

Fighting against retail emptiness: Unraveling coping strategies of small scale independent retailers in Denmark

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In the medialised world, the format of various retail environments has changed as channels have been added to the traditional physical retail store. The changes over the last couple of decades have been fast, and many small towns in Denmark experience a problem of retailers who have to close their premises, leading to a lot of empty tenancies in their city centers. This seems to set off a set of mechanisms in which the experience of the town center, the surviving single shop experiences and the individual consumer identity and his/her willingness to engage in and be affiliated with the city and its shops, affect each other. The context of reality described and the suggestion of mechanisms that interact with each other, inevitably also influence 'retail design', and inscribe retail design in a far broader context than the 'interior design' it is usually said to originate from.

This paper will argue that retail design in a medialised reality needs to be concerned with design in a broader sense, to design viable business concepts that are connected to both place and culture with a starting point in deep customer insight. The article will set out to identify some of the design parameters connected to this. It will do so through reporting on the analyses of two series of interviews. A first series of exploratory interviews are with retail strategists and designers (both of physical and web shops). Based on thematic analyses of the interviews, a clear description of the problem will be developed. First analyses demonstrate that (a) designers are asked very seldom to consider other channels than physical or digital retail stores when developing design solutions, and (b) there is a common concern about independent retailers in smaller towns not acting on the challenges of today's retail landscape. However, in the same interviews, good examples of viable concepts are also mentioned. This corresponds with the retail strategy literature, pointing out that management poses agency and possibility reactions to changes in the retail environment, as well as to innovation literature in linking deep consumer insight with design thinking. The second series of explorative interviews will be conducted with retail concept owners of small and medium size retail businesses that are considered viable (in a Danish context). Via these interviews, we will aim to examine how the concerned retail concepts are built, and which commonalities can be found.

By analysing this data, we aim to point to copying strategies which can be applied to viable small and independent lifestyle retail businesses in Denmark in today's medialised retail reality. By discussing such strategies, the project aims to inspire other retailers who struggle with the same kinds of challenges.