



The new era of retail in NYC: Lessons learned from COVID-19 - by David Asfour and Christina Magrans

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When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit the United States, the retail industry came to a screeching halt. In New York City specifically, the epicenter of it all, neighborhoods, especially those with a strong concentration of retail, were left abandoned by their loyal followers. As cases of the virus grew, so did store closings and unfortunate and unforeseen circumstances such as furloughed and laid off employees, interrupted supply chains, and a shift in the shopping experience from physical stores to e-commerce. In fact, e-commerce has accelerated due to the pandemic—a recent study showed that almost 9 out of 10 (87%) consumers are shopping online during COVID-19. This sudden pause of in-store purchases has presented an opportunity for architects and interior designers to reimagine retail spaces. So, what happens next?

As cities begin to reopen and stores start welcoming back customers, how will the world of retail change? We now understand that our old ways of conducting business are not resilient to dramatic changes and crises and may not be conducive to maintaining our health and safety in the long run. While we all want things to return back to “normal,” we must look at what we have learned and apply it to what retail will look like moving forward—the experiences we want shoppers to have, the security we want them to feel, and the ways in which stores can provide the best shopping experience.

Reimagining Retail

One thing has become clear during this time: human interaction will never lose its value and the physical customer experience is vital to a retailer’s overall long-term success. Now is the perfect time for brands and business owners to reassess the needs, wants, behaviors, and concerns of their customers as we prepare to re-enter the physical retail industry—something that many consumers are longing for as they have been isolated in their homes for several months. Customers will expect more as they venture out shopping, and their experiences must continue to evolve if we are to maintain consumer confidence. Safety and hygiene will be of utmost importance when creating healthy spaces, and the focus on consumer health must be effectively integrated into these experiential environments.

How Will the Shopping Experience Change in NYC?

While many retailers are choosing to completely shift to e-commerce, others are taking the opportunity to redefine their brick-and-mortar stores in an effort to revitalize their retail experience and rebuild their surrounding community. We should expect to see shorter leases in the future to offer more flexibility. Stores may also shift to be more showroom-like in appearance and operation, with consumers booking personal shopping appointments coordinated through online systems and easy, contactless pick-up options for those wanting to support local stores but aren't ready to step inside. This will not only heighten the experience, but it will also limit social interactions between shoppers and store employees while adhering to pandemic guidelines. These showroom-like interiors can further evolve to offer new shopping accommodations like high-tech try-on rooms which allow for items to be placed in the room, tried on, and paid for without contact between the employee and shopper.

As stores shift to offering more one-on-one interactions with customers, less square footage is needed for storefronts. The unused space in large stores can now be used as distribution centers. These distribution centers can serve as additional warehouses, storing products to meet the growing demands of online shopping—allowing items to be ready-to-ship directly to the customer.

When is the Best Time for Innovation in Retail? Right Now

While cities continue to recover from COVID-19, store owners and operators have the unique opportunity to rethink what it means to offer a thoughtful and safe customer experience. Retail spaces can use smart interior design solutions to provide customers with something they have never seen before like customizable in-person shopping experiences, integrating wellness and health initiatives into spaces, and making retail shops must-see destinations once again. Retail could emerge stronger post-pandemic, and once again, define communities while helping to foster their growth. By creating a dialogue between the stores and its customers through design, retail will be heightened by offering new and personalized encounters that propels the industry into a new era while putting customer needs first.

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