

Perceiving and Optimizing Well-being and Atmosphere in Shopping Centres – the POWAS approach

Use POWAS to turn your centre into a better shopping destination

It's not just "location – location – location" that makes the success of a shopping centre.

With

- **growing competition between shopping centres** (in particular in capital cities) and
- **more and more e-commerce** done at home,

it is ever more important for shopping centre operators to attract customers to their centre and to

give incentives to shopping centre visitors for staying there as long as possible.

They will do so as long as – in addition to many other factors – they like the atmosphere in the centre.

The "feel-good" factor or – scientifically speaking – "**atmospherics**" is a long-neglected key factor for the success of a shopping centre.

POWAS (Perceiving and Optimizing the Atmosphere and the Well-being in Shopping Centres) can help shopping centre owners and managers analyze the atmospheric situation in their centre and to define measures how to optimize the atmosphere and the "well-being" of customers in the centre.

This paper outlines the POWAS approach as follows:

- **page 1: A bit of underlying theory on Atmospherics**
- **page 2: Atmospherics as one of many success factors for shopping centres**
- **page 3: What is atmosphere and atmospheric quality?**
- **page 4: How and where to perceive atmospheric quality? – the contact points in centres**
- **page 5: The POWAS approach and its 3 parts – an overview**
- **page 6: How to improve and optimize atmospheric quality? – the POWAS results**
- **page 7: POWAS working phases**

A bit of underlying theory: "Atmospherics" as fundamental concept to increase sales in centres

Back in 1973 – roughly a decade after the first modern shopping centres in the USA and Europe opened their doors – "**atmospherics**" was defined as the effort to design space (in the sense of attractive artificial environments), or more specifically:

"to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability".

Hence, we are talking about the following "**chain reaction**"

- (physical) spatial factors and built environments

- which affect people emotionally (make them feel good and like the place),
- and this finally results in (numerically measurable) purchases.

Atmosphere as one of many success factors for shopping centres

There are many **success factors** which determine if a shopping centre is performing well, such as (cf. fig. 1):

- Location (macro, micro)
- Surroundings (residential, industrial etc.)
- Competition (shopping centres, retail parks, down-town retail etc.)
- Dimensions (size, levels etc.)
- Layout scheme (orientation, length of ways, main and side malls/passages etc.)
- Accessibility (by car, public transport, foot)
- Stores/Tenants (merchandise mix, store compilation and fit-out, staff etc.)
- Amenities (elevators, toilets etc.)
- Architecture (ceilings, heights etc.)
- Decoration (colors, furniture etc.)
- Marketing events/actions
- Management staff (engagement)
- etc.

Each of these factors contributes in its specific way to the success of a shopping centre, none of them can be neglected.

Fig. 1: Key success factors for a shopping centre



2012-09-27, © debecon GmbH Dieter Bullinger Consulting, Fuchsacker 678, CH-9426 Lutzenberg AR, T: +49-174- 9022 622, E: dieter.bullinger@debecon.biz

The “outcome”, i.e. the result of the success of a shopping centre finally is the **satisfaction**

- of clients/visitors,
- of tenants/employees, and
- of owners/investors.

Such success and satisfaction may be measured by several – numeric – **indicators** (according to the “the more – the better” rule), such as

- footfall (number of visitors)
- length of stay (time spent in a centre)

- turnover/profit (of tenants, of investor).

Each of these 3 indicators is directly influenced by more emotional factors, such as

- the **atmosphere and “ambiance”** in the centre – does the centre produce an emotional incentive for the clients/visitors to go there and does it get them in a mood to stay in the centre and to spend time and money there
- the psychological **well-being and well-feeling** of clients in the centre – do people like the centre, do they feel good there and do they regard it as their “commercial living room”.

Therefore, we can suppose that the **chain reaction** mentioned above can be described in more detail as going

- from physical (spatial and built environment quality – success factors architecture/ decoration/amenities)
- to emotional (positive mood/like the place – atmosphere/ambiance, well-being/feel-good)
- and back to numeric (footfall, length of stay, purchases/turnovers/profit).

What is atmosphere and atmospheric quality?

Sociologists and philosophers more or less unanimously describe “**space**” as the result of a rational setting and arrangement of material things (at a certain “**place**”), and the invisible, but sensually perceptible side of such setting as “**atmosphere**”.

This means: every space and place is inevitably linked with (an always and already existing) atmosphere, and this atmosphere is perceived individually (and within milliseconds) by the senses of human beings confronted with these spaces and places. Put the other way: atmosphere cannot be separated from space as “things in their arrangement” are seen by human beings as situations and evoke specific individual emotional (and cultural) reactions.

Atmosphere is apprehended through the **senses** – more in the form of a comprehensive collection and perception of impressions, less in the way of viewing or hearing. Atmosphere can be described in sensory terms, as Kotler already mentioned:

- visual (color, brightness, size, shapes)
- aural (volume, pitch)
- olfactory (scent, freshness)
- tactile (softness, smoothness, temperature).

Some of the criteria which may help to materialize the sensual perception of atmosphere could be:

- building culture
- scent/odours
- light and shadow
- sounds/noise
- air
- rhythms of movements
- views and sights
- habit (including clothing) of people
- presence of other living beings (e.g. animals)
- presence of (material) things.

It is evident that “**spatial atmosphere**” (stemming from construction/architecture/construction materials, equipment, decorative materials etc.) is closely linked to “**situative/service atmosphere**” (stemming from furniture, offers, info materials, events/activities/promotions, employees/users/visitors etc.).

Therefore, when visitors in a shopping centre should express their perception of the atmosphere and ambiance of the space in a specific shopping centre, they have to be asked about their sensory impressions of (the space in) the centre.

How and where to perceive the atmospheric quality of a shopping centre? – The contact points

The question now is: how can we **measure and evaluate the atmospheric quality of a shopping centre**, and what can be done to improve it?

The answer lies in an analysis of the emotional/atmospheric impacts of the “space” (the genius loci) which are sent out from the architecture of the center and the way space in a centre is used and “organized” by the centre operator and the tenants. These spatial and situative “signals” heavily influence the feeling and the sensations of the clients when they enter the centre and decide whether to stay there just for buying the things which they really need and/or already noted at home – or to spend hours and hours meeting friends etc. in the centre because they just like the place and feel good there.

Shopping centre marketing people usually ask a lot of questions in their visitors’ surveys – however, asking the visitors of a centre about details of their perception of the spatial quality/the atmosphere in the centre has long been neglected.

A good atmosphere of a specific place means that people regard the space as “harmonic” (meaning that the perceived atmosphere coincides with their expectations when going to the centre), that they feel welcome and good there, that they like the place and like to stay there (as long as possible).

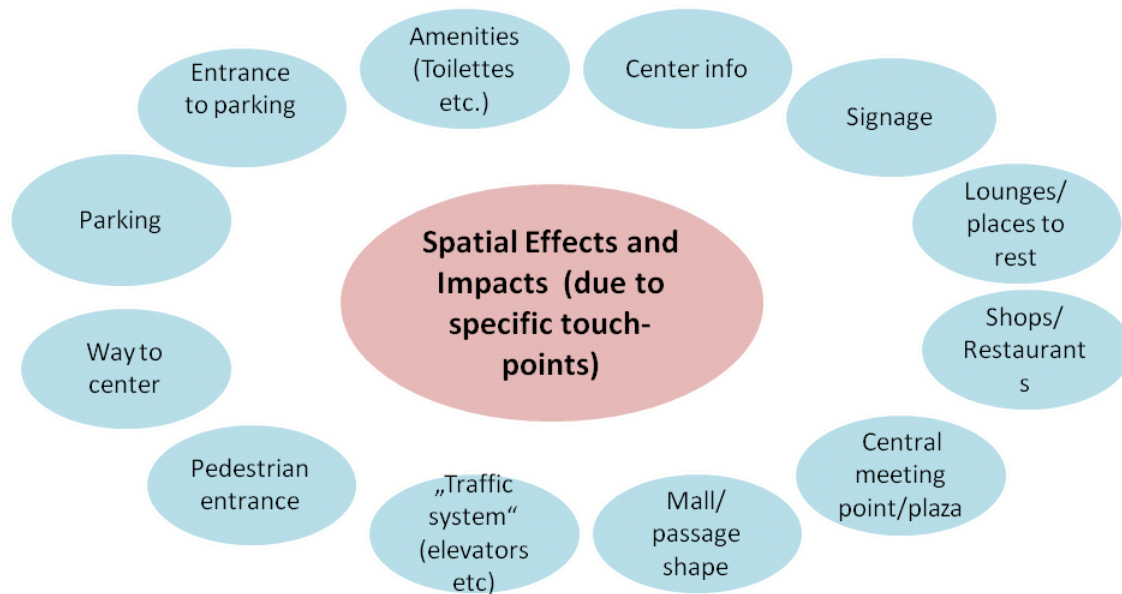
In a visitors’ inquiry, such questions about emotional impressions and attitudes may be asked – but they are not operational, as the answers do not show why people like (or dislike) the place and which factors and criteria make them answer in the way they do.

A shopping centre is a big and complex building. Therefore, people of course have a general impression of the spatial quality, the atmosphere/ambiance of the centre as a whole and their feeling and well-being when staying in or thinking of the centre. This overall impression, however, is composed of many partial impressions and perceptions as a number of “**contact points**” **along the visitor’s way to and through the centre** influences its sensations (cf. fig. 2), such as:

- Outer façade of centre
- Entrance to parking
- Parking lot (car park spaces, driving lanes, ramps, etc.)
- Way from parking to centre
- Pedestrian entrance
- Traffic system in the centre (such as elevators, escalators, staircases etc.)
- Shape of mall/passage in the centre (orientation in the centre)
- Central/main plaza/hall
- Mall/passage branches outside main plaza/hall (side mall without natural daylight)
- Shops/restaurants (tenant and merchandise mix, shop fronts etc.)
- Lounges/places to rest/chill-out zones in the centre
- “Furniture” in the centre (benches, rubbish bins, plant pots etc.)
- Signage
- Center info stand (if any)
- Amenities (toilets, bancomats, public telephones, lockers etc.)

Each of these contact points has its specific spatial quality and will influence visitors’ perception of the centre. Therefore, the visitors’ inquiry has to give respect to these contact points.

Fig. 2: Contact points – where atmosphere in a centre is perceived



2012-09-27, © debecon GmbH Dieter Bullinger Consulting, Fuchsacker 678, CH-9426 Lutzenberg AR, T: +49-174- 9022 622, E: dieter.bullinger@debecon.biz

The POWAS approach and its 3 parts – an overview

Based on the above general considerations, the **POWAS** (Perceiving and Optimizing the Atmosphere and the Well-being in Shopping Centres) approach has been jointly developed by three Swiss companies and their managers:

- Dieter Bullinger – debecon GmbH Lutzenberg (Shopping centre expert)
- Dieter Pfister – Pfister Marketing & Spacing Therwil (Spacing Management expert)
- Peter Spichiger-Carlsson – gfs-zürich Markt- & Sozialforschung Zurich (Empirical market research expert).

The aim of POWAS is to **offer a practical tool to help shopping centre owners and operators to improve the atmospheric quality and design** (in a more than just architectural meaning) of existing shopping centres.

POWAS is focused on the above-mentioned chain reaction (from physical to emotional and back to numerical) and aimed at producing proposals on how to improve

- the spatial quality and design,
- but also the situative design and service quality

in shopping centres – in order to make people stay longer and increase purchases and sales in the centre.

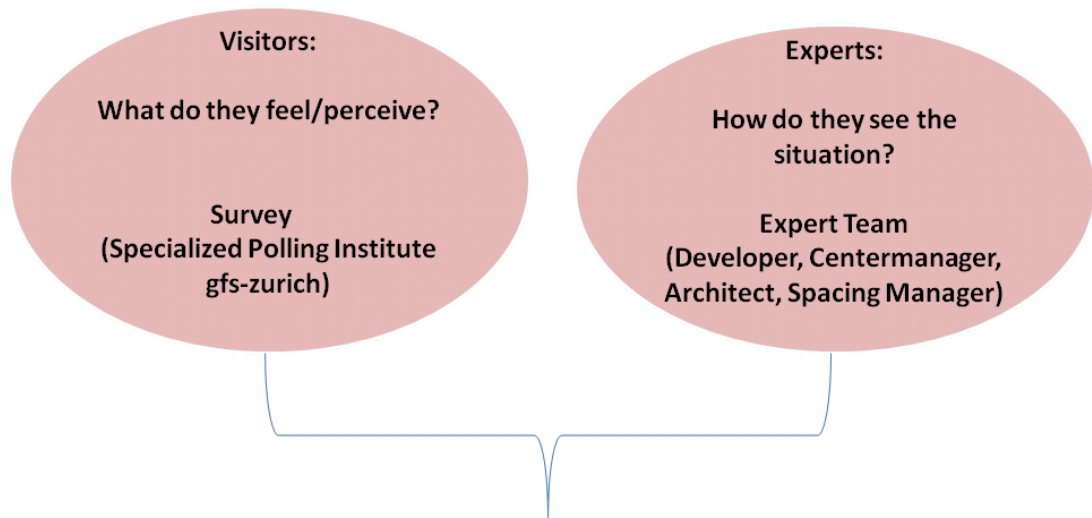
Therefore, POWAS consists of 3 parts:

(a) on the “diagnostic” side, it consists of (cf. fig. 3)

- a **customers’ opinion poll**/survey/inquiry among visitors of a specific centre (to find out how visitors feel in the centre) where visitors are asked to give their opinion regarding specific areas/spaces/contact points in the center in a very systematic way – this survey will be done (or supervised) by a very experienced opinion poll institute
- an **experts’ evaluation** (also in a very systematic way) of the centre’s spatial and service quality (including its embedding into the environment), i.e. of specific factors which are decisive for the atmosphere and well-being in the centre – this will be done by an expert team coordinated by the

POWAS project manager (together with a specialized spacing manager and the centre owner and manager)

Fig. 3: Double approach of POWAS to evaluate the atmosphere and the well-being in shopping centres



2012-09-27, © debecon GmbH Dieter Bullinger Consulting, Fuchsacker 678, CH-9426 Lutznberg AR, T: +49-174- 9022 622, E: dieter.bullinger@debecon.biz

(b) on the “therapeutic” side,

- the results of the two previous steps are put together in a **improvement measures hand-book/briefing** giving hints to the shopping centre developer, architect, owner, operator and centre manager what to do in order to optimize the spatial atmosphere and the service design in different parts of the centre under review – this compilation of proposals will comprise cheap and “easy-going” measures (regarding decoration, use of mall areas, presentation in shop windows etc.) as well as “heavy” and cost-intensive measures (like new light domes, reorganization of car-park access etc.) – the elaboration of the compilation and subsequent briefing meetings will also be coordinated by the POWAS project manager.

How to improve and optimize the atmosphere in the shopping centre? – The POWAS results

The analysis (the “diagnostic” part as mentioned above) of the atmospheric quality of a shopping centre and its perception, as it is done within the POWAS approach, can only be worked out individually, centre by centre.

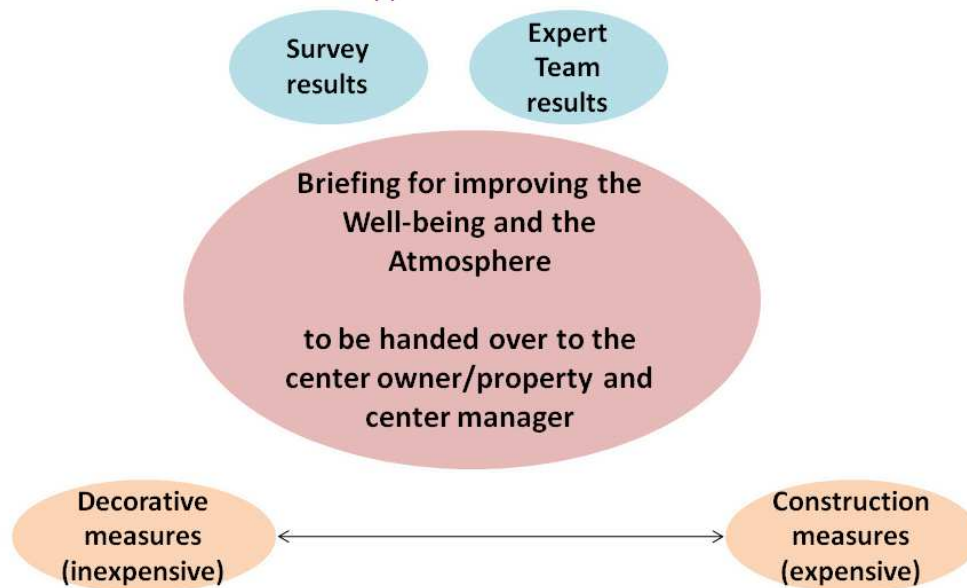
Consequently, also the results of the analyses within the framework of POWAS are very individual: they consist (on the “therapeutic” side as mentioned above) of a compilation of proposals for (better) “atmospherics”, i.e. proposals to “(re-)design the buying environment” – in general: **measures to improve and optimize the spatial quality/atmosphere/ambiance** (Atmospheric Design) and therefore to increase the well-being and feel-good factor in the centre under revision.

This Atmospheric Design manual/compilation of proposals should be used as a briefing for the center owner and operator and their subcontractors, service providers and advisors to implement the proposed measures.

These proposals for measures will cover a wide range (cf. fig. 4), from inexpensive measures regarding decoration details until expensive construction measures (such as relocation of elevators, bringing in natural light into side malls etc.). They will, however, not only contain “hardware” factors, but also comprise more software- and people-focused aspects like improving the service quality including the friendliness of

staff in the centre and its tenants as these are also important to improve the emotional incentive given by the centre to its visitors.

Fig. 4: What is the result of the POWAS approach?



2012-09-27, © debecon GmbH Dieter Bullinger Consulting, Fuchsacker 678, CH-9426 Lutzenberg AR, T: +49-174- 9022 622, E: dieter.bullinger@debecon.biz

Summing up, POWAS considers on the whole chain – it concentrates on how people (buyers) perceive the spatial quality of a specific shopping centre, and mirrors the findings with the results of an experts' check of the atmosphere/ambiance in the centre. It finally produces proposals regarding the factors architecture, decoration, amenities which may increase the spatial quality of the centre (“from architecture to space”), optimize atmosphere/ambiance and the well-being of visitors in the centre, therefore contributing to more footfall, longer stays of visitors and more purchases/sales/turnovers and profits in the centre.

POWAS working phases

In order to make best use of POWAS for a particular shopping centre, the following 3 working phases are proposed (cf. fig. 5):

- **Starting Phase (Working Phase 1):** One-day initial spotlight check – Duration: 1-2 days

The POWAS Project Director and the POWAS Spacing Manager will visit and tour the centre (together with the centre operator and/or owner) in order to make a quick check and evaluation of the centre's spatial and service design quality.

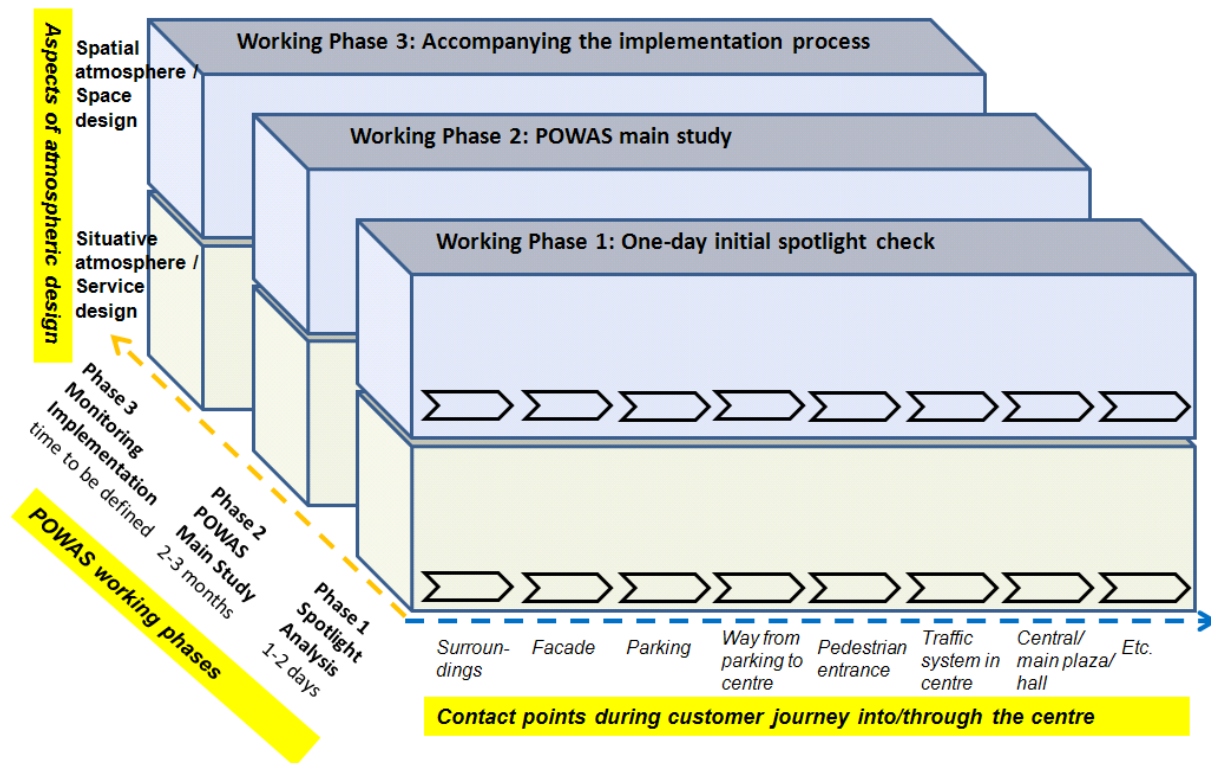
On the basis of this quick check, they will communicate their experts' opinion and give first hints to the centre operator and/or owner on which aspects the main study should specifically concentrate and where – according to their opinion – there are the most evident potentials to optimize the atmosphere and the well-being in the centre.

- **Main Phase (Working Phase 2)** consisting of the two “diagnostic” elements (a) customer opinion poll and (b) experts' check, plus the “therapeutic” element improvement measures handbook as result of the checks, analyses and evaluations – Duration approx. 2-3 months

For any additional details – see above

In addition to the visitors' inquiry analyzing the impact of the spatial quality of the centre along the contact points, the centre's atmospheric quality will be checked by outside shopping centre experts (project coordinator/manager, spacing manager, developer, architect, construction engineer etc.) together with the local centre manager and the centre owner or its representatives. Aspects to be checked by the experts will comprise natural/artificial light, views/perspectives in the centre, colors, pavements, materials, signage, decoration, mall shape and layout, orientation in the centre, use and cleanliness of mall, location and shape of vertical traffic connections in the centre etc.

Fig. 5: POWAS study subjects and working phases



2013-02-25, © debecon GmbH Dieter Bullinger Consulting, Fuchsacker 678, CH-9426 Lutzenberg AR, T: +49-174- 9022 622, E: dieter.bullinger@debecon.biz

As the resulting proposals are covering a wide range of aspects, some of them may be very concrete measures, others may be more general ideas meant as a briefing for the architect or the centre manager. In addition, some of the proposals may be very inexpensive, some others may involve larger investments.

Therefore, the final presentation of POWAS results will require the consecutive decision of the centre operator and/or owner on how to further continue the implementation process and how to phase it.

- **Implementation Phase (Working phase 3):** When implementing the proposals worked out in Phase 2, it is advisable to involve the POWAS project director and the POWAS Spacing Manager in a monitoring body supervising the implementation process and progress (for example in order to further advise the architect and/or the centre manager) – Duration/frequency to be agreed

The author:

Dieter Bullinger is managing director of **debecon** GmbH Dieter Bullinger Consulting for better shopping destinations (founded 2012). He worked throughout 22 years in different European countries as shopping center developer and asset manager for ECE Projektmanagement (1990-2001) and SPAR Austria Group/SES Spar European Shopping Centers (2001-2012).

Contact: **debecon** GmbH, Fuchsacker 678, 9426 Lutzenberg AR/Switzerland, dieter.bullinger@debecon.biz, Tel. +49-174-9022 622, www.debecon.biz