

The building I chose for this project is known as the Shops at Columbus Circle (SCC), which is a mall owned by Time Warner Inc. and located at the Time Warner Center at 10 Columbus Circle in Manhattan, New York (Fig 1). Comprised of four floors and 45 retail shops,¹ the SCC plays into the large context of the elite shopping experience through architecture, brand advertising, and location. The mall employs post-structural and phenomenological modes of communication, as well as subtly drawing on the power of the well-established female-male gender binary to sell products and attract visitors.

For the purposes of this paper, some common forms of advertising modes of communication must be defined, particularly those of *post-structuralism* and *phenomenology*. According to Graham Cairns, post-structural communication is a “rejection of basic semiotics”²—semiotics being defined as “the sign as a communicative device”³ that draws upon cultural values to represent a clear message. Contrary to semiotics, *post-structuralism* does not emphasize the clarity of such messages (signage, advertising, etc.). Instead, post-structuralism’s task is to draw in ‘literate’ consumers who are bored of, and ultimately able to, tune out simple semiotics. Post-structuralist messages confuse—and ultimately, engage—viewers, by being at the very least

¹ “The Shops at Columbus Circle,” *The Shops at Columbus Circle*, accessed November 13th, 2017. <http://www.theshopsatcolumbuscircle.com/shopping/>

² Graham Cairns, introduction to “Deciphering Advertising Art, and Architecture: New Persuasion Techniques for Sophisticated Consumers” (Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing: 2010), 4.

³ Ibid., 5.

unpredictable and fresh. *Phenomenology* is a natural outgrowth of post-structuralism. It employs the confusing messages of post-structuralism but adds another layer. Cairns writes, “It is a type of advertising whose claim is to camouflage the advert against a backdrop of non-promotional activities.”⁴ In the following paragraphs, I will demonstrate specifically how the SCC employs such modes of advertising.

As previously mentioned, the Shops at Columbus Circle is on the perimeter of Columbus Circle itself—a traffic roundabout with a monument to Christopher Columbus complete with a stone seating area and fountains. (Fig. 2) The SCC curves in conjunction with the road, assimilating to the space of the circle as a plaza. It is a wide structure and occupies a significant swath of the circle itself. The building’s exterior is comprised of grey tones (Fig. 3), matching the other constructions on the circle (the Museum of Arts and Design, Trump Tower), which are all black, white, and grey. It also complements the tones of the sidewalk, streets, and the Columbus statue. The mall’s architecture visually corresponds to the Time Warner skyscrapers above it (Fig. 4), which are twin buildings of glass that reach 55 floors of office and residential space. Like the mall, the towers are an unusual play on perspective—as the mall is curvilinear, the skyscrapers are designed to look as if they are slanted on an acutely angled vanishing point perspective. The volume of the Shops and the flatness of the buildings serve to visually accompany each other. These visual distortion of perspective serves, in part, to indicate the towers and the mall are properties of the same corporation, Time Warner, Inc.

⁴ Ibid., 7.

The ground floor stores with front signage presence are all allotted their own window space and are comprised of mostly retail luxury stores, including Coach, First Republic Bank (which the SCC's website describes as "specialists in luxury home lending"⁵), Michael Kors, and Hugo Boss. Directly adjacent to the building is the theater for Jazz at Lincoln Center. The mall stands directly outside the entrances to the 59th Street-Columbus Circle subway stop, which serviced 23.2 million people in 2016.⁶ The mall is also located caddy-corner to the southwest entrance of Central Park, one of the top tourist destinations in New York City.

The fact that the SCC is located within the same public space of Columbus' statue is no surprise to me. Both the mall and his image stand to solidify the fetishization of white colonialism and capitalism within Western history and culture. The luxury shopping that the SCC provides caters to Columbus' legacy—upper class, elitist whites who have historically exploited and appropriated the struggles of people of color and the working class. This locational assimilation is an example of phenomenological communication. Most people would not even stop to consider the implications of Columbus next to a mall dedicated entirely to the concept and image of economic exclusivity. And while this aforementioned association is certainly an opinionated one, consider the concept of Columbus' cultural and religious motivations and the SCC's economic motivations: Columbus came to the New World to exploit natural resources

⁵ "First Republic Bank," *The Shops at Columbus Circle*, accessed November 13th, 2017. <http://www.theshopsatcolumbuscircle.com/shopping/first-republic-bank/>

⁶ "Annual Subway Ridership," *MTA*, accessed November 13th, 2017. http://web.mta.info/nyct/facts/ridership/ridership_sub_annual.htm

and is attributed as the founder of an empire based on the wealth of these resources. Now, it is economics and politics that control these resources, and the SCC is a gleaming example of the success of capitalist exploitative practices, especially in poor, third world countries (which is what people of Columbus' time would have considered the Americas before it was colonized by Europeans). It is now within this capitalist ideal that our God-given right is to pursue wealth at the expense of others.

Moving into the interior of the mall, one enters upon a massive lobby of four unsectioned floors (Fig. 5). Quiet, pleasant music plays and the smell of expensive perfume wafts through the air. The interior architecture matches the building's outside: the floors, walls, and ceilings are comprised of black, white, and grey stone. There is consistent use of fluorescent white lighting and glass dividing. Everything is shiny, bright, and clean.

Most interesting to me was the tastefully refined and sophisticated enforcement of the gender binary of men and women as two totally separate, non-overlapping entities. This divide could be seen within the space of the mall itself. As one walks toward the back end of the lobby, the mall's floor plan splits off into two 'wings.' (Fig. 6) Marking these intersecting spaces on each side are two large bronze statues, each about fifteen feet in height. On the entrance to the left wing stands a naked woman. On the right, a naked man (Figs. 7 & 8). These statues are really the only two pieces of 'art' in the whole building but they serve a much more significant purpose than being popular meeting points. Phenomenologically, they are subliminal fortifications of gender identity as man

or woman, and nothing else. They pass as art, but in my opinion are advertisements that serve to strengthen the concept of gender as a static binary and not a fluid spectrum.

Furthermore, in my opinion, the statues serve another function: to divide the layout of stores within the mall. If one takes the rightward, masculine path, they chance upon a corridor of retail stores, of which the majority cater exclusively to men such as Pink, and Hugo Boss. (Fig. 6). In this corridor too, is a promotional for Maserati cars, with an actual model (starting at \$75,000) (Fig. 9) guarded by an imposing male security officer. Go to the left, towards the female statue, and one chances upon feminized stores, including Michael Kors (it's window display features exclusively female mannequins and purses) (Fig. 10), Coach, and Swarovski. As a stranger on the phone succinctly cued into this subtle segregation: "I'm outside Hugo Boss, next to the penis man."

The second and third floors of the mall (the fourth is food only) also cater to this gender divide (Figs. 11 & 12). On these floors' left wings, you see J. Crew for women, M.A.C., Sephora, and Eileen Fischer. Go to the right, and you'll be unsurprised by the J. Crew Men's Shop, The Art of Shaving, H&M Man, and an Aveda outlet that prominently features a natural hair growth supplement for men (Fig. 13).

The architecture of the Shops at Columbus Circle is a shining example of the one-stop-shop for contemporary American luxury goods. Whether you're looking for fashion, jewelry, or electronics, this mall is always trendy. But underneath it's gleaming façade are centuries of homogenized tradition. Look at these beautiful products' tags and you'd be hard-pressed to find a commodity that was made in America. European goods, European tourists, and European cultural and economic principles serve as the foundation for this

mall's success. We have Christopher Columbus, among others, to thank for this. The mall continues to glorify and fetishize capitalist practices that allow for the very existence of these goods. Aside from the geographic location that essentially has enshrined Columbus' image and legacy, phenomenological and post-structuralist advertising has also masterfully warped the Western gender binary into modes of artistic expression with the mall's ground floor bronze statues. It certainly took expertise and skill to craft these pieces, and it also takes a certain type of literacy to deconstruct them into their basic messages. The architecture and things in the SCC may be brand new, but their founding principles are centuries old, and perhaps to on the outside, archaic, unsustainable and totally out of style.

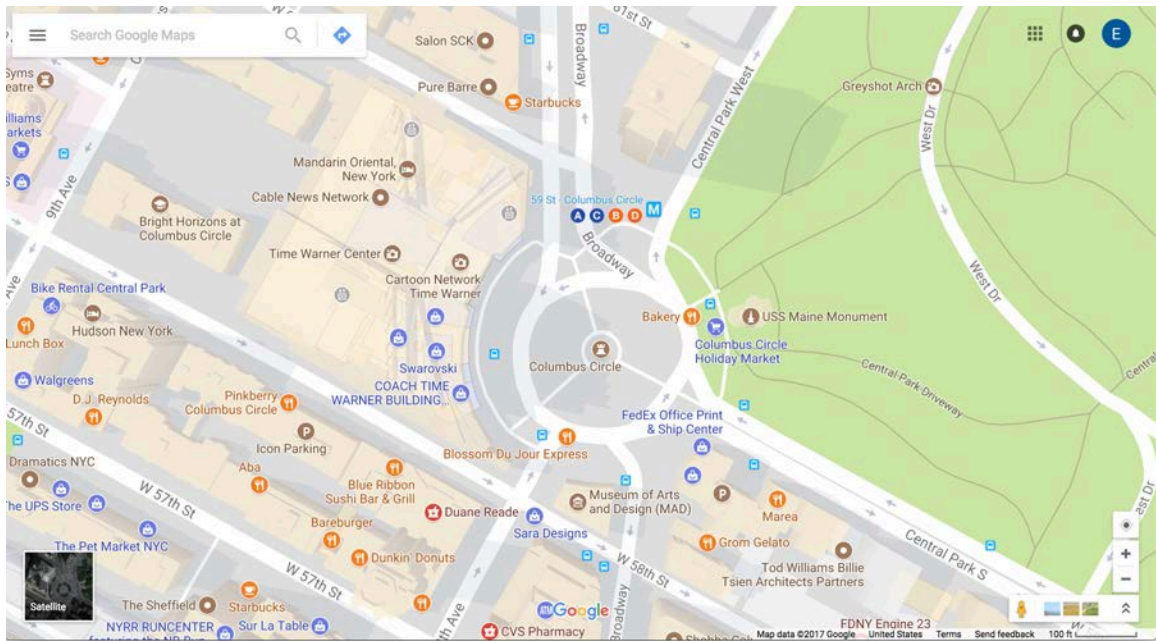


Fig. 17

⁷ “Columbus Circle,” *Google Maps*. Accessed November 13th, 2017. <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Columbus+Cir,+New+York,+NY/@40.7680481,-73.9845662,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x89c258f63c9804b5:0xacca5e3d4112d7eb!8m2!3d40.7680441!4d-73.9823722>



Fig. 2⁸

⁸ Tim Diep, Mark Kumar and Andre Salimbangon, "Columbus Circle: The Center of New York City," *CUNY McCaulay*, accessed November 13th, 2017. <https://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/columbuscircle15/>



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

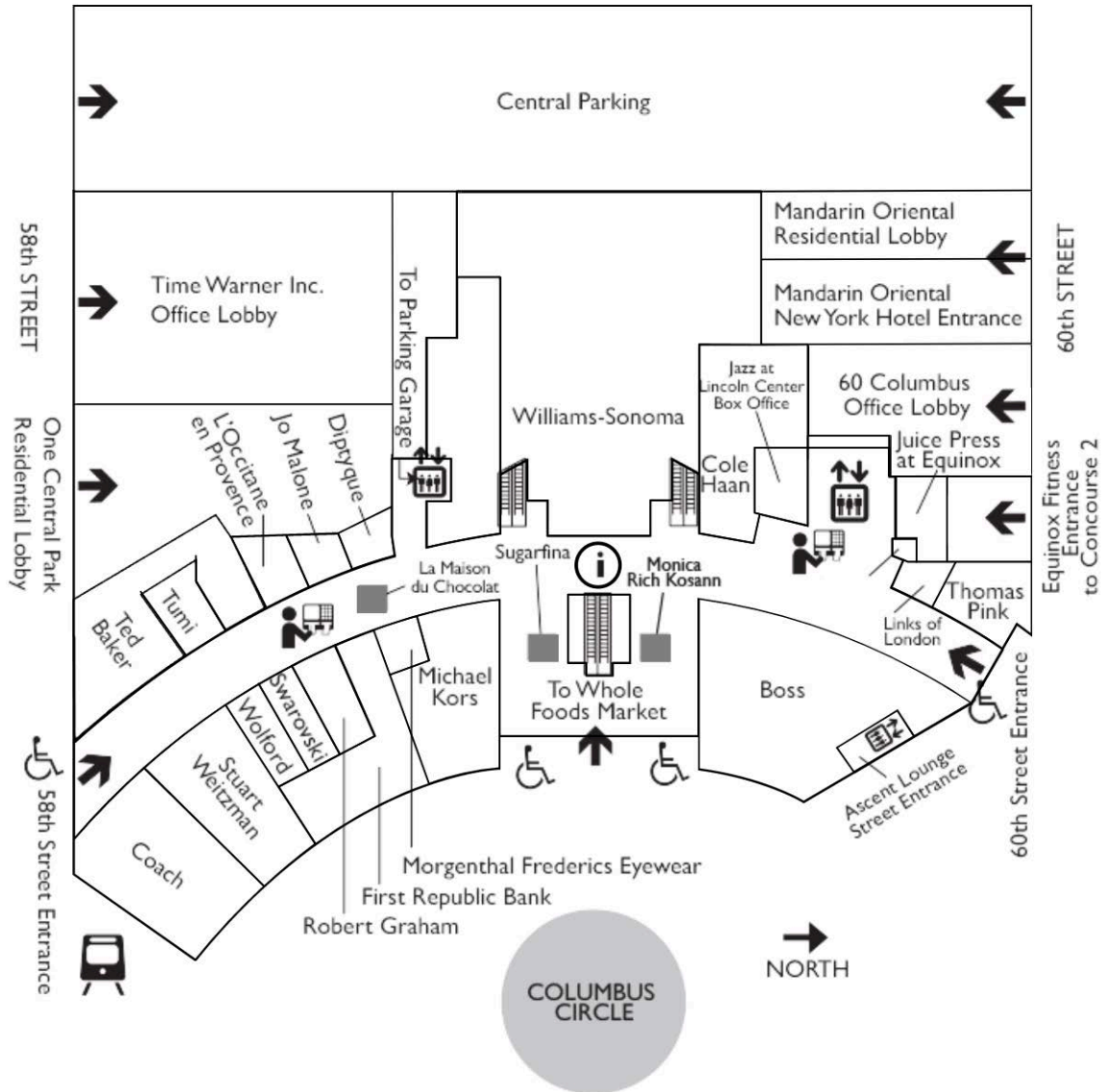


Fig. 6⁹

⁹ "Store Directory," *The Shops at Columbus Circle*, accessed November 13th, 2017. <http://www.theshopsatcolumbuscircle.com/directory-and-map/>



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

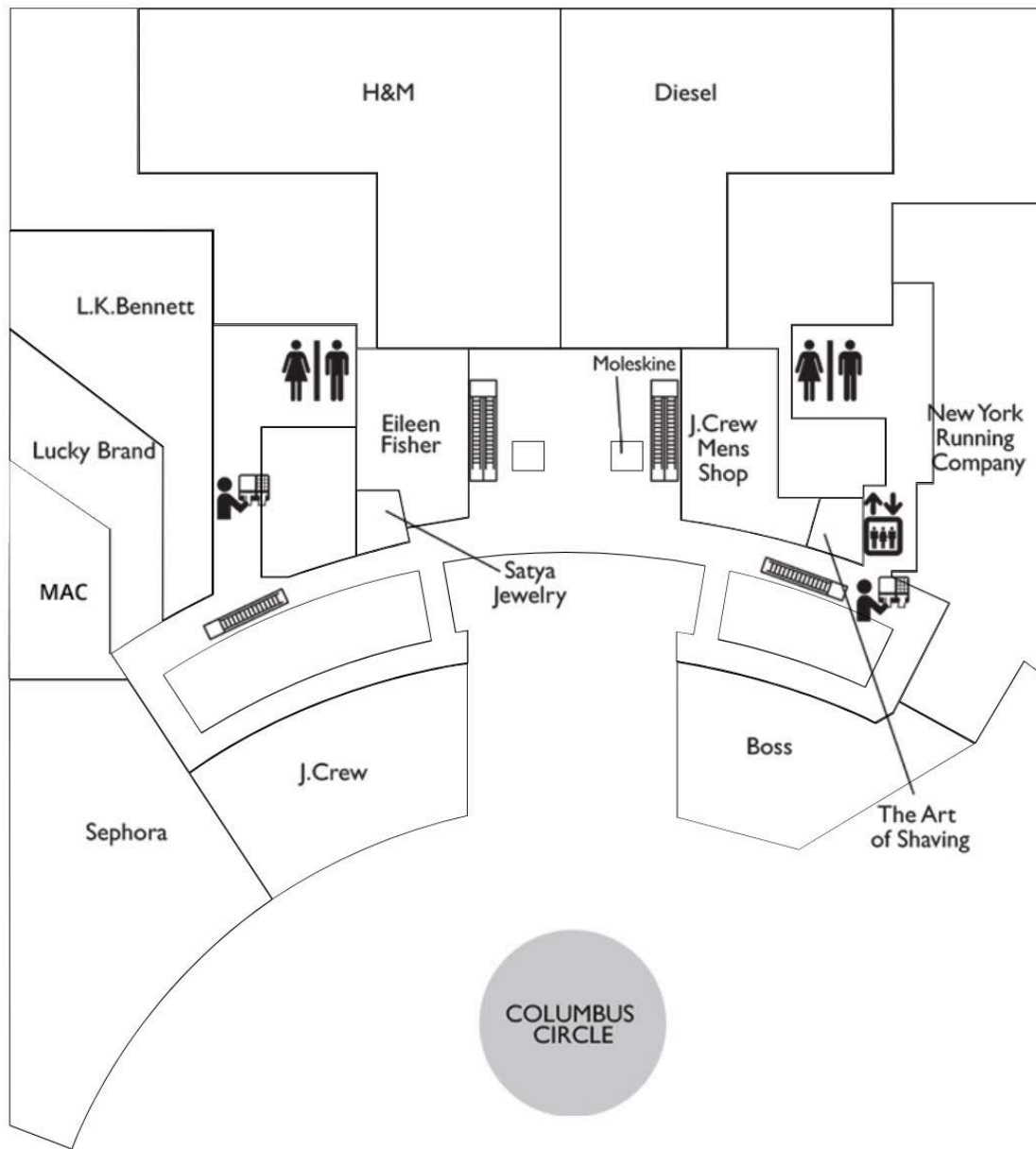


Fig. 11¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid.

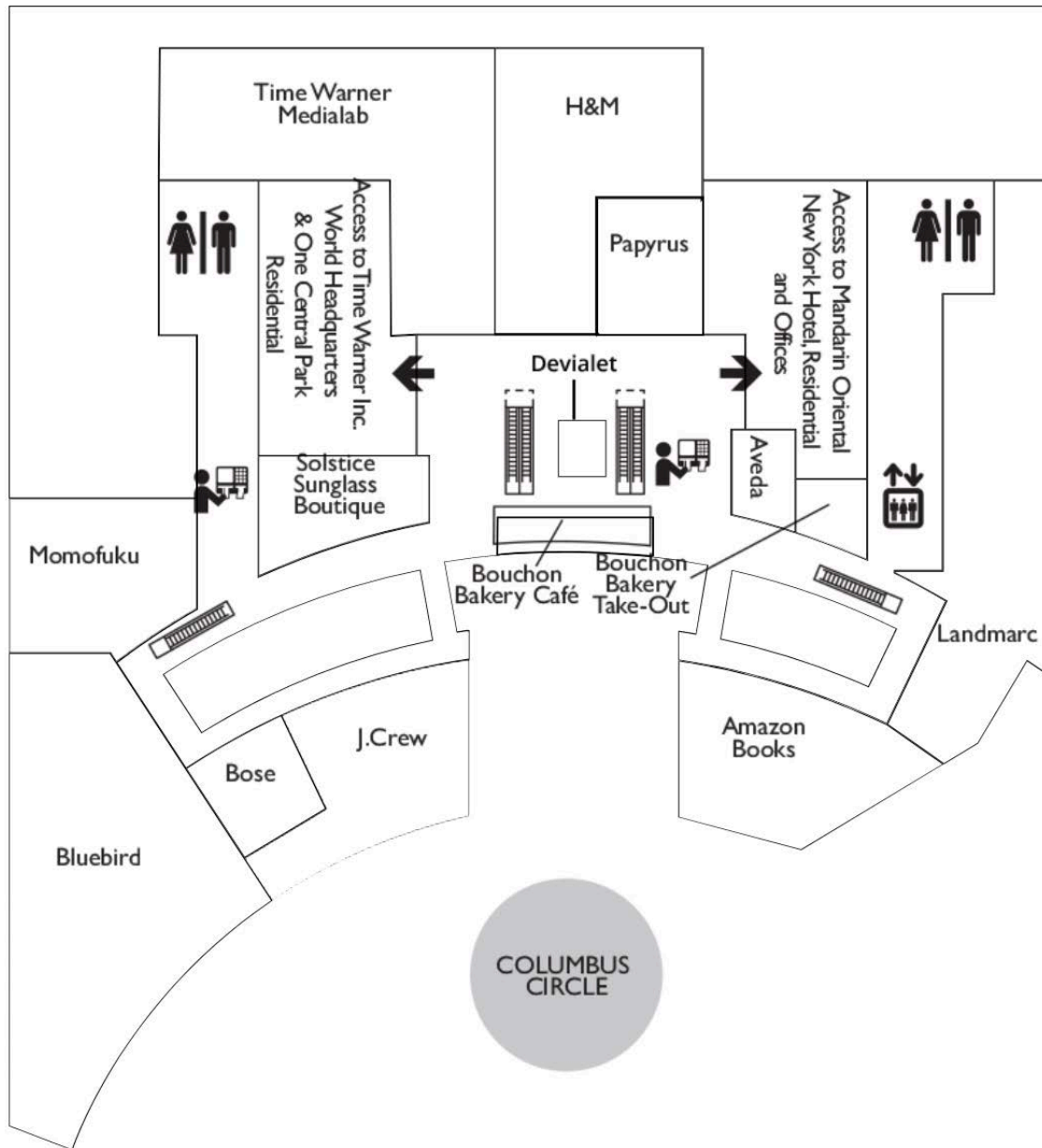


Fig. 12¹¹

¹¹ Ibid.



Fig. 13