front of the store's windows, and often contain passage to the store's entrance within their boundaries. In these cases, often plants or parasols are used to delimit the area. High planters can create an experience similar to that of sitting in a niche (HK1), giving a 'safe' vantage point from which to observe the surrounding area. In photo CPH2, we see outdoor heaters deployed in conjunction with parasols. These heaters make it possible to extend the period where outdoor seating is possible, and are often turned on in the evening, or on days with particularly low temperatures. The parasols also serve to trap the heat, giving them a dual function.

4.1.7 CPH3: the satellite

Sidewalks must be kept free for pedestrian traffic, but in locations where there is space for an outdoor area on both sides of a sidewalk, stores can apply for the right to use the space on either side of the sidewalk. Specialty coffee shops, with their narrow focus on coffee, are typically too small for this solution, but it is common for larger cafés, and for the bakeries with specialty coffee offerings mentioned above. In this type of more features are used to separate it from the surrounding area. This could be because the store's owner, through the use of branded design elements, is attempting to integrate some degree of brand value into the consumer's outdoor experience. The farther the outdoor area is from the store itself, where brand value is easier to control, the more difficult it becomes to control the customer experience. Branded design elements can help strengthen the attachment to the store, and keep the attachment between the satellite and its shop clearly defined.



Typologies of outdoor seating in Copenhagen. Illustrations of top view above and photo examples below. From left to right: Typology 1: CPH1, Typology 2: CPH2, Typology 3: CPH3, Typology 4: CPH4.

Feelings of comfort play an important role in inviting people both to visit and to linger. The act of lingering is a defining feature of cafés (Waxman, 2022). Furniture in which customers can relax can provide a feeling of comfort, and thus encourages them to linger. An important element of feeling comfortable is the feeling of control. The more control people have over a space, or feel that they have, the more satisfied they will be (Peeters, L. in Waxman 2022). Coffee shops can help customers to have a feeling of control by providing a variety of seating options. Larger outdoor areas, such as those in CPH3 and CPH4, often have more seating options and some moveable furniture, which allows customers to arrange different configurations for different sizes of gatherings. Again, design features that frame the area while still allowing for a view to the neighborhood can provide a feeling of security, as explained in the section on type HK1.

4.1.8 CPH4: outdoor

A growing trend to locate shops in more remote locations from the city center, often in older, formerly industrial areas, or close to the harbor, was identified in Copenhagen. A previous study on the tendency to place coffee shops in repurposed buildings in remote locations, supports this finding (Münster, 2023). Remote locations apparently offer a welcome escape from the city for those willing to jump on their bikes to reach them—they are often located in areas which are not well-connected to public transportation. The study mentioned above showed that consumers are attracted by the environment and atmosphere of these locations and consider the characteristics of the surroundings to be a part of the experience. In some cases, exploring the neighborhood was even mentioned as the main reason for visiting. Because of their remote locations, outdoor areas at these cafés are often spacious; fences, surrounding buildings, canopies, parasols, and large plants are often used to define the boundary between the shop’s outdoor area and the surrounding environment. As described above, this can be seen as a way of creating a safe space, from which consumers can look out upon unfamiliar surroundings, gaining confidence from a position of security.

5 General discussion

In the sections below, similarities and differences in the designs observed in the two cities will be discussed and related to theory. Insights from interviews with store representatives will be introduced, in order to shed light on design intentions. The section comprises four general themes which were identified in the course of analyzing the data: climate; symbolic value; prospect and refuge; and neighborhood consumption.

Outdoor seating areas are a general tendency, one which necessitates design-related considerations in an array of areas such as architecture, store design, urban planning, atmospheric design, layout and furniture design. These seating areas are not simply frameworks for sitting and eating and drinking; they can also have an attention-creating effect, by raising the visible profile of the shop in the surrounding environment. As such, outdoor serving can be considered a type of “active,” street level activity. These have been shown by Gehl and Svarre (2013) to be eye-catching, and to draw in passersby. A store owner in Hong Kong, from one of the first specialty coffee shops to implement the outdoor ‘niche’ in 2014, explained that the outdoor area was more or less a coincidence: *“I thought it would be a good smoking area”* he explained, but he quickly realized that customers liked to sit outside, even those who didn’t smoke. *“Now almost all coffee shops have outdoor seating,”* he said. A representative from a shop with a fully-open facade explained, *“We wanted to create a pet-friendly and welcoming environment.”* In recent years, Hong Kong, and other cities in China as well, have experienced a boom in the presence of companion animals. This is fueled at least in part by socio-demographic trends such as delayed marriage and higher incomes. Many coffee shops have responded to this trend by encouraging customers to bring their pets, primarily dogs (Barber & Münster, 2022). This can be seen as a kind of niche marketing or going after a specific market segment by accommodating that segment’s particular needs. A store design manager from Denmark explained that they started implementing outdoor areas some years ago, and that the tendency took off during the pandemic. *“Today, we won’t sign a lease without knowing that we can get approval for outdoor service,”* she explained and also mentioned that most of their competitors have implemented outdoor seating.

5.1 Climate

The climate in these two cities is very different. Obviously, climate has a direct influence on the shaping and use of outdoor seating areas. But it also has an indirect influence, in that the architecture, urban design, and planning in which outdoor areas exist are also formed by the local climate. In Copenhagen, facade walls are nearly always weight-bearing constructions. In Hong Kong, most of the older buildings that have become interesting for specialty coffee shops do not have weight-bearing facades; they can simply be removed in order to create an open area between the interior and exterior. For this reason, outdoor seating areas in Copenhagen are placed outside the building, while those in Hong Kong are often placed in the front part of the rental property. Temperature swings present challenges for outdoor areas in both cities, but for very different reasons. In Hong Kong it is often too hot to sit outside comfortably, while in Copenhagen it is often too cold. In both markets, there are examples of efforts to ameliorate temperatures in order to make outdoor seating more comfortable: Niches in Hong Kong provide shade, and there are examples of open facades where air-conditioned air cools the outdoor area slightly.

In Copenhagen, conversely, outdoor heaters are often used in the colder months, and even at night during the summer. All of these solutions can serve to extend the period where outdoor seating is

possible. Baskets with warm blankets for customers to borrow are another common feature outside Danish cafés. This can be seen as a more sustainable way to keep customers warm. Artificial warming and cooling of outdoor spaces is an inefficient and expensive proposition, and—depending on the energy source, of course—must be considered an unsustainable solution. In fact, this kind of wasteful practice has been banned in some cities. In New York City, for example, businesses can be fined for blasting cool air into the street in an attempt to entice customers (Brasuell, 2015). A two-level facade (as in HK1), with a glass panel between the interior and outdoor seating area seems to be a better solution, balancing the desire for outdoor seating with the need to keep cooled air inside.

5.2 Symbolic value

Observation studies in both cities indicated that stores place outdoor furniture outside all year, also in seasons where the temperature makes outdoor seating unattractive. A Danish store representative confirmed this, adding that *“we also use the outdoor furniture to show customers that the store is open.”* In other words, benches, chairs, tables, and awnings have not only functional value, but also symbolic value. It is this same symbolic value that brands attempt to bring to bear when they use outdoor design features in indoor areas. For example, awnings are used by the Swedish fashion brand Arket, in an airport concourse. Perhaps because customers might not expect a café in a store known for clothing, these ‘strong’ symbols are deployed to indicate its presence. Similar examples of the use of outdoor elements in interiors have been observed in Hong Kong, where the classic metal shutters, for example, which are used to secure street-level stores at night, have been seen as decorative elements in both fashion stores and restaurant interiors.

5.3 Prospect refuge

In both cities, the layout and design of outdoor areas, whether intentionally or otherwise, provide customers with a safe place from which to observe street-level activity. Hildebrand has applied the prospect and refuge theory to architecture, and suggests that prospect and refuge may result intuitively in the work of an designer who seeks to control the manner in which open spaces are spatially framed (Hildebrand, 1991, in Dosen & Ostwald, 2013). Store representatives do not directly mention prospect and refuge, but some did mention actively using design features to frame outdoor areas. For example, a store design manager from Copenhagen explained that they use benches and planters to frame the outdoor areas of their cafés, in order to create a boundary between the seating area and the city.

5.4 Neighborhood consumption

In both Hong Kong and Copenhagen, specialty coffee shops can be found throughout the city, but there is a tendency for them to be located outside of traditional commercial areas. Possible explanations for this trend are complex, but in part reflect pandemic conditions, where residents have sought local experiences in the place of travel. Lower rents are another possible explanation. In Hong Kong, economic downturn brought about by pandemic restrictions resulted in lower rents, which allowed new entrepreneurs to enter the market (South China Morning Post, 2021). Consumers, for their part, have supported these businesses out of an interest in supporting smaller, local initiatives, as opposed to larger, international conglomerates. In Hong Kong, local identification has grown during the post-1997 period, and has become politicized since the unrest in 2019 (Barber & Münster, 2022). A desire to support local businesses, to be a part of a local environment, or to create an identity distinct from that of larger chains; all of these are possible explanations for the appearance of shops in these untraditional areas. A store owner in Hong Kong explained that when he opened his store,

there were no other coffee shops in the area. Most of the other shops sold leather and textiles, so in the beginning his shop provided guidance to customers seeking specific leather and textile products. In this way, the café supported the surrounding businesses. As other cafés and coffee shops began to appear in the area, he explained, it gradually became known as a café destination. In Copenhagen there is a still-growing tendency for coffee shops to be located in outlying neighborhoods, in areas and buildings that have not previously housed cafés. A study of coffee shops located in repurposed buildings in Copenhagen indicates that consumers appreciate the so-called ‘vibe’ in older, repurposed buildings, as well as the characteristics of the neighborhoods in which they typically appear (Münster, 2023). These are often former industrial areas, which might be located near the harbor.

6 Conclusion and suggestions for future research

With increasing frequency, coffee shops in both Hong Kong and Copenhagen include outdoor seating areas that relate themselves just as much to their urban surroundings as they do to the coffee shop itself. These areas serve to attract interest from the street, but they also offer customers a vantage point on the neighborhood. Through analysis of design features, layouts, facades, buildings, climate, furniture, and surroundings of 114 outdoor seating areas, four typologies of outdoor seating arrangements were identified in each city. Two typologies showed similarities between the cities, while the other two typologies were identified as specific to the local context. Differences in design solutions between the two cities reflects, to a large extent, differences in climate, architecture, and legislation governing use of public spaces; still, similarities exist between the two cities with respect to how the layout is related to the building and its surroundings, and in how furniture and design elements are arranged. In both cities, there is a tendency for the design to attempt to offer guests some form of protection from the surroundings, and yet furniture was often arranged so that guests could observe the surroundings from this protected vantage point. This tendency can be explained by Appleton’s prospect and refuge theory, which manifests—consciously or unconsciously—in these design layouts. The findings can form the basis for further studies that have the potential to lead to local planning and development strategies.

In addition to their functional values, outdoor design features were found to have signaling effects. The meanings of such design features clearly merit further study, in order to gain insights into the symbolic values that these features might have in different contexts. Likewise in both cities, a growing tendency was observed to place coffee shops in neighborhoods and buildings that have not previously housed them. These shops bring a new demographic to neighborhoods that they might not otherwise have visited and can therefore be considered an entry point for neighborhood consumption. The value of coffee shops in neighborhoods that have not previously contained this type of business is clearly a relevant subject for continued study, in relation to their value for consumers, societies, businesses, and neighborhoods. Often, things that we observe and come to know through our own observations are things that we come to care about. In this way, it might be argued that outdoor seating areas, by providing a safe space for this kind of observation, encourage stewardship of a neighborhood, and can therefore be an element in community-building strategies. This is also clearly an avenue ripe for future research, whose results could have implications in multiple academic disciplines.

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About the Author:

Mia B. Münster: a Research Assistant Professor at PolyU School of Design in Hong Kong. In her research she is particularly interested in understanding store and café design from the perspective of users, businesses, designers, neighborhoods, societies, and environment.