

Retail design influences: Technology and the next generation

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Instagram! One single word that is going to be the end of me. My teenage daughter is obsessed with it, her friends are obsessed with it, and now it's weaved its way into my world of retail architecture. It's not only Instagram, but other social networks that retailers and developers are embracing to help stay relevant, retain existing customers, and attract new customers. These Apps, along with advancements in technology and e-commerce, are responding to the changing needs in customer's shopping behaviors and are now major players impacting design. Designers have always needed to understand their client and their business, but now, more than ever, the retail designer needs to understand the future consumer and the latest technology available to them.

Some real estate research firms predict that 15% of malls in the U.S. will close or be converted into non-retail space within the next 10 years, and expect half of America's shopping malls to fail over the next 15 to 20 years. While these are harsh assumptions, it's the retail environments that adapt or react to the changing users that will succeed. Part of this success falls on the designers and their ability to develop spaces that address their specific needs.

In addition to knowing how to design and build a physical space, designers need to understand the end user and their shopping habits to create experiential spaces geared for multi-generational users.

Generation Z users, children under 18, are typically technologically savvy and want instant gratification. While they are yet to be spending their own money, they spend their parent's money mainly shopping online and through apps. Shopping online for clothes, furniture, and just browsing for "stuff" is second nature and almost the norm. Going to the mall or a store is a different experience for them than it was when I was their age. Their generation is accustomed to a world bombarded with advertising and the massive availability of instant content.

The millennial consumers, now in their 20's-30's, are more willing to share their personal information and expect tailored experiences based on the information they've shared. They tend to be more concerned with a brand's belief and ideals, are more likely to browse than just buy, and look to a shopping destination for the social experience more so than other generations.

Adapting and incorporating the needs of the next generations with tools like a design experience strategy that integrates a full customer experience into the design will help to close the gap between the technology the customer uses and the designs of shopping centers.

The design strategy starts at home, where customers browse the shopping centers app and social media looking for any events being held, product trends, deals, and updates from retailers. Designers should incorporate into their design any logos, colors, and branding used in the app to sync for a seamless branded experience that transitions effortlessly from mobile devices to the physical environment.

Approaching the shopping center, customers that have the shopping center app are greeted with

personalized messages, greetings, and even parking availability options via beacon technology. Additional messaging and retailer promotions interact with the customer as they enter the common areas, giving them specific sale promotions and directions. Wayfinding will adapt from a directional only tool to a physical experience with touch points located throughout the mall on digital and interactive storefronts, common areas that hold social events, and smaller, personalized dining areas.

As customers enter a store, retailers will continue the experience with personalized offers. Free WiFi and tablets are available to answer product questions, provide customer support and complete purchases for items not available in the store. Store designs will incorporate interactive digital displays and video walls. Electronic displays allow customers trying on merchandise to view digitally triggered content throughout the store identifying product information with options, style tips, videos, related marketing campaigns and suggested complementary products. Displays and video walls flow seamlessly throughout the store and are easy to operate. Physical stockroom footprints are reduced, cash wrap areas are minimized with cashless mobile checkouts and online pick up areas blend into the design for smooth and quick access. Some retailers are testing destination specific concepts to include hair salons, bookshops, coffee shops, and vinyl records departments. All are focused to enhance the customer's socialization and keep them in the store longer.

Ultimately, it's understanding the user, technology, and creating the right customer experience model for both the retailer and the built environment that will help designers create a social and lasting shopping experience.

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