

FRAME

THE NEXT SPACE
ISSUE 153
AUTUMN 2023

SPATIAL THERAPY

How interiors can benefit
body and mind

Bp 8 710961 141144
EU €24.96 CHF 33.00 UK £22.00
JP ¥3,800+ tax KR ₩ON 45,000



'WELLNESS SHOULD BE THE FOUNDATION OF ALL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES'



Ian Johnston



Ari Peralta

Robert Thiemann



Post-Covid, personal health and wellbeing have risen to the fore. Retailers are beginning to understand that brick-and-mortar stores can have a positive impact. What exactly is wellbeing in the context of retail and how can design solutions contribute to it? Robert Thiemann explores the topic with two London-based thought leaders: Ian Johnston, founder of retail design consultancy Quinine, and Ari Peralta, founder of research design studio Arigami, which works at the intersection of neuroaesthetics, sensory design and wellbeing.

ROBERT The future of retail is often discussed in terms of offering enhanced in-store experiences and omnichannel integration. Recently, doing so more sustainably is also making its way up the agenda. But can – and should – retail also contribute to our health and wellbeing holistically, beyond selling products?

IAN As an extension of mental health, wellbeing is one of the most significant social issues that remains largely untouched by global retail brands. Let's assume that a retail store can enhance a shopper's wellbeing, albeit fractionally. We believe this is significant enough to justify a retailer's motivation, or even a sense of duty.

No single store or global business will have a sizeable environmental impact through its sustainability practices. Despite this, retailers are beginning to understand the urgency and value of small, collective changes for tackling sustainability-related problems. Retail's influence on social wellbeing is no different.

ARI Retail is exponentially evolving because customer preferences are evolving. Brands have an opportunity to rethink brick-and-mortar by elevating their product and experience offering and making wellness the foundation of all customer experiences. I refer to this next era as the 'transformation economy', a time when experience for experience's sake is not enough. Customers are looking for brands to help empower them and enrich their journey with meaning and purpose.

ROBERT Shopping can be fun but also exhausting. Which spatial conditions cause what we call retail fatigue?

ARI Today, retail is quite overwhelming. Too much product, not enough staff and disjointed sensory stimuli. This situation creates a feeling of sensory overload in our brains and a friction-full shopping experience. Spatial conditions brought on by harsh lighting, secondary noise from technology and chemical odours seem to be among the top reasons why we find retail environments unhealthy and uncomfortable. These poor spatial conditions, paired with an excessive number of visuals, keep the brain in a constant fight-or-flight response. This cortisol-induced state contributes to customer agitation – physically, mentally and emotionally.

IAN The impact of sensory stimuli is dependent on the individual shopper. They may be overwhelming for neurodiverse shoppers, but can also impact neurotypical shoppers. Then again, some may find sensory overload fatiguing or even unbearable, while others may find it stimulating and invigorating.

We strongly believe that when we design considering the margins of society, we design for everybody, and all of society benefits. The supermarket sector is beginning to address neurodiverse shoppers by introducing 'quiet hours' during which lights are dimmed, checkout beepers are disabled and there are no store announcements. Designed to benefit customers with sensory needs, they've also been hugely popular with older customers.

But retailers can also 'design in' stimuli to create a positive experience that counters fatigue. Take a run-of-the-mill transactional shopper journey. By punctuating this shopping experience with playful, educational, social or entertaining moments, retailers can re-energize and replenish shoppers' spirits, alleviating the fatigue they usually experience.

ROBERT If you define wellbeing from a spatial viewpoint, it's about creating conditions in a space that contribute to being well. Think of sunlight, access to nature, clean water and air, and reasonable sound levels. How can brick-and-mortar stores make this possible?

IAN We shouldn't underestimate the value of incorporating natural elements into a space, but that's far easier to achieve in malls and on high streets than in individual stores. With its numerous gardens, Changi Airport in Singapore is a great example of how to take this idea to the max, and it's become a shopping destination in its own right.

It's easier to incorporate features that are more subliminal – such as lighting, sound, air quality and temperature – and introduce systems to control their levels. Today, sophisticated lighting systems can mimic natural light and match our circadian rhythm. The introduction of audio and alteration of sound levels throughout the day can create a specific ambience. Materials can also be incorporated to absorb sound, and air-conditioning systems can manage air quality and temperature.

ARI It makes perfect sense to associate wellbeing with nature, because nature is our ultimate source of balance. It constantly offers our brain trillions of sensory signals, which our evolutionary biology is primed for. From our circadian cycles to our auditory thresholds, nature has and will continue to shape our brain's evolution. Retailers who find inspiration in nature and can successfully translate those elements into a cohesive experience have the potential to enhance customer perception and health. Circadian lighting, spatial sound and non-toxic materials – they all play a significant role in creating a nature-like environment.

ROBERT One tactic to improve the wellbeing of shoppers is to soothe the senses. Which opportunities do you see for retailers in this regard?

IAN As physical retail increasingly becomes more experiential and less transactional, there's a huge opportunity for retailers to develop the full range of sensory stimuli in their in-store experiences to improve shopper wellbeing. The presence of water and its associated sound, visual impact and possibly cooling sensation are undoubtedly very powerful, but they're also challenging to get right and costly to change, as retailers need to continually delight and surprise their shoppers in new ways. »

Supermarkets already use the smell of bread to make us feel hungry and encourage us to purchase more, but it's also a homely, comforting scent that relaxes consumers as they go about their weekly shopping routine. Bookstores use cafés and the aroma of coffee to create a warm, cosy atmosphere, inviting shoppers to stay a while longer.

Retailers should learn from hospitality – from spas, hotels and restaurants that have long used scents, lighting, music and materiality to create specific ambiances. Wander around most high-end hotels and you'll find distinct changes in all these sensory stimuli, depending on whether you're in the lobby, restaurant, bar, lounges, bedrooms or spa areas.

ARI I strongly believe that before brands and designers start layering on sensory components, it's imperative to develop a cohesive sensory design strategy. Most brands onboard sensory experts late in the design process and, more often than not, in silos. This is what creates the friction people don't necessarily see yet can feel.

To successfully create environments that enhance customer wellbeing, brands must first define what wellbeing means to them. This authenticity begins at the top, reflects the corporate side of retail and manifests across all customer touchpoints, including online.

While people are about 99 per cent biologically similar, how we interpret our reality varies significantly. There are specific spatial elements that impact us all, but soothing the senses is quite personal. Blue is not calming for everyone. Understanding that customers may have an array of interpretations and reactions is key. Now, with the rise of technologies such as AI, wearables and sensors, brands have a unique opportunity to capture customers' sensory needs and deliver them in a more personalized and meaningful way.

ROBERT It's vital that those interested in creating spaces that promote wellbeing research and understand behavioural psychology and neuroscience. How can retail designers tap into these scientific fields of research?

ARI Having a design degree is no longer enough. To be successful, designers need to better understand technology, behaviour and how the human brain actually works.

Despite efforts to increase knowledge, most designers find themselves overwhelmed or simply lost when it comes to science and tech. I don't blame them. There's so much pseudoscience and 'marketing research' that dilutes what we truly know, making it confusing and oftentimes going against design intuition. For brands to truly make a holistic impact, they need comprehensive input. This typically involves a team of multidisciplinary experts, not a token scientist.

IAN In terms of neuroaesthetics, it's proven that something pleasing to the eye is good for the brain. Exciting new domains of research are merging psychology, cognitive neuroscience and design. While the relationship between the three is not yet clear, previous studies have found that viewing art improves psychological and physiological states, enhancing wellbeing. A 2006 study by Clow and Fredhoi found that visiting the Guildhall Art Gallery in London lowered participants' salivary cortisol and subjective stress levels. Neuroaesthetics explains how aesthetic experiences can influence our wellbeing – put simply, viewing something visually pleasing leads to positive emotions by activating brain regions associated with reward and emotion processing.

ROBERT Feeling well is closely related to being connected with others. How can retailers empower consumers to connect in meaningful ways?

'Brands don't need purpose. They should help customers achieve *their* purpose'



IAN If we strip retail down to its essence, it's less a place to purchase and more a social pastime. Retailers have lost sight of this over the last few decades in their pursuit of commercial success, yet recent trends are shifting retail back to its original core purpose. First, the growth of e-commerce has begun to free the physical store of its primary duty to facilitate transactions. The resulting emergence of experiential retail is a modern adaptation of its original social and communal role; shopping is a pastime we use to escape, discover and learn. Second, the pandemic stripped societies worldwide of all social interaction, revealing our true dependency on physical retail to fulfil this basic need. Retail must react to this new-found awakening; stores are social spaces that can energize and revitalize society.

For many, an interaction with the postman, the butcher or a local grocer is an important part of social normalcy and may be considered akin to participating in society. As populations age, opportunities for social activities often reduce, as young people tend to dominate hospitality and cultural events. Retail experiences could emerge as a predominant form of leisure among older generations and, as a by-product, create feelings of social integration. With this in mind, targeting older generations in physical retail might be a great social cause with far-reaching benefits. Given its purchasing power and leisure time, targeting this group would also be an astute commercial decision.

For modern brands hoping to captivate younger consumers, the social nature of retail has a different face, as reflected by the growth of branded social experiences. A yoga class at Lululemon or a creative workshop at NikeLab leverages the physical store, naturally bringing people together and creating a sense of community. For younger generations, retail must also reflect the social landscape outside the physical retail store.

ARI Our brain hasn't evolved to recognize brands and companies – instead, we use the same circuitry in our brain we use to communicate with people. In other words, we see brands as people. From store design to social communications, when retailers translate brand characteristics into personal qualities, customers can develop a different kind of relationship with and appreciation for the brand. I've seen technologies such as generative art installations pave a new way for customers to interact, slow down and connect with one another.

During a recent trip to NYC, I visited my friend Refik Anadol's *Unsupervised* installation at MoMA. After observing how people interacted with his 'meditation art', it became obvious that this trend will only grow. People not only sat there for hours, but they also interacted and spoke to one another with peace, kindness and love. This is exactly what retail needs. »

ROBERT Research says joy, hope, inspiration and excitement top the list of emotions people seek more of in their life. How can retailers offer transcendent wellness: losing yourself, forgetting your worries?

IAN

The field of positive psychology has established that being in a 'flow' state – being immersed in an activity and feeling focused, energized and aligned with the task at hand – improves our wellbeing. It's an active meditative state where there's a balance between a person's skills and the challenge of the activity with a clear goal in mind. How flow states influence our wellbeing should be front of mind when designing any human-centred experience, including retail.

Science journal *Environment and Behaviour* published a study analysing the daily experiences and wellbeing of 500 US families. It found that individuals with stronger flow experiences in their leisure activities showed greater levels of wellbeing. Another study by science journal *Leisure Studies* analysed the daily experiences of older adults and found that flow experiences and 'serious leisure' were associated with positive wellbeing. Similar to flow, 'serious leisure' was defined as an activity demanding commitment – something that satisfies with personal or social rewards. This could provide insight into what makes the most rewarding retail experience. Perhaps rather than comfort, we seek a challenge, and rather than service, we seek enrichment.

For brands, the most positive function of a store is to create an environment that facilitates and builds a relationship with customers. This is the ambitious goal of idealistic retail designers and businesses alike. Can retail experiences that encourage a state of flow deliver this desired level of customer attachment to the brand? Research published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that flow-induced activities also establish deep connections to the location in which they take place. We associate our feelings of personal growth, learning and development with that specific environment. Retail must take advantage of this.

The challenge lies in the decision-making that precedes design solutions. Are designers bold enough to create experiences that are challenging rather than comfortable or convenient? Are senior retail leaders willing to make profound decisions to prioritize customer wellbeing in their stores?

ARI

For retail to engage positive emotions, it must first evolve its approach from wellness as a transaction to wellbeing as an outcome. I don't believe retail should be about masking our problems or escapism, but rather about helping us become aware of our present state and inspiring us to overcome our challenges from the inside out. Again, brands don't need purpose. They should help customers achieve *their* purpose.●



'Perhaps rather than comfort, we seek a challenge, and rather than service, we seek enrichment'