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## The Evolution of Retail Design

How we shop and buy is changing. This has significant implications for the design of retail spaces.

[Tom Moseman](#) (Envirosell), [Maureen Boyer](#) (Senior Associate, Gensler), and [Barry Bourbon](#) (Principal, Gensler) recently discussed research informed design and the evolution of retail design at GlobalShop 2010 in Las Vegas. The principles underlying their approach to research (Envirosell) and design (Gensler) were summarized on their first slide: “We believe it’s critical to uncover the emotional and behavioral needs of the people who experience space, and to understand how those needs change over time—whether they’re changing by choice or by market forces such as demographics or economy.” When they are designing a space, this team focuses on the needs of shoppers and designs spaces that reflect current shopper attitudes and behaviors. They work to create environments that motivate people to return after an initial purchase and that requires continuing and comprehensive research.

Envirosell is widely recognized for the observational research made famous by its founder Paco Underhill and described in his bestseller *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*. Their carefully structured research includes periods spent “in the wild” with shoppers to gather fundamental insights that are refined through conversations with shoppers and envisioning sessions with retailers. By the conclusion of those envisioning sessions, which integrate material culled from those observations with other information such as demographic, competitive/market, and financial data, the qualities required in an environment that is meaningful to shoppers have been identified. Then it’s time for Gensler to go to work giving those qualities physical form—often in spaces that are boldly different from a client’s existing stores or those of competitors.

Retail design involves more than just bricks and mortar. Successful retailers are integrating their web presence, social media, and physical stores. This creates a client-responsive synergy. Store fixturing and other elements must be flexible enough so that they can be easily changed to reflect information gleaned from social media. Repeating design elements in electronic and physical environments increases continuity between shopping experiences as well as customer comfort.

The economic upheaval of the last few years has created pressure on retailers to keep shoppers in their stores—but has reduced the resources at their disposal to do so. Even high end brands are now creating whimsical environments using graphics and other design elements. Designing these stores requires ingenuity, because budgets are small. Attention to detail and creative re-use are important.

Moseman, Boyer, and Bourbon find that the influence of gender on retail design is changing. While retailers are recognizing that women are responsible for many purchase decisions, even in areas not traditionally associated with their influence, such as electronics, male shoppers are receiving more attention under some circumstances. Convenience stores with clean bathrooms are notoriously favored by female shoppers, but female-friendly design extends to store layout and signage as well. Men can be uncomfortable shopping with women, even when products are relatively gender-neutral, so some brands are rewarding male shoppers with their own stores. These male-oriented shops are designed with brand, and not gender in mind. Representing the brand involves capturing a psychological position, not simply replicating colors or forms.

As populations age, it becomes more important to insure environments are legible. This requires clarity of store positioning as well as circulation paths. Resting zones with chairs that don’t impede active shoppers are also becoming more prevalent in both malls and within individual stores. These oases increase the time spend in stores and improve the quality of the shopping experience as well.

The economy is encouraging a search for value, and value can be social as well as financial. It is becoming increasingly important in some markets that stores reflect important social values such as a concern for the natural environment. Material selections can make this concern for nature apparent, but if green features are not necessarily apparent, brand consistent communication of them can be important. Greenwashing is readily apparent to shoppers; any expressed commitment to the environment must be genuine and consistent.

Although some stores now have branches around the world, Moseman, Boyer, and Bourbon have found that a cookie-cutter approach to store design that leaves every outlet looking exactly the same is not successful. Retail design must respond to local sales traditions (such as the amount of goods that should be on display) and material/finishes practices, for example. An “understandable and deliberate attempt to respond to local culture” is encouraged.

The GlobalShop presentation by Moseman, Boyer, and Bourbon highlighted ways that shoppers and retail design are evolving, which can inform the work of people developing both retail and other spaces.

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