

Emptiness and Value Generation

A Generative Relational Economics Study of Luxury Retail Space

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Abstract

Luxury retail exhibits a configuration that departs from what scarce-resource allocation would predict: in space rented at the highest rates, the deliberate refusal to use that space densely, and at times the refusal to sell at all. Free and sparsely hung art shows, flagship floors holding a handful of pieces, near-empty airport counters are its instances. A scarce-resource reading treats such emptiness as forgone yield; the mature design literatures—atmospherics, servicescapes, the experience economy, and luxury-retail strategy—read it more richly, as the staging of aura, affect, and experience upon the shopper. This paper argues that both readings, for all their differences, address what the space does *to* a visitor rather than what relation the space *generates*. It proposes that emptiness is better understood as a field in which relation is generated, and that the governance of that relation becomes possible only upon such a field. Two mechanisms by which such a field generates trust are distinguished—the governance of a relation, and common experience—the latter being the more difficult to counterfeit, since it rests on co-presence rather than on what is said. On this account the value of a commercial space need not issue from immediate exchange: an unfinished common experience may itself constitute the relational ground of trust. What then warrants scrutiny is not whether a given space generates relation, but where the relation it generates is subsequently directed—back into the relation itself, or toward a sale. The paper offers a three-layer line of analysis—whether a space constitutes a relational field, by what mechanism the field generates trust, and where the generated relation is directed—as a supplement to the scarce-resource view of this class of phenomena.

Keywords: emptiness; relational generation; relational governance; common experience; trust; spatial configuration; luxury retail.

A note on the standing of this paper. This is a case study. It takes one commercial phenomenon—the deliberate emptiness of luxury retail space—and asks whether the established accounts of that phenomenon exhaust it. The order of exposition follows the order of the argument: the existing explanations and their limits are set out first, and the relational account is introduced only as what they leave unaddressed. Should the design literatures be shown already to answer the question posed here, the later sections lose their ground. Objection, correction, and counter-evidence are welcome at huangwanhong@serendip.ngo.

1 INTRODUCTION

The prevailing understanding of commercial space treats it as a scarce resource whose configuration aims at the maximization of yield. On this understanding the value of a selling space is a function of the transactions it can promote per unit of area; the space is organized as a container for goods and an array of points of sale, and yield per unit area is the natural measure of a configuration's merit. The understanding serves well across most commercial forms and underwrites a settled repertoire of practice, from the arrangement of shelving to the design of circulation.

Luxury retail presents a class of configurations that departs from this understanding in a systematic way. In locations rented at the highest rates, certain actors decline to use their space densely and instead leave large tracts of it deliberately empty. Tokyo's Ginza district offers a concentrated sample. A department building devotes a full floor of prime-rent space to a free art exhibition, hung sparsely, a few works rather than as many as the wall will bear; a stand-alone luxury flagship may fill a lavish building with a few cabinets and a few representative pieces, the remainder left open; the luxury counter in an airport is more extreme still, at times a single case amid near-total emptiness. What these share, and what this paper calls *emptiness*, is the deliberate refusal to use the most expensive space densely—at the limit, the refusal of immediate sale.

Emptiness of this kind constitutes a theoretical problem because of the identity of those who choose it. Were emptiness confined to actors who calculate poorly, it would be mere error and would require no theory. But it is chosen, repeatedly and systematically, by the actors least able to afford waste and most practiced in calculation. Why should an actor whom the scarce-resource assumption casts as a maximizer of yield depart from that maximum, and do so persistently rather than by accident? One answer is that the actor is not rational; but this sits poorly with the high calculation such actors display elsewhere. A more plausible answer is that the scarce-resource framework fails to register something these actors are in fact optimizing. If so, emptiness is not an incidental deviation from a settled framework but a signal that a dimension of value exists which that framework does not measure. Identifying that dimension is the point of departure here.

The phenomenon to be explained resolves into three connected observations. The first is emptiness itself: high-end retail leaves costly space open, and does so in proportion to, rather than in inverse proportion to, the calculating capacity of the actor—the more practiced the calculator, the more inclined to emptiness. The second is the difference in density: emptiness is not uniform even within the high end, for the stand-alone flagship tends to the open while the department-store concession tends to the dense, and this difference calls for explanation. The third is the anomaly of the airport: a site of enormous footfall, brief dwell, surrounding competition, and travelers in a state receptive to impulse would, if density were governed by

the contest for attention, be the densest of all; in fact the airport luxury counter is among the emptiest, and what its emptiness generates takes a form other than immediate sale. Together the three observations suggest that density is not a variable that yield or attention alone can explain.

Existing theory has offered several accounts of this emptiness, each with its truth and each with its limit; they are taken here as the background against which the argument is set, not as adversaries, and are reviewed in the three sections that follow. The economics of commercial space—the allocation of scarce space toward yield, the competition for attention, and the analysis of consumption as a system of signs—accounts for emptiness as forgone yield recouped elsewhere, as a bid for notice, or as a sign of status and distinction (§2). The design literatures of retail space—atmospherics, servicescapes, the experience economy, and luxury-retail strategy—account for the affect, aura, and experience the configured space produces in the visitor (§3). Lacan’s account of lack and desire supplies a thread for why emptiness should kindle anything at all, desire being aroused by the void an object marks rather than by the object (§4). What the three share, and what opens the space for this paper, is that each explains what emptiness *signifies* or what it does *to* the visitor, while leaving unasked what relation the emptiness *generates*, and where that relation is directed.

The account this paper offers in response may be stated as a single claim.

Central claim. *Emptiness need not be a deficiency in the use of a resource; it is better understood as a field in which relation is generated, and the governance of relation tends to become possible only upon such a field. The mechanisms by which such a field generates trust may be divided into two—the governance of a relation, and common experience—of which common experience is the more authentic and the harder to counterfeit. On this account the value of a commercial space does not always issue from immediate exchange: an unfinished common experience may itself constitute the relational ground of trust. What warrants scrutiny is accordingly not whether a given space generates relation, but where the relation it generates is subsequently directed—back into the continuation of the relation, or toward a sale.*

The claim unfolds in four steps. The first distinguishes *absence*—the shortfall of a resource—from *emptiness*—the opening of relational possibility—and so recovers emptiness as a field of generation rather than a void awaiting fill. The second holds that the governance of relation presupposes such a field, and that whether a space can constitute a field of its own that it is in a position to govern turns on the disposition of configurational control; this accounts for the difference in density among the stand-alone, the airport, and the concession. The third distinguishes the two mechanisms of trust generation, governance and common experience, and argues the greater authenticity of the second. The fourth asks after the destination of the generated relation, observing that even a trust as authentic as common experience tends, in

high-end retail, to be directed in advance toward a sale—and that the gravity of this direction is aggravated, not lessened, by the authenticity of what is so directed.

The paper's contribution is accordingly not a verdict upon luxury but a line of analysis in three layers: whether a space constitutes a relational field (the condition of generation), by what mechanism the field generates trust (the condition of governance), and where the generated relation is directed (the direction of value). This line turns the question about emptiness away from "what does it display, at what yield" and from "what does it signify" toward "what relation does it generate, and toward what is that relation governed." It does not presuppose that commercial space is without generativity; on the contrary, it grants that real generation occurs, and places the weight of analysis on the destination that follows generation. Its interest exceeds the single case of luxury: the same line of analysis may, in principle, be brought to any arrangement that presents as the generation of relation while serving some external end.

The remainder proceeds as follows. §2 reviews the economic accounts of commercial space—scarce-resource allocation, the economics of attention, and the economics of consumption as sign—and argues that what a space generates is prior to what it attracts. §3 reviews the design literatures of retail space, which explain the effect of the configured environment upon the visitor. §4 sets out the theoretical background, taking Lacan's account of lack and desire as a thread for how emptiness kindles and generates relation, together with the qualification that thread requires. §5 develops the first two layers of the claim: emptiness as a field of generation, and the dependence of governability on configurational control. §6 treats the mechanisms of trust and argues the authenticity of common experience. §7 asks after the destination of the generated relation. A closing section states the limits of the account and the work it leaves open.

2 THE ECONOMICS OF COMMERCIAL SPACE

The economic literature offers the most direct explanations of why commercial space is configured as it is, and three strands bear on luxury emptiness: the allocation of scarce space toward yield, the competition for attention, and the economics of consumption as a system of signs. Each explains something of the phenomenon; each stops short of the question this paper poses.

2.1 *Scarce-Resource Allocation*

The baseline account treats retail space as a scarce input whose configuration maximizes yield. Rent having been paid, the return-maximizing use of an area is the one that promotes the most transaction: goods are displayed, points of sale multiplied, and the merit of a configuration read off as sales per unit area. Under this account emptiness is forgone yield—area that could have carried goods and did not—and its persistence in luxury retail can be reconciled only by

treating the empty space as an indirect investment that raises returns elsewhere, whether by protecting brand equity or by justifying a price premium. The account is powerful where it applies, and it is calculable. Its limit, for the present phenomenon, is the one already noted: it explains the tolerance of emptiness only by positing an external return that the emptiness secures, and it does not inquire into what, within the empty space itself, produces that return. The value is attributed to the emptiness; the mechanism is left in the dark.

2.2 *The Economics of Attention*

A second strand locates the scarce resource not in space but in notice. In the economics of attention, the binding constraint on commerce is the limited attention of consumers, competition is in large part a competition for it, and the configuration of space is one of its instruments. The strand suggests a ready explanation of luxury emptiness, since emptiness is conspicuous: a sparse display, in a field of dense ones, is seen first. Luxury retail would then empty its space to command notice, and emptiness would be the scarce-resource logic transposed from yield to attention—what is maximized being not sales per unit area but notice per unit area. The reading has the appeal of introducing no new dimension of value, only a new quantity to be maximized. It meets, however, two difficulties, and they point the same way.

The first concerns the dependence of attention on background. Attention is drawn by difference, and difference is defined against a surround: a patch of emptiness is conspicuous because its surroundings are dense, and where all is empty, emptiness is no longer seen. Were the aim simply to command attention, the effective means in an already dense environment would itself be emptiness; the mechanism the explanation invokes, difference producing salience, would recommend emptiness and density with equal ease, according to a background the actor does not solely control. Attention therefore underdetermines density: the same notice may be won by the dense display or by the empty one, and the appeal to attention does not fix which.

The second concerns the airport. Were density governed by the contest for attention, the site where attention is scarcest and competition fiercest should be the densest. The airport is such a site: enormous footfall, brief dwell, a surround of competing shops, travelers in a state receptive to impulse. The attention logic predicts that the airport luxury counter would turn every inch to the winning of notice. The observation is the reverse; the airport counter is among the emptiest of all. The framework can accommodate the airport only as an exception, and an explanation obliged to enter its most typical instance as an exception is one whose force is in doubt. A measure of empirical caution is owed: the emptiness of the airport implicates several factors—the constraints of security and logistics, the structure of footfall, the brevity of dwell, the particular condition of the cross-border traveler—and none of these is claimed to be irrelevant. The narrower claim is that the appeal to attention does not suffice to explain the airport's emptiness, since the direction it predicts is the opposite of what is observed.

Together the two difficulties reposition attention. It is at most the result of something prior: where a space has first generated some relation, notice, meaning, and identification may follow, but notice does not itself constitute a relation, as the resting of the gaze is not the establishing of trust. This gives the paper's first claim.

Claim 1. *In commercial space, attention is a consequence of relational generation more than its cause. The observable order tends to run from the space, which constitutes a field of some relation, to the relation generated within it, and only then to the notice, meaning, and identification derived thereafter—the reverse of an order in which attention comes first and the space is designed to capture it. What emptiness generates is, on this reading, prior to what it attracts.*

The claim repositions attentional phenomena without denying their reality. Demoting attention from cause to consequence vacates the question it had occupied: what makes a space a field in which relation may be generated. That question the economics of attention, fixed on notice, does not pose.

2.3 *The Economics of Consumption as Sign*

A third strand reaches past the transacted good to the social meaning of consumption, and it comes nearest the phenomenon. Veblen (1899) identified conspicuous consumption, in which expenditure signals standing precisely by its visible wastefulness: to consume without evident use is to display the capacity to waste, and thus one's rank. Luxury emptiness reads immediately in these terms—the costly floor left open is waste made visible, and the visibility is the point. Bourdieu (1984) refined the mechanism from wealth to taste, showing consumption to be a marker of distinction and a bearer of cultural capital; the sparse, museum-like interior signals a cultivated discrimination that the dense display would not, and addresses those able to read it. Baudrillard (1972) carried the line furthest, arguing that the commodity has become a sign, its value lying in its place within a system of signification rather than in use; emptiness, in this idiom, is a sign operation, a statement made in the grammar of consumption.

These accounts are correct in what they identify, and their advance over the scarce-resource view is real: they recognize that emptiness produces something other than immediate sale—status, distinction, sign-value—and so that value need not issue from the transacted good. Their limit is that the something they identify is the *use of a symbol*: what the emptiness means, to whom it signals, what standing it confers. The question of what *relation* the emptiness generates, and of where that relation is subsequently directed, lies outside their frame, which reads the empty space as a sign to be interpreted more than as a mechanism that generates and governs a relation. This frame contains, in Baudrillard, an anticipation of the present concern: his later critique charges consumer society with abolishing wealth by aborting “the concrete,

relational dialectic of social interchange.” The relational dimension this paper pursues thus has a precedent in the consumption literature, which names it as what the system forecloses and leaves it undeveloped as a positive account. Developing it is part of the work undertaken here.

3 THE DESIGN LITERATURES OF RETAIL SPACE

The emptiness of luxury retail is not an unexplained phenomenon. A mature body of theory addresses precisely how such space is designed and why it works, and any account that would supplement it must first say what it explains and where it stops. Four literatures are pertinent, and they are treated here in turn.

The study of retail *atmospherics* begins with the observation that the built environment of a store is itself an instrument of selling. Kotler (1973) defined *atmospherics* as the deliberate design of buying environments to produce in the buyer emotional effects that raise the probability of purchase, and located the means in the sensory register: light, color, scale, sound, the shapes of things. On this account emptiness is intelligible as an atmospheric choice—the sparse, high-ceilinged, softly lit interior induces an affective state of calm, deference, or elevation that a dense environment could not. The account is powerful and largely correct as far as it reaches. Its reach, for present purposes, is the affective state of an individual shopper: it explains what the environment does to the buyer’s mood and, through mood, to the buyer’s disposition to purchase.

The concept of the *servicescape* generalizes the point. Bitner (1992) assembled the physical dimensions of a service environment—ambient conditions, spatial layout, signs and symbols—into a single construct and traced its effects on the behavior of customers and employees alike. Emptiness, in these terms, is a spatial-layout decision whose holistic effect is apprehended by the customer as a quality of the whole. The *servicescape* literature advances beyond *atmospherics* in treating the environment as a system rather than a sum of cues, but the terminus is the same: the object of explanation is the effect of the environment upon the persons who function within it, and the currency of that effect is perception, affect, and behavior.

The *experience economy* reframes the whole enterprise. Pine & Gilmore (1998) argued that firms increasingly stage experiences rather than furnish goods or services, positioning the seller as a stager of memorable events and the buyer as their guest. Luxury emptiness reads naturally in this idiom: the near-empty flagship is a stage, the sparse placement a piece of dramaturgy, and what the visitor carries away is less an object than a memory. This is a genuine deepening, for it recognizes that value may reside in something other than the transacted good. Yet the experience it names is still an experience *had by* the visitor—an affect, a memory, a satisfaction lodged in the individual—and its measure remains that individual’s engagement and eventual custom.

The literature on *luxury-retail strategy* is the most specific and the most instructive here. Dion & Arnould (2011), on the basis of ethnographic work in luxury stores, describe how such retail assembles “charisma” through the principles of art and magic—staging the store as a site of aura around a charismatic creative director, mixing artworks with merchandise, sacralizing the brand. Joy et al. (2014) document the same in flagship stores that interleave art and object, and a related line reads the luxury store as temple or cathedral in which ritual is staged. This literature comes closest to the phenomenon of this paper: the free art exhibition on a costly floor is, in its terms, exactly the assembling of charisma through art. And it is precise about the aim. Dion and Arnould conclude that luxury retail is *producer* rather than consumer oriented, and that it seeks to generate *awe rather than community*.

That conclusion marks, with unusual exactness, the seam at which the present account enters. The design literatures, across their differences, converge on a single form of question: what does the configured space do *to* the visitor—to the visitor’s affect, perception, memory, sense of awe—and how does that bear upon the visitor’s disposition to buy. That question they answer well, and it concerns one party. What relation the emptiness generates between the visitor and the brand, and where that relation is subsequently directed, falls outside it. Awe is a state of the shopper; community, which Dion and Arnould find luxury retail explicitly to decline, would have been a relation. That luxury retail is theorized as producing the former and forgoing the latter is a finding of the literature, and it is the finding this paper takes up, by asking after precisely the relational dimension the strategy is said to forgo.

4 A PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH TO EMPTINESS

Two clarifications precede the positive account, one terminological and one theoretical. The terminological one separates two things that ordinary usage runs together under the word “empty.” The theoretical one borrows, and then qualifies, an existing explanation of why emptiness should have any generative power at all.

4.1 *The Concept of Emptiness*

To call a space empty may mean either of two things, and the difference is decisive for what follows. It may mean that something which ought to be present is missing—the shelf that should hold goods holds none, the position that should be staffed is unstaffed. Call this *absence*: the shortfall of a resource against a standard that specifies what should fill it. Or it may mean that a space has been left open, not against a standard of fill but as a condition for something to occur within it—the clearing in which a thing can appear, the interval that lets a sequence be heard as rhythm. Call this *emptiness*: not the lack of a thing but the opening of a possibility.

The scarce-resource framework recognizes only the first. Under a standard that specifies goods-per-area, every unfilled area is an absence, a shortfall to be corrected, and the reading

of luxury emptiness as forgone yield follows necessarily from admitting only this sense. But the emptiness at issue is of the second kind. It is not that the flagship's floor lacks the cabinets it ought to have; it is that the openness is itself doing something—holding a space in which something between visitor and brand may take place. The distinction is not a play on words. It marks the difference between a quantity measured against a target and a condition measured by what it makes possible, and only the latter can be a field of generation rather than a deficit.

This second sense is not novel. It is close to the notion of *ma* in Japanese aesthetics—the interval or negative space that is not the absence of form but the very condition of form's legibility, the silence that makes the phrase, the gap that makes the composition. What *ma* names in art, emptiness names here in commercial space: an openness that is generative rather than deficient. The point of the distinction, for this paper, is to license a question the first sense forecloses. If the emptiness of luxury space is absence, the only question is why the shortfall is tolerated. If it is emptiness in the second sense, a prior question opens: what does the openness generate?

4.2 *Lack, Desire, and the Objet a*

That emptiness should generate anything at all is not obvious, and here an existing theory supplies a thread. In Lacan's account, desire is not aroused by the object that would satisfy it. What arouses desire is lack—the void around which desire circulates—and the object that appears to be desire's aim, the *objet petit a*, is less the cause of desire than a stand-in that marks the place of the void. Desire is sustained precisely because the void is not filled: the object is always the wrong object, and desire continues past it. On this account the generative power of emptiness is intelligible. A space organized around a void—the single case amid the open floor, the few pieces amid the clearing—does not present an object to be had so much as mark the place of something absent, and it is the marking of that place, not the object, that stirs the visitor. What the sparse display kindles is desire in Lacan's precise sense: aroused by the void it circles, not by the thing it contains.

This thread is taken up here, but it must be qualified, and the qualification is where the present account parts from a simple application of Lacan. In its own terms, the Lacanian void is structurally *open*: the point of the analysis is that desire does not terminate, that the object is always missed, that the circuit does not close. Luxury retail borrows the first half of this structure—it uses the void to kindle desire—but appends to it an ending the structure does not have. The desire the empty space arouses is turned, in the end, toward a purchase: the open circuit is given a terminus it did not possess. It would overstate the matter, and misread Lacan, to say the desire is thereby satisfied or the void filled; the more exact description is that a structural openness is converted into a controlled trajectory—an arousal that in Lacan runs without end is here routed toward a determinate close. The qualification matters because it locates precisely what is at issue. It is not that luxury emptiness fails to be Lacanian; it is that

it is Lacanian in its opening and non-Lacanian in its closing, and the whole question of the paper lives in that closing—in whether the openness an empty space creates is left open or is routed toward an end external to it.

This gives, in a first and still phenomenological form, the criterion the later sections will make analytical. Confronted with an empty space that has stirred something in a visitor, one may ask whether the emptiness lets the visitor go—whether the opening it created is left as an opening, onto whatever the visitor might make of it, or is quietly directed toward a determinate close. The question is not yet a method; it is stated here only to name, at the level of experience, the difference the account will later have to draw with more precision. What that precision requires is the positive notion deferred so far: emptiness not as void-around-an-object but as a field in which relation is generated. To that the next section turns.

5 EMPTINESS AS A FIELD OF RELATIONAL GENERATION

The reviews leave a question standing that none of the accounts poses: granting that emptiness is generative, what does it generate, and what determines whether the generation can be built upon? This section develops the first two layers of the central claim. The first treats emptiness as a field of relational generation. The second treats the disposition of configurational control as what determines whether a given space can constitute a field of its own, and so accounts for the difference in density among the forms luxury retail takes.

5.1 *The Field*

The concept of emptiness recovered in §4 was an opening of possibility rather than a shortfall of resource. The positive content of that opening can now be stated. What an empty commercial space opens is a field in which a relation between visitor and brand may be generated: the sparse counter, the cleared floor, the few pieces amid the open interior do not present an object to be acquired so much as hold a space in which something between the two parties can take place. The visitor is not positioned before goods to be assessed and bought but placed within a configured openness that solicits a bearing—attention, deference, curiosity, a sense of being received rather than solicited. That bearing is the beginning of a relation, and the empty space is what makes room for it.

This function calls for a distinction, since the design literatures would describe the same interior as producing an affective state in the visitor, and the two descriptions are easily run together. An affective state is a condition of one party, lodged in the visitor and measured by the visitor's disposition to buy. A relational field is a condition between two parties, and what it generates is a relation, which has its own subsequent history independent of whether a purchase follows. The empty space generates the second, and the first—the awe, the calm, the elevation—is one of its derivatives, standing to the relation as notice was shown in §2 to

stand: downstream of it. The order runs from the configured emptiness, to the relational field it opens, to the relation generated within it, and only then to the affects and notices that follow.

Claim 2. *Emptiness in commercial space functions as a field of relational generation: the configured openness opens a space in which a relation between visitor and brand may be generated, and the affective and attentional states the design and economic literatures describe stand downstream of that relation as its derivatives rather than its substance.*

5.2 Configurational Control and Spatial Density

If emptiness generates a relational field, the difference in density among luxury forms becomes the next thing to explain, for emptiness is not uniform: the stand-alone flagship tends to the open, the airport counter to the sparse, the department-store concession to the dense. The variable that orders this difference is the disposition of configurational control—the extent to which a single actor governs the grammar of the space in which its field would form.

Consider the three forms in that light. The *stand-alone flagship* occupies a building whose configuration one brand controls entire. Emptiness there opens a relational field, and because the surrounding grammar is the brand's own, the field can be furnished and governed: circulation, threshold, lighting, the conduct of staff, the terms on which a visitor is admitted and received. The brand both opens a field and shapes what happens within it. The *airport counter* occupies a pass-through space the brand does not control. Emptiness there opens a relational field as well—the sparse counter still holds a space in which a bearing toward the brand may form—but the surrounding grammar belongs to the airport, and the onward trajectory of the visitor is not the brand's to govern; the traveler arrives, passes, and departs on a schedule set elsewhere. The field forms; what may be layered upon it is constrained. The *concession in a department store* occupies space whose grammar belongs to the host, and the host's grammar is dense. A void opened at the concession tends to be absorbed into the surrounding density rather than to congeal into a field that is the brand's own; the concession, lacking the control that would let an opening hold, inclines toward density, transacting point by point within a field that is not its to shape.

Two dimensions are at work here, and separating them clarifies the difference. The first is whether the space can constitute a relational field of its own, which the disposition of configurational control tends to govern. The second is the mechanism by which such a field, once formed, generates trust—a matter deferred to §6, since the stand-alone and the airport, both of which open fields, come to trust by routes that differ. Arraying the three forms along these dimensions gives the following.

	<i>Prospect of an own relational field</i> (with configurational control)	<i>Tendency of trust mechanism</i> (treated in §6)
Stand-alone flagship	High	Governance of a relation
Airport counter	Present, with governance constrained	Common experience
Concession	Difficult to form	(Reverts to point-wise transaction)

The cells are stated as tendencies, and the graded phrasing carries the weight of the claim. A stand-alone need not constitute a governed field; a concession might, on occasion, hold a small opening; the airport is subject to the confounds noted in §2. The claim concerns the direction in which configurational control inclines the outcome, and reaches no further.

Claim 3. *Whether an empty space constitutes a relational field of its own that it is in a position to govern tends to be set by the disposition of configurational control. Where one actor controls the surrounding grammar, emptiness both opens a field and admits governance upon it; where control is apportioned or absent, the field may still open but governance upon it is constrained, or the field does not readily form and the space inclines toward density. The difference in density among luxury forms tracks this variable more closely than it tracks the contest for attention.*

Two of the three forms, the stand-alone and the airport, open relational fields, and both come to generate trust; the routes by which they do so differ, and the difference is the concern of the next section. The concession, inclining toward density, illustrates by contrast what the other two achieve: where no field of one's own can form, what remains is transaction, point by point, in a field belonging to another.

6 MECHANISMS OF TRUST IN A RELATIONAL FIELD

The stand-alone and the airport both open relational fields, and both come to generate trust. The routes differ, and the difference is the second dimension of the table in §5. This section treats the two routes, the governance of a relation and common experience, and argues that the second is the more authentic of the two, in a sense that will be made precise. A preliminary word situates why trust is the quantity in question at all.

6.1 *Trust as the Scarce Quantity*

The economic reviews located scarcity first in space, then in attention. A relational field makes visible a scarcer quantity than either. Goods can be allocated; attention can be won; trust can be neither allocated nor won in the manner of a resource, since it is the settled expectation, on the part of one party, that another will act as its relation to it warrants. What a merely dense space reaches, at its most effective, is attention: the shelves address, the signs announce, the goods are seen. What an empty space can reach, where it generates a relational field, is trust. The difference is one of depth, and the ordering may be put as a graded ascent—goods, then the attention and recognition that a symbol can buy, then trust—in which each stage is scarcer and harder to secure than the last.

The reason trust sits at the top of that ascent bears on what follows. A symbol tends to struggle to generate trust, and the difficulty is structural: a symbol persuades, and persuasion, by declaring an interest in the outcome, gives the other party reason for reserve. The tendency admits exceptions—a signboard honored over many years may sediment into trust, and a symbol repeatedly borne out may come to be believed—and the general inclination holds through them: what is said in order to be believed is, for that reason, harder to believe. Trust inclines to arise where nothing is being urged—where the parties are not persuader and persuaded but co-present in some shared circumstance. An empty space that declines to urge is, in this respect, positioned toward trust in a way a dense and speaking one is not.

6.2 *The Governance of a Relation*

In the stand-alone flagship, the relational field is the brand's to govern, and trust is generated by the conduct of that governance. The visitor is received on terms the brand sets and sustains: the manner of admission, the pacing of circulation, the bearing of staff, the restraint of the interior, the consistency between what the space intimates and what the encounter delivers. Where these are governed well and over time, the visitor comes to hold a settled expectation as to how the brand will conduct itself, and that expectation is trust. The mechanism is the reliable governance of a relation across repeated encounters, and it is available to the stand-alone precisely because the stand-alone controls the field within which the relation unfolds. Trust of this kind is real and it is not easily won; its condition is the configurational control that lets a field be not only opened but held.

6.3 *Common Experience*

The airport counter does not govern the visitor's onward trajectory, and by the measure of governed relation it would seem to generate less. It generates trust by another route. The traveler and the brand are, for an interval, co-present in a shared circumstance: the passage through the airport, the waiting, the crossing of a border, the suspended time of transit. The sparse

counter, declining to sell, places the brand within that circumstance as something encountered in the course of the journey rather than as something urged upon the traveler. What forms is the sense that the brand was present in a stretch of the traveler's own experience—not that it addressed them, but that it was there, in the same passage. This is common experience, and it generates trust by a mechanism distinct from governance: not the reliability of a governed relation across encounters, but the co-presence of two parties in a lived circumstance, which persuasion cannot counterfeit because it consists in having been there rather than in anything said.

Common experience is a mechanism in its own right, distinct from a diminished form of governed relation. It rests on a different ground—co-presence rather than conduct—and reaches trust by a route the governed relation does not travel. In one specific respect it is the more authentic of the two, and that respect can be named precisely. The authenticity of common experience lies in its resistance to counterfeit: a governed relation can be simulated in its outward conduct, a reception staged, a manner rehearsed, but co-presence in a real circumstance either occurred or did not, and cannot be manufactured after the fact by anything the brand says. What rests on having been there is harder to fake than what rests on conduct that can be performed. In this specific respect—resistance to counterfeit—common experience is the more authentic mechanism.

Three bounds keep this authenticity claim to its proper size. Common experience is one trust-generating mechanism among several: trust arises also from repeated reliable dealing, from shared adversity, from the passage of time, from kinship, from institutional guarantee, and to name common experience the source of trust would overstate what the airport shows. Emptiness is one means by which a brand may reach common experience, alongside others, and the reaching of common experience is one path to trust among the several just named. And the authenticity here is the specific resistance to counterfeit described above, which a governed relation borne out over years does not lack in its own way: the governed relation generates a trust that common experience does not displace. Within these bounds the two mechanisms may be set down.

Claim 4. *A relational field tends to generate trust by either of two mechanisms. In the first, available where configurational control permits, trust arises from the reliable governance of a relation across encounters. In the second, available even where governance is constrained, trust arises from common experience—the co-presence of the parties in a lived circumstance. Common experience is, in the specific respect of resistance to counterfeit, the more authentic of the two, since it consists in having been present rather than in conduct that can be performed; it remains one mechanism among several, and emptiness one means of reaching it.*

Both mechanisms generate something real: a trust governed into being in the one, a trust

co-lived into being in the other. What becomes of that trust—whether it is left to accrue to the relation that generated it, or is directed toward an end outside that relation—is a further question, and the answer to it is where the account of luxury emptiness reaches its point. To that the next section turns.

7 THE DIRECTION OF GENERATED RELATION

Both mechanisms of §6 generate real trust. The question this section takes up concerns what becomes of that trust once generated: whether it accrues to the relation that produced it, or is turned toward an end lying outside that relation. Answering the question calls for a criterion, and the criterion is the one named in phenomenological form at the close of §4—whether the opening an empty space creates is left open or is routed toward a determinate close. Made analytical, the criterion asks after the direction in which a generated relation is subsequently sent. Two directions are available. A generated relation may be left to accrue to itself, feeding the capacity of the parties to continue in relation; or it may be folded toward a sale, made an entry that converges on a transaction. The direction, and not the fact of generation, is what distinguishes the cases.

7.1 *The Criterion of Direction*

The criterion earns its place by discriminating between two arrangements that generation alone cannot tell apart. A library and a flagship may each open an empty, unhurried space; each may generate in a visitor a relation to the institution; each may leave the visitor with something carried away. What separates them is where the generated relation is directed. The library's opening accrues to the reader's relation to reading, which continues on terms the reader sets; the flagship's opening is laid out in advance as an entry that arrives, by a route prepared for it, at a purchase. The same generative gesture serves, in the one, the continuation of a relation, and in the other, its conversion into a sale. Naming this the direction of the generated relation gives the analytical form of the question asked phenomenologically before: whether the empty space lets the visitor go.

7.2 *Folding as the Common Fate of Both Mechanisms*

Applied to the two mechanisms of trust, the criterion yields a result that neither the design nor the economic accounts anticipate. Both directions of trust, in luxury retail, are turned toward the sale. The governed relation of the stand-alone is directed there by design: the reception, the atmosphere, the cultivated familiarity are laid out so that the trust they build arrives at a purchase, in the flagship, on terms the brand controls. And the common experience of the airport is directed there as well: the sense that the brand accompanied a stretch of one's travels is prepared in advance as an entry, so that the trust co-lived into being in transit converges,

later, on a transaction at the city store. The trust generated by co-presence, which §6 found the harder of the two to counterfeit, is folded toward a sale as surely as the trust built by governed conduct.

7.3 *The Appropriation of Common Experience*

This result reaches its sharpest form in what becomes of common experience. Common experience is, of the trust mechanisms treated here, the one that rests on the least counterfeit-able ground: it consists in two parties having been co-present in a lived circumstance, which cannot be fabricated after the fact. Luxury retail generates exactly this—the traveler’s sense of the brand’s presence in the passage is a real common experience, co-lived and not merely asserted—and then directs it toward the sale. What is turned toward a transaction is not a symbol, which persuades and is discounted accordingly, but a genuine co-presence, which persuades no one because it urges nothing. The most authentic of the trust mechanisms is put to the service of the least relational of ends.

The structure of this appropriation is one the framework has met before. Where a dominant symbol appropriates the poetic mechanism of generation, the site of generation is moved from the interpreter to the symbol; here, the mechanism appropriated is common experience, and what is moved is its destination—from the continuation of the relation, to the sale. The generative mechanism is left intact and running; what is altered is where its product is sent. Common experience is, in this precise sense, put to use: made to generate a trust that is then directed away from the relation that the co-presence would otherwise have served.

7.4 *The Severity of the Appropriation*

A reading offers itself at this point that would soften the finding, and following the argument to its end requires setting that reading aside. Since the airport generates real trust, one might conclude that the case is only partly capture, and that a relational account should temper its verdict accordingly. The observation underlying this reading is correct: the trust is real, the generation genuine, and the account does not deny it. The conclusion drawn from the observation runs the wrong way. The reality of the trust aggravates the appropriation rather than tempering it.

The measure of the severity is the authenticity of what is appropriated. To direct a mere symbol toward a sale is the ordinary condition of advertising, and it deceives no one, since a symbol is known to urge. To direct a status-signal or a distinction toward a sale is the more sophisticated commerce the consumption literature describes. To direct *trust* toward a sale—and specifically the trust generated by common experience, which arises in the one register of human relation that persuasion cannot reach—is the deepest of the three, because what it turns toward a transaction is the layer of relation least suited to being sold. The authenticity

of common experience is precisely what makes its appropriation grave: the more real the co-presence, the more the relation it grounds is one that ought to have accrued to the parties, and the more its diversion toward a sale takes something that was not the sale's to take. The finding is not lightened by the reality of the trust. It is made heavier.

This severity carries no implication that the trust generated is false, or that a visitor is deceived in the ordinary sense. The co-presence occurred; the trust it grounds is warranted by a real circumstance. The appropriation lies in the direction imposed on that warranted trust, ahead of time and without the visitor's part in the decision—the routing of a relation, real in its generation, toward an end that the relation's own continuation did not call for. Whether every instance of luxury emptiness so routes what it generates is a matter for the empirical caution already entered; the claim concerns the direction toward which the configuration inclines what it generates, and the gravity that direction carries when what is so directed is trust.

Central proposition. *By its use of emptiness a luxury space may sell nothing, and in selling nothing reach the trust that a symbol struggles to build. This is not the redemption of luxury retail but the completion of its appropriation: the trust so reached—generated by common experience, the least counterfeit-able of relational goods, and owed by right to the relation that the co-presence would have served—is directed in advance toward a sale. What is appropriated is the more severely taken for being the more authentic; the emptiness that could have let the visitor go is configured, instead, to bring the visitor back.*

7.5 Relational Residue and the Unfinished Encounter

Two features of what the airport generates give the direction of the generated relation its final specificity. The first is that a common experience, once past, leaves behind a trace—not an object retained but a residue of the relation, a having-been-alongside that can condition what follows. This relational residue is neutral in itself, and its direction decides its character: the residue of a genuine encounter opens onto the continuation of the relation it traces, while the relational residue the airport leaves is prepared as an entry that opens onto the flagship's sale. The same kind of trace, according to the direction given it, either feeds a relation or funnels a transaction.

The second feature is that the encounter the airport generates is unfinished, suspended at the moment of transit and awaiting whatever will complete it. Unfinishedness carries no verdict of its own—the interval of *ma* is unfinished and left for the viewer to complete, and desire in Lacan is unfinished and never closed—and what an unfinished encounter opens onto is what decides it. The unfinished encounter of the airport is opened toward a written ending, the purchase that waits to complete it; a generative unfinishedness would be opened toward an ending not yet written, which the parties to the relation would supply. The criterion of direction applies to the unfinished as to the residue: what matters is the terminus toward

which the opening is turned.

8 IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITS

The case of luxury emptiness bears on a question larger than luxury: what distinguishes the generation of relation from its appropriation, when the two are indistinguishable in their outward form. This section states that implication, marks the reach of the analysis beyond the single case, places the account within the larger programme it belongs to, and sets down the limits under which the whole should be read.

8.1 *Openness and Generativity*

The analysis carries a consequence for how generativity is to be told apart from its imitation. Luxury emptiness generates a relational field, opens desire around a void, and reaches trust through common experience; each of these is a genuine opening, and none is feigned. What the account has shown is that all three openings can be produced and then directed toward an end outside the relation they open. Openness, accordingly, is not sufficient to mark generation: an arrangement may exhibit every outward sign of opening a relation—the field, the kindled desire, the co-presence—while the relation so opened is configured to converge on a transaction. What separates generation from appropriation is not the presence of an opening but the direction the opening is given: whether what is generated accrues to the relation that generated it, or is turned toward an end the relation did not require. Generativity, on this account, includes a condition beyond openness, which is that the generated relation not be appropriated—that the opening be left open.

8.2 *The Reach of the Analysis*

The three-layer line of analysis assembled here—whether a space constitutes a relational field, by what mechanism the field generates trust, and where the generated relation is directed—was developed on luxury retail because luxury retail displays the structure with unusual clarity: the generation is real, the appropriation clean, the direction toward the sale legible. The line is not confined to that case. Any arrangement that presents as the generation of relation while serving an end outside the relation is open to the same three questions. A platform that generates community among its users and directs the trust so built toward the retention of attention for sale; an institution that cultivates a relation with those it serves and routes that relation toward its own perpetuation; a program of care that generates a genuine bond and turns it toward compliance—each may be examined by asking what field it constitutes, by what mechanism it generates trust, and toward what its generated relation is directed. The analysis of luxury emptiness is, in this respect, a worked instance of a form of inquiry that extends wherever generation and appropriation wear the same face.

8.3 *Place Within the Programme*

The line of analysis belongs to a broader effort to treat value as generated in and through relation, which may be called a generative relational economics. The parent framework, generative relational being, concerns how relation generates being; the economics named here concerns how relation generates value; and a companion concern, generative relational governance, treats how a generated relation is governed once it exists. The three questions of this paper distribute across these: the constitution of a relational field is a question of generation, the mechanism by which the field generates trust is a question of governance, and the direction of the generated relation is the question on which the value turns. Emptiness has served throughout as the site where all three meet—a mechanism that generates a relational field, that where control permits admits governance upon it, and that stands or falls, as generation or as appropriation, on the direction its generated relation is finally given.

8.4 *Limits and Further Work*

The account rests on claims that could be wrong, and stating them as such is part of setting it down. The empirical basis is a small set of configurations observed in a particular retail landscape, and the reading of the airport in particular carries confounds already entered: the sparseness of the airport counter admits explanations—of security, logistics, dwell, and the traveler’s condition—that the relational reading does not displace, and the claim entered was only that the appeal to attention predicts the wrong direction, not that the relational field is the sole cause of the observed emptiness. The mechanisms are offered as tendencies inclined by configurational control, and instances running against the tendency are to be expected; the account would be strengthened by their study, not embarrassed by it. The distinction on which the whole turns, between a relation left to accrue to itself and a relation directed toward an end outside it, awaits an operational form that would let a given case be assigned to one side or the other by something firmer than the reading offered here. Supplying that form, and testing the three-layer line against arrangements beyond retail, is the work this paper leaves open.

A note on method. No formal apparatus has been used to state what prose states plainly here, and the abstention is deliberate. A value written as a function of weighted variables would decorate the argument without deriving anything from it, and would borrow a rigor the argument has not earned. The mechanisms admit two honest presentations: clear prose, or a genuine connection to the language of dynamical systems, in which a relational field would answer to a space of configurations, a direction toward a sale to an attractor, and the produced customer to a fixed point of the arrangement’s own dynamics. The second is not attempted here. What is claimed is stated in the first.

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