

Reconsidering education in retail design: Today's challenges and objectives

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Abstract Technology and digital developments are important drivers for new challenges and opportunities in retail, but also cause change in customers' shopping behaviour. Assuming these changes also affect the discipline of retail design and retail designers, the presented paper explores retail design as it is considered today from the perspective of practitioners and academics in the field. In this context, we propose two emerging challenges in coping with the prevailing developments which influence the discipline of retail design. We determined a lack of understanding the impact of ongoing phenomena on the retail designer and on their future requirements. Furthermore, we recognized a lack of specialized retail design courses which prepare future designers for this challenging field. The authors conclude with elucidating the context of ongoing research, which aims at overcoming current challenges.

Keywords Retail design, Education, Design process, Digitalisation, Omnichannel

Retail, omnichannel and the phygital space

Technological innovations have always been a driver for change in retail design. The invention of the escalator late 19th century, created a multilevel shop experience and the application of the barcode around 1950 made a larger shop space and product range possible (Quartier, 2011). Of more recent times are the global adoption of the internet and its commercial exploitation, causing the rise of e-commerce. Consequently, retailers are challenged to create a consistent brand story in the physical and online world.

From the customer's viewpoint; e-commerce, the access to information on the web and the rise of mobile technology have changed their shopping behaviour. Customers are becoming hyper-connected (Euromonitor, 2015) and according to Rigby (2014) digital technology has influenced the way they discover, evaluate, purchase, receive, use and return their products. Hence, retailers have started to change their strategies. A first example are the efforts of retailers and designers in differentiating the physical store from online and/or offline competitors by means of evoking memorable customer experiences (Petermans, Janssens, & Van Cleempoel, 2013). Second, retailers are expanding their commercial channels through which customers can interact with the firm, called multichannel (Neslin et al., 2006). More recently, retailers are now shifting to an omni-channel strategy, aiming at channel integration. Consequently, customers can use the channels interchangeable and seamlessly during the buying process (Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015). Starbucks' digital application for example, enables customers to pre-order, pay, collect rewards, and tip the barista by using their smartphone.

Omnichannel is driven and realised through new

technology and software (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013). Therefore, retailers rely on advanced technologies as a way to break down the barriers between the online/offline world (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Rahman, 2013). In the store this technology is translated in applications such as virtual and interactive screens/mirrors, digital signage, mobile applications for product reviews or payment, etc. (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014).

The past few years, omnichannel has become a buzzword in retail, hence it is gaining more attention from the academic field. Building on multichannel inquiry (Verhoef et al., 2015), research in omnichannel is conducted from multiple angles such as retailing, marketing, business management & strategy, information system research, logistics, pervasive computing, etc. (Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014; Picot-Coupey, Huré, Piveteau, Towers, & Kotzab, 2016).

In general, we noted that omnichannel research is mainly considered from the retailer's and/or customer's perspective or focusses on the technological aspect. Picot-Coupey (2016) for example thoroughly uncovers a firm's challenges during the development of the omnichannel strategy, but only addresses the retailer's experience. What stays unaddressed are the obstacles or opportunities during the creating of these *phygital* spaces from the creative executors' perspective, namely the retail design agency. Yet, like previous innovations, we presume that current changes also affect the practitioners' retail design thinking and doing. Samsung's new flagship store (New York) for example, reflects a change in the design and the purpose of the store to a digitally enabled, social, interactive and inspirational branded place. Given this gradual shift in the appearance and purpose of the physical store and its increasing digital connectedness; we assume future retail designers'

knowledge and skills will be even more challenged. In what follows, we will explore retail design as it is considered today by academics and professionals in the field. Ensuing on these arguments, we will discuss why retail design and design education need to be reconsidered in the light of current transitions.

The holistic turn in retail design

Retail design is a young evolving discipline (Christiaans & Almendra, 2012; Petermans & Van Cleempoel, 2010), often considered as a sub-discipline of interior design (Quartier, 2015; Skjulstad, 2014). The latter is rather logical, since the design of commercial spaces traditionally has belonged to the scope of interior designers (and architects) (Christiaans & Almendra, 2012). Driven by the emancipation of interior design in the '80 (Quartier, 2015), retail design has evolved from a rather artistic and interior-led discipline to a mature strategic, multi-disciplinary and customer-centric practice. Nowadays, the focus is on the functional aspects and commerciality, brand communication and the creation of experiences (Christiaans & Almendra, 2012; Dalziel, 2014; Quartier, 2015; van Tongeren, 2013). Hence, Quartier (2015), Skjulstad (2014) and Christiaans & Almendra (2012), desire to acknowledge retail design as an independent discipline. Arguing that retail design goes beyond aesthetic and functional design of a space, they point out that it embraces multiple disciplines such as interior design, architecture, product design, graphic design and needs to be further substantiated with knowledge from social sciences (e.g. psychology and sociology), service design, communication, branding theory and marketing. Thereupon, Quartier (2015) defines retail design as the design of spaces for selling products/or services and/or brands to consumers. Besides, it is interdisciplinary in order to create a sensory interpretation of brand values, through physical or virtual stores. The definition still echoes the relatedness with interior design as it involves the design of the physical space. However, the virtual space has now been brought forward as belonging to the scope of retail design. Supporting this notion, Christiaans & Almendra (2012) claim to be aware of the technological developments in retail design. In their conviction, advanced technology allows for new ways of interacting and demand reconsidering the physical and virtual space in terms of what both spaces and products are, their function and how they are used and experienced (Christiaans & Almendra, 2012). Concerning the digital, aspect David Dalziel (2014), head of London based retail design agency Dalziel & Pow, deems on it as a new tool for retail design which contributes to the customer's retail experience. Furthermore, he assumes digital design to become stronger and more integrated in the future. Yet, the growing pervasiveness of digital aspects in the built environment seem to imply a change in the role of future spatial designers. This was staded by Yildirim (2016) who did a survey with interior design students about their perception of smart pervasive domestic environments and their future role as designer. About 88% of the students expected a shift in their future roles. Additionally, students supposed creativity, technological, material and system design knowledge to become more important, together with

an increasing need for interdisciplinarity with fields as industrial design, psychology and computer engineering. Subsequently, Teufel & Zimmerman (2015), plea for a new generation of retail designers who approach the design process in a holistic way. They define holistic retail design as the creation of shopping experiences across stationary, temporary, digital customer touch-points and what shapes spaces, platforms, events, interfaces, signage and communications. The aim is to evoke attention, reputation and customer loyalty for retail brands. In the context of holistic retail design, the authors suggest there is a need for designers who have a thorough understanding of all retail parameters. Besides, they need to think and work on the level of communications, graphics, space and the digital sphere (Teufel & Zimmermann, 2015).

In sum, these statements illustrate the field's desire to evolve towards an independent and distinctive discipline. Furthermore, it reflects the specific interdisciplinary character of retail design which originates from the complex and fast evolving field of retail, the changing customer's needs and technological developments in our society.

Regarding the retail designer's role, the findings reflect a need for practitioners whose knowledge goes beyond the creation of functional and aesthetic store environments. Based on the perceived changing strategies and digital developments in retail, we suggest future retail designers should be able to transform a retailer's omnichannel marketing aspirations into a strategic and creative phygital design.

In the context of the aforementioned transitions in retail design, we identified two challenges concerning the retail designer and retail design education. First, from the retail designer's perspective we noticed a knowledge gap in terms of understanding the impact of ongoing phenomena on their design process and their future requirements (skills, attitude and knowledge). We conducted a review of professional literature, written by retail design practitioners. We selected literature that essentially dealt with practical guidelines to develop commercial environments. The review showed that the shared practitioner's knowledge mainly addresses the components of the physical environment and overlooks the digital aspect and the growing number of retail channels. Authors who did touch themes as the changing character of retail, omnichannel and digitalisation were rather vague by recommending to approach the commercial concept in a holistic, consistent and coherent way (e.g. van Tongeren, 2013).

Second, regarding the retail designer's training, we determined a minor presence of specialized retail design courses on master, bachelor and postgraduate level. Courses are mainly approached as a part of the interior design training. This despite of the fact that the academic field echoes for retail design to become a discipline in its own right (e.g. Quartier, 2015) and to broaden the discipline's body of knowledge (Petermans & Van Cleempoel, 2010). Therefore, we hope current

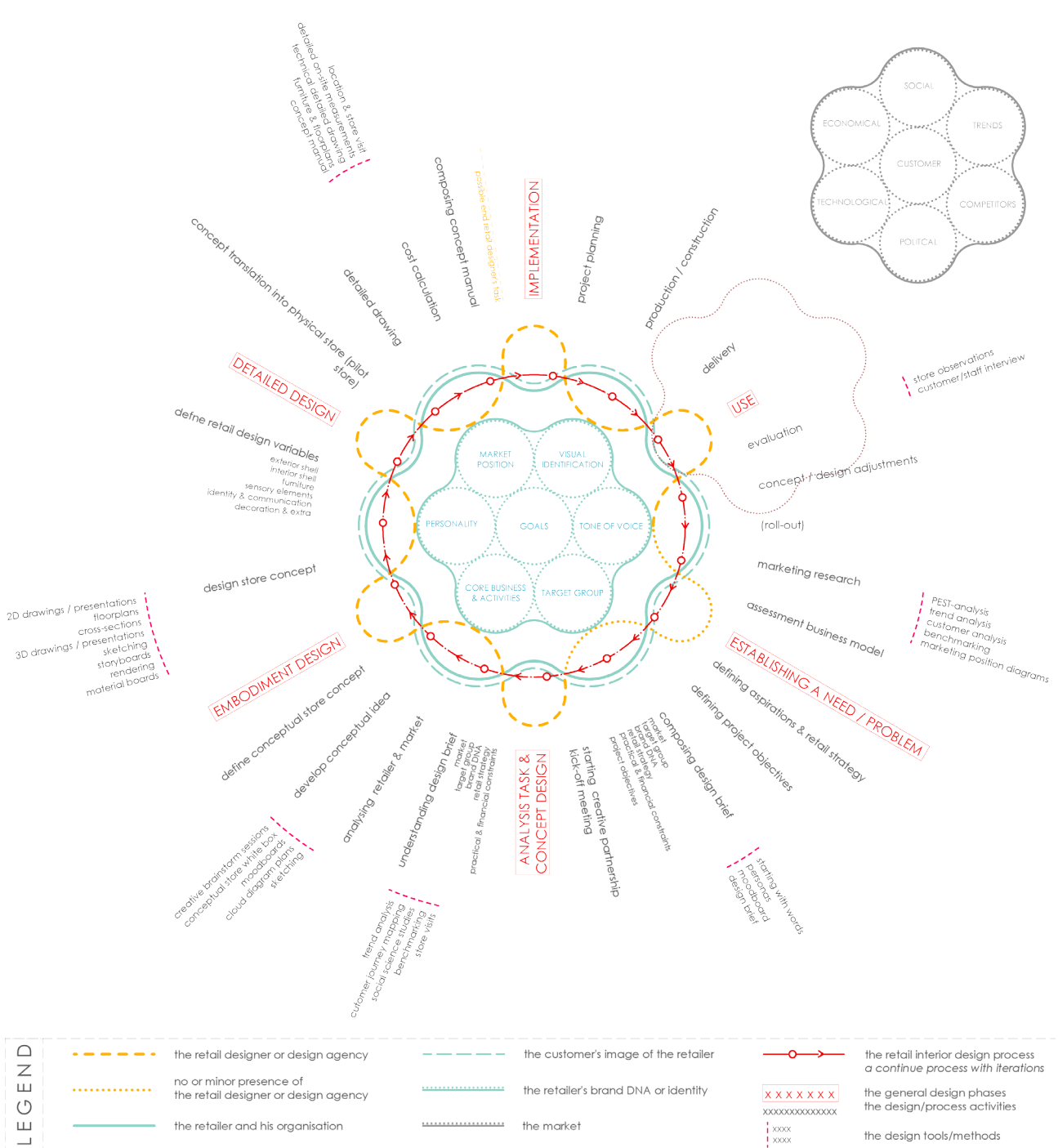


Figure 1. Retail interior design process model.

examples such as the master training at Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam and the recent new bachelor program at Westerdals School of Arts, Communication and Technology in Oslo (see Skjulstad, 2015) to be encouraging drivers for future retail design education.

To conclude, as we believe that research in the designer's field of activity and retail design education are beneficial to overcome these current challenges, we conclude this paper with our objective for further research.

Objective for further research

The presented paper aimed at outlining prevailing

tensions and challenges in the field of retail design caused by the current developments in retail, the changing customer and increasing digitalisation. Therefore, we wish to position this paper in the context of ongoing PhD research. We aim at overcoming the field's challenges by means of opening up the actual notion of the discipline of retail design and to focus on retail design education. The overall research project follows four major phases. **First**, we want to grasp the discipline's current body of knowledge and way of working. This implies understanding the retail design process and the characteristics of today's retail designers in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude. **Second**, as we have

mapped the prevailing developments in retail driven by technological and digital advancements, we want to understand the impact on the retail design discipline from the perspective of the retail designer. Questions that will be addressed in this matter are: do today's retail designers experience specific challenges in the execution of the strategic and creative design process? Do they experience knowledge gaps or lack in skills regarding the rise of pervasive technology in the retail environment and omnichannel in retail? What are the requirements and the desired role of future retail designers? **Third**, as academics and practitioners suggest a holistic approach in retail design, we want to grasp how this is done in practice. Therefore, we will rely on best practice examples, namely retail design agencies that execute the design process in a holistic way. Concretely, this means that they translate a retailer's omnichannel aspirations into a commercial concept which covers all channels. **Fourth**, as the research exerts a top-down approach, findings from the field will serve to reconsider the way current retail designers are trained. They form the starting point in our reflection of developing a conceptual *ideal* retail design program which meets the requirements of future practitioners.

Currently, we are in the first phase of the project in which we have developed a conceptual model, representing a retail interior design process (Figure 1). The model is derived from a review of professional retail design literature combined with academic perspectives on retail design and the design process. This led to the composition of a visual model which reflects the design process, supplemented with related (design) activities and tools. Furthermore, the model shows the complex intertwining of the retailer, the retail designer and society in which the customer is embedded. Moreover, the model reflects the changing and complex character of the design process. Illustrated as connected shapes, the model suggests the never ending design process (Doyle, 2004; van Tongeren, 2013) and refers to the ongoing developments in the field caused by changes in society which affect retail and vice versa (Murialdo, 2013; van Tongeren, 2013).

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