What is Retail Design?: Defining a theoretical framework

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The twentieth century saw the expansion of retail formats to meet the demands of economic growth, increasing personal income, wealth and consumption. Reflecting its origins, retailing has been dominated by western-centric approaches to design. However, a contrast has emerged between developing retail markets and those in the mature, developed world. In this more complex global scenario, the design of stores and their interiors requires a more detailed understanding of its contexts and relationship to theory. The aim of this conceptual paper is to meet these needs by explaining the tensions between retail design's contribution to corporate branding and to the stores as social and participative spaces.

This paper is structured in four parts. The first examines design-led perspectives towards retail interiors and retail buildings. From relatively modest beginnings with a focus on shop interiors and later lifestyle design, design has made a distinctive contribution to branding. This is evident from the visual elements within a successful brand, its name, symbol, design or combination of all three. Visual identity forms an important strand of store design research, which acknowledges the seminal influence of Olins (1978) on corporate design to convey the shape and nature of organisations. Olins came to regard retailers as brand innovators, replacing FMCG companies with their emotional appeal and providing more comprehensive engagement with consumers through "brand temples".

The second strand extends branding to the late twentieth-century contribution of buildings as symbols of good taste, power, and status (Berg and Kreiner, 1990). In the 1980s and 1990s the combination of commercial interests with architecture gave new prominence to the architect (Glendinning, 2004). Design as meaning and symbolic design led to unique, sometimes iconic buildings which were defended for a sense of heightened experience, and the liberated imagination of their consumers (Jencks, 2005). Consequently the retail brand could be defined by discourses drawing on the three elements of distinctive design: the building, the celebrity (signature) architect and media engagement (Sklair, 2006).

By contrast, the third strand introduces sustainability to retail design with a focus on re-use of buildings and materials. From the 1970s, the urban heritage and selective conservation of the environment has become an important consideration. The modernist, transformational agenda has been tempered or overtaken by an adaptive one that engages with its external environment and is reflected in the design of buildings and interiors and use of materials.

The final section moves to design as a source of creativity and inspiration. For consumers, the store can provide a source of inspiration, for new spatial ideas as well as new merchandise and its arrangement. How things are organised, co-ordinated and presented can contribute to individual identity, social identity as well individual problem-solving. This perspective sees active participation by consumers in the retail environment and the ways in which retail design engages with people.

In conclusion, the paper maps these perspectives onto global retail development and proposes future directions for store design.

References

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