

What is Luxury?: Exploring Luxury through MBS

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It takes fifteen minutes to walk from one end of Marina Bay Sands (MBS) to the other. It takes even longer when one is sightseeing or window shopping. Everywhere one looks, there is glass, marble, concrete, or metal. The outer structure is made of thousands of panes secured by shiny grey metallic beams. The inner structure is built of concrete or marble. Storefronts are built of marble walls and tall glass doors. Window displays stretch to the ceiling, encasing the season's dresses, handbags and products.

Walkway infrastructure follows a similar pattern. It is lined with wooden railings and tempered glass. Directories are either metallic electronic boards or physical street signs. Rubbish bins are sleek, circular and shiny. Neatly trimmed potted plants complement the space. Waterfalls or ponds are installed at major intersections. The riverboat attraction resides near the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station. Paying passengers traverse MBS without disembarkation as the attraction is not meant for entertainment, not transportation.

Four invisible things are ever pervasive: space, natural light, the air, and the absence of dust. Despite the sheer amount of space MBS has, nothing is dirty, nothing is dusty. Wherever one goes, natural light pours in from the ceiling. Wherever one goes, the air remains consistent. It is cold, strong and well-ventilated. It feels fresh without having a particular scent attached to it. Clearly, MBS is maintaining a certain image. What exactly is MBS trying to achieve through design?

On a macro-level, MBS is a contrast to the way things normally are. Given that Singapore is a tiny-island nation state, space is a regulated resource. It is a limited resource

that must be carefully maximised. MBS is no exception. MBS exists to serve its primary functions, i.e. to provide a retail and entertainment experience, but also for an aesthetic function, i.e. to create a sense of luxury through its materials and architecture. This suggests that luxury can be created, implying that interpretations of luxury exist. This begs the question: What does luxury look like in Singapore?

One way of examining luxury as a concept is through a philosophical framework. In *A Philosophy of Luxury* (2015/2019), Lambert Wiesing argues that luxury is an aesthetic experience. It has necessary and sufficient qualifiers, i.e. luxury is necessarily ostentatious and luxury is sufficiently an experience. Luxury is a special aesthetic experience because it is relative to one's perception and of its functionality. It builds on phenomenology and functionalism, creating a multidimensional characterisation of the concept. Husserl's phenomenology describes things as experiences, saying we are confined by it as we cannot interact with life outside of our experience of it (Smith et. al., 2018). Functionalism is the idea that things are things because of their functions, i.e. a chair is a chair because it functions as a chair (Levin, 2018). Therefore, there are no essential properties of things that make things chairs and not chairs. He says luxury is not necessarily wasteful, but it can be, giving the example of a mansion within the heart of London being considered luxurious because such a design and placement of a house is not necessary for anyone to live. This highlights the functionality of luxury — it does the intended aesthetic function with needless characteristics.

Thus, MBS is more than its material goods and architecture. While MBS was designed as an economic and tourism investment (Chua, 2011; MBS, 2019), it has become much more. The individual experiences of each person shapes what MBS is. Staff members who have worked there since its inception will have become desensitised to the heightened sense of luxury, thus may only perceive it as a workplace and nothing more. To them, the

function of MBS is not luxury, but a personal economic space. This creates a non-luxury dimension to MBS. A similar dimension is with people who develop unhealthy relationships with luxury at MBS. Those who suffer large financial losses from gambling, or overspend at luxury outlets will form a warped perception of luxury, treating it as a curse rather than an idealised aesthetic experience. Additionally, investors of MBS may only see it in economic terms, disregarding all other aspects. Its luxury may be lost on them. This highlights the limits of examining MBS as luxury alone. It fails to capture the diverse experiences people have about the same building.

Another way of looking at luxury is through the lens of marketing. In "The Key Drivers of Perceived Omnichannel Service Quality in Fashion," Pattern (2021) analyses "omnichannel retailing" and "service quality perception[s]". She describes luxury marketing as an "omnichannel experience". This experience has six factors: (1) physical and (2) digital "stimulation", value for (3) physical and (4) digital "service quality", (5) "affiliation" and (6) "choice optimisation". Stimulation is when someone experiences a product or service. Service quality is a consumer's evaluation of the customer service provided by the company. Affiliation is a brand's reputation being resonated with by the consumer. Choice optimisation is when a customer can make an informed decision with complete information about competing products or services. She also describes a typical consumer's journey, where people conduct research digitally, curating opinions about products online before purchasing them in person. She says "omnichannel service quality is a multidimensional construct" in contrast to the traditional view of physical and digital journeys being a mono-dimensional construct.

From her model, MBS only partially fulfils the omnichannel experience, specifically the physical stimulation and service quality and affiliation. One who enjoys being surrounded by material luxuries will feel at home at MBS, and thus strengthen their resonance with the

brand that they are interacting with at MBS. While it does not fundamentally matter where a Dior store is located, because the primary function of a store is to sell products, being housed in a luxury environment appeals to consumer's preferences. It creates a luxury experience for them. Essentially, consumers are not only paying for physical products and tangible services, they are also paying for an elevated, out-of-the-ordinary experience when they shop at specific stores.

What Pattern's model fails to capture is the perceptions of people outside the ordinary, e.g. the ultra-rich, i.e. those who live, breath and bathe in luxury. These people are at the height of luxury; They can go no further. While MBS would fulfil their affiliation, they may be left unsatisfied after going through the entire omnichannel experience because there is no novelty, no "magic" in the experience. To them, it is just a part of everyday life.

In short, Weising would say MBS is the physical manifestation of a luxury aesthetic experience to some people. Pattern would say MBS is only the final phase of the omnichannel luxury marketing experience. Thus, either MBS is a complete experience or a necessary component in luxury.

This brings us to a question: "Where does luxury come from?". As luxury is quantified by its audience, as seen in both interpretations, the characteristic emerges from the assignment and experience of its observers. Suppose life never existed to begin with. Materials such as concrete and marble would still exist, but would it have additional value? The innate chemical properties of the elements and compounds would certainly exist without any observers, but the financial properties may not be innate, thus may not exist without life. This is because financial value is a human construct.

The ultimate question we can ask is: "Is luxury innately real? Or is it a human construct?". This question seems to be unanswerable. Contemporary interpretations of luxury suggest luxury is an aesthetic experience. Therefore, it only emerges through observation or

usage. However, it is not definitely so, as beautiful things are naturally occurring, but beauty is either arbitrated by observers, or is an innate property of naturally occurring things.

Thus, the overarching question is: "Is aesthetics real?" Perhaps so, as it adequately explains our interaction with beauty, luxury and art. Therefore, luxury exists. Perhaps one may draw further insights while exploring the halls of MBS.

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