Rethinking the education of retail design. What are the competences a retail designer needs in this fast evolving discipline?

Katelijn Quartier, Stephanie Claes & Jan Vanrie

Published online: 06 Sep 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 177

View Crossmark data

Rethinking the education of retail design.
What are the competences a retail designer needs in this fast evolving discipline?

Katelijn Quartier[a*], Stephanie Claes[a] , Jan Vanrie[a]

[a]Hasselt University, Belgium
*katelijn.quartier@uhasselt.be

Abstract: It has been our hypothesis that designing for retail in the future would strongly benefit from more specialized education and training programs, truly integrating social sciences and design disciplines. To this end, we are currently aiming to launch a postgraduate certificate program on retail design. In preparing this program, we have critically reviewed the three different educational programs that we already organize on retail design. To have a first indication of the validity of this approach, we were able to use interviews with senior and junior designers of 10 retail design agencies. The results suggest that there seems to be both a demand and an opportunity for a retail design program for (young) professionals who will work together in group on a (preferably realistic) design assignment, which offers a sufficiently deep handling of issues, an integration of theory and practice via a workshop set-up and should most likely be offered in English.

Keywords: Retail design, Education, Competences, multi-disciplinary

1. Introduction

A retail designer mainly works for two important stakeholders: the consumer and the retailer. Both have changed profoundly over the past decade. Evolutions in technology and society cause the rules of the game to change at an increasing pace: an economical shift that made the consumer the focus of attention, a growing urge for differentiation, or a world in which looking for new experiences has become an essential aspect of daily shopping life. For most retailers the main challenge is the fact that the story and the experiences they offer no longer start at the front door of the store. More often another channel like a website or a social media platform initiates the customer journey. Every aspect of each channel, but also each part of the story, needs to be consistent with what the consumers expect of the brand. Creating holistic and seamless brand experiences, which transcend the boundaries of online and offline channels is crucial (Rigby, 2014; Van Ossel, 2014; van Tongeren, 2013). Because of the growth of technology and e-commerce, the store has lost its unique position and has become one of the retailer's many channels. Nonetheless, stores will remain one of the most important channels for retailers to communicate with their consumers (Stevens, 2013). From this perspective, a store should become a place where passion is shared, they should offer inspiration, tell a fitting story, and offer an intense multisensory experience with one main goal in mind: to build an emotional connection with the consumer.

The evolutions in retail obviously have repercussions for the field of retail design and the role of the designer in the design process. A retail designer today is challenged to meet the changing customer needs and to design a holistic and consistent brand story across all the retailer's channels. These shifts in the discipline of retail design have made the profession more complex, as designers need to think and work in a more trans-disciplinary way (Quartier, 2015; Teufel and Zimmerman, 2015). This means that also retail design education should take these developments into account and rethink the way future retail designers should be educated and trained.

2. The discipline of retail design

Retail design could be considered as a design discipline which concerns the design of virtual or physical spaces, serving to merchandise products and/or services (Quartier, 2011).Today, however, the discipline is still largely seen as a subfield of interior design: in literature on retail design many authors consider the design of the physical environment as the default starting point (Claes, 2016). Due this narrow view on retail design as a part of interior design, the discipline is limited in its development towards a mature discipline in its own right. Indeed, we argue that retail design is becoming a more professional, distinct field, based on an interdisciplinary foundation and with an increasing need for specialized knowledge (Quartier et al., 2016). Cutting-edge retail design practice is leading the way in this respect. For example, next to trained designers, these design agencies also employ psychologists and sociologists to understand better the people for whom they are designing. However, in daily practice, this approach is not yet widespread and, given the evolutions sketched above, new questions demanding innovative answers keep arising. Here, we plead for retail design to integrate the strengths of design disciplines and social sciences to evolve into a new, transdisciplinary field - creating a unity of intellectual frameworks beyond the disciplinary perspectives - with the aim of a better understanding and practice of store design. This process, however, requires bridging several gaps (Quartier, 2017). A first gap concerns the production of relevant knowledge and is situated between the two underlying research domains, i.e. the relevant domain of design research (e.g., including design disciplines such as architecture, interior architecture, or industrial design) on the one hand and the more behavioral science of consumer marketing (and related disciplines such as environmental psychology and sociology) on the other. A second gap towards this integrative, professionalized field of retail design concerns the application of knowledge and the disconnection of research and practice: the actual managerial practice and knowledge validated by scientific research are rarely aligned. Finally, the third gap concerns the education of future retail designers to actually practice this integrated retail design approach, as the teaching of relevant knowledge domains is currently still separated in different educational programs. This final gap is the focus of the current paper. We start with a brief sketch of the international context and then introduce our strategy in trying to bridge this gap.

3. Education of retailing and retail design in Europe

Concerning the current educational offer in Europe, for professionals and on bachelor-master level, with regard to retail design, two perspectives are found - one of design and one of marketing. As mentioned previously, retail design is often characterized as a design discipline closely related to, or as a sub field of, interior design. From a historical point of view, this is quite understandable since designing for retail spaces has always been the area of architects and interior architects/designers. An exploration of the current educational offer shows that over the last fifteen years, retail design education has come to the fore at a university level. Before, only retail management had its own

curriculum (Christiaans and Almendra, 2012). Now, retail design is being taught in different design disciplines ranging from interior design, product or industrial design to architecture, each with their own emphasis. However, contemporary educational programs still prefer a conservative approach combining intra-disciplinary (working within a single discipline) topics and domains related to either (retail) design or social science disciplines. Most of the educational programs are organized by architectural schools, although interest from other design disciplines as for example product design is rising.

Within the marketing perspective of retail design, a varied offer of educational programs exist, going from basic and more general introductions in retail marketing to specialized programs such as fashion retailing. These programs are mainly aimed at students in the broad field of marketing and, when narrowed down to retailing, the focus is put on the store as a strategic instrument by means of which a brand can communicate and act with a (potential) customer in order to make the customer buy. Such retail marketing programs are primarily theoretically oriented from a marketing and consumer behavior angle, but limited regarding how to implement retail strategies into an actual store design.

As mentioned before, in a professionalized, mature discipline of retail design, physical and digital spaces will be created that are consistent, coherent and above all, complementary. We argue that this requires a true integration of knowledge and insights of both retail design sciences and behavioral science of consumer marketing. However, as the situation sketch above suggests, the current educational landscape is not very encouraging in this respect.

4. Retail design education at Hasselt University

In line with arguments raised above, at Hasselt University (Belgium) it has been our hypothesis that designing for retail in the future would strongly benefit from more specialized education and training programs, truly integrating social sciences and design disciplines. To this end, we are currently aiming to launch a postgraduate certificate program (of 25 ects) on retail design. In preparing this program, we have critically reviewed the three different educational programs that we already organize on retail design. First, we have our master program in interior architecture in which retail design is a specialism. The second is a series of masterclasses targeting experienced executives/professionals active as retailers, designers or marketers. Third, a summer school has been organized for bachelor and master students from different fields and different educational institutions. By having these programs critically assessed by the participants and relevant stakeholders, we try to distill insights into their respective strengths and weaknesses in order to use this knowledge in designing the new postgraduate curriculum.

4.1 Master of interior architecture with retail design as a specialism

Within a 3-year bachelor (180 ects) /1-year master (60 ects) academic structure, students have the possibility to specialize in the field of retail design in their master year. This master year consists of two semesters. In the first, students have a design studio and a theoretical retail design seminar. The second semester is devoted to their master project, which is strongly connected to their master thesis. The basic concept of this program was to link individual research of the students directly to their own design projects (Petermans, Vanrie, Van Cleempoel, 2013). On average, there are about 12 students per year in the retail design master.
Based on analysis of the student evaluation reports of the last 9 years (each semester is evaluated both qualitatively in a focus group with student representatives and quantitatively through

anonymous questionnaire). Apart from practical issues, the most salient remark in the early stages of our program was the lack of integration and connection of theory and practice. Students seemed to have difficulties to apply and integrate the information from the theoretical courses in their design studio. To this end, we started to develop a stronger connection between the two by a closer link to the design assignment in terms of content and timing. In the last two years, we evolved to a more workshop oriented strategy: the design studio starts with theory, next an exercise is given to te students to learn to apply the theory in their design assignment. Since the launch of this idea, in 2014, the students evaluate the course really positive (although timing issues remain, and maybe always will…).

4.2 Masterclasses Advanced Retail Design

In today's knowledge economies, the importance of lifelong learning for active professionals grows tremendously. In this context, two groups within the university, namely interior architecture (faculty of Architecture and arts) and marketing and strategy (faculty of Business Economics), installed the Advanced Retail Design (ARD) masterclasses in 2013. The masterclasses target experienced professional marketers, designers and retailers. It consists of six or seven evening sessions on a specific range of topics and an inspiration tour (usually in Antwerp) in which we visit retailers who are prime examples of implementing the theoretical concepts discussed in the sessions. Each masterclass starts with state-of-the-art scientific knowledge delivered by academics. This part is followed by a marketing consultant or designer to testify by means of real cases how they assist retailers in implementing the particular concepts discussed in the first talk. In a third part, we invite a retailer to talk about personal experiences with specific design choices related to the topic of the class. The number of participants for the masterclass is typically between 12 and 24.

Each session is evaluated immediately, by having participants complete an evaluation form at the end of each evening, but the series as a whole is also evaluated one week after having finished. Apart from specific remarks concerning specific speakers, the participants generally agree that the strengths of the program concern the mixed target group. They strongly appreciate discussions that arise in the participant group as a whole. Also important is the appreciation of the connection between theory and practice via the three testimonials of stakeholders (academic, consultant/designer, retailer). A frequent comment though, is the fact that participants miss a deeper insight into the specific topics. By having three speakers, each with their own approach on the topic, within a time span of 2,5 hours, we are indeed limited to a somewhat superficial handling of the issue. Participants are shown the tip of the iceberg, but many of them indicate they would like to dive deeper. This is not possible in the organizational framework of this masterclass, but does indicate an existing demand for other types of programs.

4.3 Summer School Seamless Retail Design

Short-term but intensive programs such as international summer schools are interesting options in an academic setting: they promote international cooperation for students (and teachers and researchers) and are also relatively easy to set up within the formal and practical limitations of academic institutions. Since 2014, Hasselt University has been organizing the 'Summer School in Seamless Retail Design' in cooperation with the Technical University of Delft (NL), the Politectnico di Milano (IT), and Middlesex University (UK). The goal of this 10-day summer school is to invite 20 international students from different disciplines (interior design, architecture, product design and marketing) to collectively reflect on the challenges and opportunities of the store of the future by creating retail environments which seamlessly combine the spatial (physical environment), the digital and the human (experiential) factor. Next to study visits and social activities, the basic program

consists of morning sessions where students are introduced to state-of-the-art knowledge brought by academics and experienced practitioners. In the afternoon, they actively engage in a design assignment in multidisciplinary teams. Each year the design assignment is focussed on thinking and designing the store of tomorrow in a conceptual way. Each day, the lecturers of the morning sessions assist in supervising the afternoon sessions to ensure an optimal integration of knowledge transferred in the morning. Moreover, as of last year, we started to also integrate a workshop-day where an expert guides the students the whole day in a particular task, i.e. the branding process, by means of an action plan with small exercises.

Each edition, the summer school is assessed by the students through a survey, conducted one week after the end, and by the academic stakeholders and the practitioners. All indicate that the strong elements are the inter-disciplinary and the international character, as well as the concept of feeding students both academic knowledge – i.e., insights in the latest research results – as well as practical guidance – providing them with design methodologies and thinking models. An analysis of the working process and results of the design assignment, indicates that the creativity of the design students together with the more theoretical view and communication skills of the marketing students pushes the design towards more well-founded and relevant outcomes. The students enjoy having to work together in groups with students of different origins, culture and education. One remark that keeps returning, regardless of the actual design assignment, is that it is difficult to design on a conceptual level (which was the aim of the summer school). The students tend to go into detail too soon and lose touch with designing a concept. The formula of the workshop-day was evaluated as very positive. The students further mention the seamless integration of theory and practice, the strict timing and the division in smaller assignments as beneficial to the design process.

5. Designing a new retail design curriculum

In line with arguments raised above, we are convinced that designing for retail asks for an additional specialized training program. We have analysed the three current programs and the specific strengths we want to integrate in the postgraduate certificate program are listed in Figure 1. Our master program has some good elements regarding the integration of theory and practice (e.g., via the workshop set-up), but has the constraint of only being offered to students with a bachelor degree in interior architecture. With a postgraduate certificate program, we can welcome people from different educational backgrounds to improve the learning process. The Masterclass (ARD) shows that discussing theory and practice with all stakeholders in retail design is very valuable. The combination of knowledge, practical experience and different perspectives offers a huge added value in the learning process. In this conception, however, ARD lacks the possibilities for more in-depth processing; an aspect that can be offered in a more extensive postgraduate certificate program. Finally, a clearly positive aspect of the summer school is that people from different educational programs work together in a design assignment. However, due to the short timing, the focus of our

summer school is limited to learning to develop a concept, and less on designing the actual space in detail. It would obviously be beneficial to have the opportunity to work on developing both.

		Ma retail design	Advanced retail design	Summer school seamless retail design	Post graduate	Connection interviews
1	integration theory and practice	research seminar + design studio	research is presented (Prof.), retailer testifies	experts & professors teach in the morning and help the students in the design studio	link between experts and the design assignment (studio)	yes, well defined mix
2	different disciplines students	no, only Ba interior architects	professionals: marketeers, retailers and designers	students: architects, interior architects, product designers, marketeers	students and professionals: all design disciplines and social sciences	yes, in order to become a team-player
3	different disciplines teachers/ professors	no	marketeers, retailers and designers	from different design disciplines and social sciences	from different design disciplines and social sciences	yes, design agencies apply to consultants for this
4	experts from practice teaching (external)	no	marketeers, retailers and designers	from different design disciplines and social sciences	from different design disciplines and social sciences	
5	international	not yet, starting from academic year 2016-2017	no	yes	yes	mentioned between the lines
6	group dynamics	no	open discussion and group exercise	work in international groups, with different disciplines (4 or 5 students)	yes, set-up to be determined	yes, in order to become a team-player
7	omni-channel approach	no	no	in both the theoretical as the practical sessions	both in teaching and in the assignment	barely

Figure 1. Infographic retail design programs

To have a first indication of the validity of this approach, we were able to use interviews with a senior and a junior designer of 10 retail design agencies located in Belgium (4), The Netherlands (5), and Germany (1). For one agency, only a junior designer could be interviewed, which yielded a total of 19 interviews. These interviews were part of a larger research project and had the objective to explore current retail designers' views on which competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes) a retail designer needs to have. Since we not only wanted to focus on the current profile of a retail designer, we also asked them to reflect on the required competences that might become more relevant in the near future (between 10 or 15 years). Here, we screened these interviews to look for connections between the eight strengths we retrieved from our educational programs and what the respondents mention about how they feel retail design should be taught now and in the future. The result are summarized in the last column of Figure 1.

Concerning the first aspect (integration of theory and practice), the designers believe in a well-defined mix of theory and practice, since being able to design is still seen as the basic core competency of a retail designer (design abilities are mentioned by all 19 respondents). Some respondents (3) also state that theory should be dealt with in a more integrated way by means of processing it afterwards in practical assignments or during a workshop.

For the second, third and fourth aspect (integration of different disciplines), several respondents highlight competences that can be related to disciplines such as marketing (mentioned by 13 respondents), branding (11), strategy (6), consumer behaviour (12), philosophy (2), sociology (5), psychology or environmental psychology (6). Not surprisingly, designers work together in close collaboration with people from other disciplines, either within the office or through external consultants. Brainstorm sessions also seem to be a team effort in the early phase of the design project. So, having some understanding of group dynamics, the sixth factor, is an important aspect in the design process.

The designers did not explicitly mention the international dimension in their interviews. What was mentioned though, is that regarding education, they feel there are too few educational programs focusing on retail design and those who do are mostly not offered (entirely) in English.

Surprisingly, the omni-channel approach, our seventh aspect, was not mentioned very often. This might be because these services (web-design, interface design, etc.) still tend to be outsourced for many agencies and the designers we interviewed were primarily interior architects or product designer for whom this is somewhat outside their competences and required body of knowledge. It remains an important question how this will evolve in the future and whether this is indeed a skill required to have as the retail designer of tomorrow.

Apart from previous aspects we looked for in the interviews, we can draw one general conclusion. It was highlighted that modes of interaction such as internships and leveraging from practical knowledge in the class room or studio are worth considering (11 respondents). The opinion of the designers shows that a retail design program should not be an entity on its own, but should maintain a close relationship with the field of practice. This can be on the one hand by stimulating internships and on the other hand by bridging practice-based knowledge and academic knowledge through the involvement of retail design practitioners or retailers in the educational context. For example working on real cases with retailers creates the opportunity to design authentic learning environments where students can be supported by practice-based knowledge, methodologies and strategies.

6. Conclusion

Retail design is already a multi-disciplinary team effort and we argue that as a discipline it will evolve even further. Hence, we also believe that retail design education should reflect this multi-disciplinary aspect where business strategy, spatial, graphical, product and even digital design work together in order to create holistic and viable retail concepts and formulas. A review of current retail programs and exploratory survey of practicing retail designers, suggests that there seems to be both a demand and an opportunity for a retail design program for (young) professionals who will work together in group on a (preferably realistic) design assignment and which offers a sufficiently deep handling of issues, an integration of theory and practice via a work-shop set-up and should most likely be offered in English. Future efforts in this respect will focus on a more international benchmark of retail design education programs, including the exploration of international collaboration.

References

Quartier, K. (2011). *Retail design, lighting as a design tool for the retail environment*. Doctoral thesis at Hasselt University and PHL.

Quartier, K. (2015). Retail design: a discipline in its own right. *Inner magazine, 0.* Retrieved from http://www.innermagazine.org/retail-design-a-discipline-in-its-own-right/

Quartier, K. (2017). *Retail Design: What's in the Name?* In: Petermans, Ann; Kent, Anthony (Ed.). Retail Design: Theoretical Perspectives, Routledge, p. 31-48.

Quartier, K., Lommelen, T., & Vanrie, J. (2016). Combining the Best 2 of Both Worlds in Retailing and Design: Cross-Practice Integration and Innovation, Including the Role of Education. In: McIntyre, Charles; Melewar, T.C.; Dennis, Charles (Ed.). Multi-channel marketing, branding, and retail design, Emerald, p. 33-51

Christiaans, H. H. C. M., & Almendra, R. A. (2012). *Retail design: a new discipline.* Paper presented at the International design conference, DESIGN 2012, Dubrovnik, Croatia.

Rigby, D. (2014). E-commerce is Not Eating Retail. *Business Harvard Review.* Retrieved from https://hbr. org/2014/08/e-commerce-is-not-eating-retail

Stephens, D. (2015). *The Future of Retail Is The End Of Wholesale.* Retrieved from http://www.retail-prophet.com/uncategorized/the-future-of-retail-is-the-end-of-wholesale/

Van Ossel, G. (2014). Omnichannel in retail: het antwoord op e-commerce. Tielt: Uitgeverij Lannoo.

Van Tongeren, M. (2013). One to One: The Essence of Retail Branding and Design. Amsterdam: BIS Publishers.

Petermans, A., Van Cleempoel, K., & Vanrie, J. (2011). Tacit knowledge in interior architecture: interior architects on the *designer-paying client-user client relationship*. Paper presented at the conference IASDR2011, Delft, the Netherlands.

Zimmermann, R., & Teufel, P. (2015). Holistic Retail Design: Reshaping Shopping for the Digital Era. Amsterdam: Frame Publishers.