



Bricks & Mortar, 2021 – What are we designing? Part 3 - by Tom Bailey and Sean Phelan

June 01, 2021 - Spotlights

Tom Bailey

Sean Phelan

Part two of this article appeared in the May 4th issue of NYREJ.

With a reported 66% of shoppers already going to Amazon and online sites first before purchasing, retail futurist Doug Stephens predicted in a recent RetailDive interview that, “by 2033 the majority of consumption will be online.” Bricks and mortar stores, he asserts are actually, “powerful media channels,” not the final “purchase channel,” with online media being the actual “ultimate store.”

Written from the perspective of HUNT's engineers, architects, and interior designers, our goal is to directly address the physical design issues that our developer, retail, and municipal partners are currently confronting, i.e., what do we include in the design of a new building/space for potential retailers?

How do we renovate an existing building for on-demand retailers not needing storage, but needing robust broadband and a personalized customer experience that complements, if not surpasses, the on-line shopping experience?

And how do municipalities continue to offer their residents and visitors a vibrant street-level retail experience that supports their tax bases and attracts more growth and development?

To keep our focus, when we refer to retail in this article, we are generally not including restaurants, bars, and coffee shops.

First, the amount of square footage needed per retailer has been dramatically reduced, with traditional storage and display space needs dropping as the result of improved inventory control, real-time manufacturing capacity, and the consumer's desire for the personalization of products before purchasing.

This begs the question of both what to do with store spaces configured for 20 years ago and how to divide square footage under existing rooftops. Among the answers are flex spaces and portable furniture; pop-up and easily transformed kiosks; and staged expansions wherein start-up retailers can expand their footprint as they grow and avoid unnecessary initial costs for unusable space. Curbside and store pickups of online purchases, locker systems, and self-service checkout counters will propel "front-of-store" designs and reconfiguration of storefronts, window treatments, sidewalks, and curb cuts. Already, students of store design are reporting that the efficiency demands of "to-go-fulfillment-solutions" are driving a movement toward distinct spaces rather than inner-store department overlap.

Interior signage and design—back to the experience—must share the same attributes, with choices in lighting, color, and furniture becoming even more important. Do your customers prefer a utilitarian Walmart concrete and metal shelving-model that suggests aggressive pricing, or do they want a feeling of exclusivity and aspirational shopping—art on the walls? A Nordstrom shopper will expect quite different amenities and customer service, propelling the location of cash registers and customer service centers. These are not new concerns, but the need to get it right has never been more urgent.

In addition to mobile-web applications—think of how your phone beeps when you are within a mile of a Starbucks. Clear, attractive, and unambiguous digital and fixed wayfinding and signage leading to stores, parking, and local attractions must be supported by a robust Wi-Fi system. Interior signage and design—back to the experience—must share the same attributes. Do your customers prefer a

utilitarian Costco model, industrial chic, a feeling of exclusivity and aspirational shopping, art on the walls? These are not new concerns, but the need to get it right has never been more urgent.

With Apple store and Amazon Go in-store experiences the new standard, fixed cash-register sites are already being phased out by many retailers in lieu of iPad-carrying sales representatives. Similarly, bricks and mortar designers and retailers are only beginning to capitalize on the promise of Organic Light Emitting Diode (OLED) luminaires, displays, and “window treatments,” and their ability to personalize a store for an individual consumer, event, or time-of-day.

Upstate stores? Looking Ahead

For their part, national retailers have recognized their upstate customers’ desire for downtown living and street-level experiences, with Target, Wegmans, and Dollar General among others having designed urban-store models. At the same time, local retailers and restaurateurs are calling on engineers and architects to design an entirely new hybrid space. Buoyed by their successes in home and business deliveries, worried about withstanding future e-commerce inroads, and acknowledging the potential for future shutdowns, they are creating locally sited, “dark” stores and kitchens – thus, capitalizing on their local connectivity and completely bypassing the storefront retail experience.

Meanwhile, given the number of first-floor vacancies and spaces undergoing changes from traditional retail to professional office spaces and even first-floor residential uses, individual property owners and business associations need to improve and standardize window treatments. Such treatments create customer excitement and anticipation, share information, and reinforce existing or desired Main Street “brands.” If the resources are available, community and student projects can be highlighted in storefronts.

In Rochester New York’s East End neighborhood, retailers and office tenants took these branding efforts a step further, collaborating with the City of Rochester and NYSEG on a business-funded, street-pole banner program highlighted by photographs of “local characters” and underlined by business website addresses. Similar, non-commercial banner programs feature local service veterans.

In more than 27 states and an even larger number of municipalities, “art taxes” or “percent for art” laws require developers to spend a fixed percentage-of-development costs on public art and landscape design.

Discounts and coupons, cooperative branding with adjacent stores and product suppliers, pre-sale social media engagement (invitations to a product event or opening), and post-sale engagement and empowerment of consumers as your allied marketing team, these are just a few of the tools left in the traditional retailer’s toolbox, according to Bailey, AIA, an architect, and former Florida community planner. “Business and community leaders would also be wise to lobby for their government services offices to locate on Main Street and consequently bring consumers to town; to program events; and, to build secure and friendly public spaces. The WeWork remote-worker office

rentals are great examples of attracting street-life and consumers.”

90% of retailers use both bricks and mortar and e-commerce sites and social media for customer service interactions... yet another expression of consumer's demands for a 24/7 experience and purchasing opportunity. This shift is propelled by a millennial audience who shop online 67% of the time (versus their baby boomer counterparts, who continue to frequent bricks and mortar locations for 72% of their purchases). New bricks and mortar store openings sagged further in 2018 (3.8%) while on-line stores grew by approximately 15%.

Tom Bailey, AIA NCARB, is senior project manager and Sean Phelan, associate AIA, is the corporate communications manager at HUNT Engineers and Architects,, Rochester, N.Y.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540