

DESIGN DYNAMICS

Navigating the new Complex Landscape of Omnichannel Fashion Retail

edited by Valeria M. Iannilli, Alessandra Spagnoli



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5. Navigating Complexity: The Evolving Role of Design in Omnichannel Retail

*by Valeria M. Iannilli, Alessandra Spagnoli
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5.1 Retail Design as a Fluid and Ever-Changing Discipline

The current retail system is a complex and highly transformative environment. The transformation it has undergone over the last two decades jointly mirrors the change that has taken place within the market competitiveness, the consumer horizon, and technological readiness. Within this context, the different domains' ecosystems and skills that contribute to the shaping and management of the retail experience have multiplied: objectives, processes, and tools have hybridised capturing and adapting to the economic, social, and technological transformations. Similarly, the role of retail design has also radically changed.

Retail design – a discipline that jointly contributes to shaping the consumer experience within a network of both physical and digital spaces and settings – is a relatively new and, at the same time, highly fluid and constantly changing discipline.

Retail design was intended, in its initial connotation, as an area of interest in interior architecture (Kent, 2007; Petermans, 2012). It obtained its first recognition in the 1960s and in a more mature way from the 1980s when brands began to be recognised as capable of encompassing a system of tangible and intangible values that made them distinctive and meaningful for the consumer. It was during these years that retail design developed «a specific character that distinguished its practice from the related fields of corporate, packaging and product design» (Kent, 2007, p. 739), evolving from a

«graphical, 2D approach in the creation of an identity, to the combined concept of external architecture and internal spaces» (Kent, 2003, p. 140). Relying on an initial focus on interior design aspects, the designer's main task was translating the brand image and values into the tangible nature of physical retail spaces. The concept of atmospherics (Kotler, 1974), which meant the control of synaesthetic perceptions within a retail environment in terms of tactile-material, chromatic, olfactory dimensions, and layout management, became central as a tool to influence perception and guide consumer behaviour (Donovan et al., 1982; Gardner & Siomkos, 1986). At the same time, the graphic elements, capable of transferring and transmitting brand identity through visual experiences, became a design component within stores: the corporate image, consisting of elements such as displays, signs, general shop information and many other communication artefacts, was recognised as an important design tool to foster consistency in the consumer experience (Kent & Stone, 2007). In this context, the store's role as a communication channel between the brand and its audience was consolidated.

Since the end of the 1990s, the shift from a product-centric approach to a more service-centric one (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Merz et al., 2009) and, at the same time, a higher emphasis on the emotional and experiential dimension (Hirschman & Stern, 1999; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) has influenced the practice of retailers and designers by promoting retail environments capable of combining entertainment, fun and leisure within spaces conceived as “theatres of experience” (Petermans, 2012). Retail design is increasingly gaining autonomy as a professional practice with distinctive elements from interior design; however, there was still little structured reflection on the discipline.

With the strengthening of the experiential dimension, the discipline of marketing, particularly experiential marketing, increases relevance and becomes a driving force. For a long time, marketing has been driving practices, defining guidelines, and providing both professional practice and theoretical-critical reflection. Similarly, the servitisation process that has affected the production, distribution, and consumption system (Dinges et al., 2015), together with the complexification of the relationships between the different channels and touchpoints (Hickman et al., 2020; Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014) within an

omnichannel environment, has subsequently supported management's leading position. The ever-increasing complexity of retailers' activities and the related back and front-end management processes have required comprehensive governance of the strategic, procedural, and operational dimensions of goods and services flow within the distribution knots (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020) – between suppliers and final customers – capable of ensuring consistency, fluidity, and effectiveness. In this complex context, technological spread and transformation effects were progressively integrated.

Finally, as advanced technologies have been able to trigger a continuous exchange and strengthen the merge between the physical distribution and the consumption experiences' virtual dimension (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Blázquez, 2014), the whole IT sector grew exponentially and quickly in prominence, becoming a driving force in the sector's transformation dynamics. Indeed, the current technological availability impacts all the management flows of goods, services, information, and experiences in the consumer sphere and systematically involves the entire back end (supplier management, fulfilment, CRM, etc.) and front-end (on-site and online customer experience, service assistance, etc.) process chain.

Throughout these transitions, design has been forced to redefine its role and tools in response to the intervening changes: from an approach predominantly grounded in the interior design domain and expertise, retail design has embraced the domains of product design and communication design and, more recently, is finding bridges with service design and interaction design. However, in the face of the transformations that retail design practice has undergone, little research still adopts a holistic approach that reflects on the disciplinary specificities of retail design (Iannilli, 2010; Petermans & Kent, 2016; Quartier, 2016). Most studies, in fact, tend to adopt a vertical approach to the different areas of design: interior design, communication design and product design (Christiaans & Almendra, 2012).

Consequently, nowadays, retail design is calling upon to envision how to interrelate with all other domains and retail functions – from marketing to management to IT – to evolve into a discipline that truly embraces interdisciplinarity and keeps bringing innovation to the sector.

5.2 The Design's Role in the Omnichannel Retail Environment

In this complex context characterised by a co-presence of different actors, concerns, competencies and sometimes even objectives, the building and managing of the knowledge network that “informs” contemporary retail takes on central importance. This entails questioning phenomena such as production and technological processes, competitive systems, the dissemination of knowledge and the drive for innovation, adopting a new point of view that is aware of the framework's dynamism.

From the point of view of the innovation impulse promoted by design, this often resulted in an innovation of meaning. Concerning design-led innovation processes, Verganti recognised, in addition to design's commitment to improving functional performance or use, a major commitment to infusing new meanings into products, services and processes (Verganti, 2009). The key capability of design-driven innovation is to access and share knowledge, identify critical actors with whom to share the “design context”, and convey and recombine such knowledge to build new value propositions (Verganti, 2008). This peculiarity of design-driven innovation relates to the fact that design, among the projectual disciplines, is the one that has performed a reinterpretation of disciplinary boundaries the most, «transforming dividing boundaries into platforms for disciplinary interaction» (Iannilli, 2010, p. 127). Within these “dividing boundaries”, design has recognised opportunities for coordinating and integrating different disciplinary knowledge and, thus, a favourable terrain for creation and innovation.

Retail design is recognised precisely for this cross-disciplinary nature as a practice that arises and develops from interaction with other knowledge areas. Within this scenario, retail design has moved, and still moves today, in its ongoing transformation, along three interconnected directions that need to be questioned and investigated: design as a “navigator” of complexity; design as a bearer of open knowledge; design as an agent of synthesis and analysis.

5.2.1 Design as a “Navigator” of Complexity

Retail today goes beyond its physical perimeter and explodes into new virtual and phygital platforms along new customer journeys, where an organised network of new channels and touchpoints ensures novel customer experiences. The overlapping and merging of physical and digital dimensions, the multiplicity of streams and players operating within distribution systems, and the focus on the processual dimension of the consumer experience represent some of the aspects that make the sector today a complex system: a system composed of variable and strongly interconnected elements that are indivisible and require a “holistic” approach to their investigation and handling.

This scenario returns, in parallel, the complexity that the designer assumes in defining new meaningful projects, increasingly informed by a considerable amount of multidisciplinary knowledge. Designing within the retail system means tackling and holding together technical-operational, strategic-communicative and business-commercial knowledge and practices and embodying solutions capable of holding together material and immaterial company and consumer values.

In this regard, the need emerges to create and experiment with new design tools and methods capable of taking into equal consideration the different knowledge domains that enter into the new retail innovation processes, not only with respect to the new omnichannel approach but also to the apparent new service orientation.

If we consider design as a cognitive and operational tool employed to envisage change – ranging between what is and what could be – the designer’s attitude to “embrace discontinuity and indeterminacy” (Michlewski, 2008) is a way of accepting and navigating complexity. This approach, by assuming to «engage in a process that is not predetermined or planned ahead in detail and where outcomes are unknown or uncertain» (Michlewski, 2008, p. 380), allows the designer to recognise the lack, or inadequacy, of codified operational tools to deal with this complexity and thus prompts to use old tools innovatively, perhaps reconfiguring them, or creating new ones from scratch by operating inter- or trans-disciplinary syntheses. Thus, design can provide a framework of meaning to the project within a mobile and in transformation landscape.

5.2.2 Design as a Bearer of Open Knowledge

Today's retail environments require knowledge beyond multidisciplinary and the ability to interact with other knowledge fields and share interpretative codes and research methods. If humanistic and social science research, economic-managerial research, and business research have already been contributing fruitfully to the implementation of innovation in retail formats and concepts for some time, the current role of digital technologies, servitisation processes and the new circular economy, which characterise the emerging retail panorama, point to the necessary inclusion of new variables within retail design contexts. The urge to call for the intrinsically interdisciplinary character that characterises retail design comes from the need for openness to these new variables.

The design activity is the result of a complex knowledge that places itself comprehensively and pragmatically with respect to the necessary know-how related to the competitive company needs, to the customer centrality, to the product system in a retail omnichannel environment, in which the physical space is more and more “augmented space” (where interior design, communication, interaction and services design operate in an integrated way). In this context, the design concept becomes the unifying setting capable of giving significance to the variables required to address a precise demand for enhancement, innovation, and competitive value.

The clear separation between technical skills and management skills, between specialised knowledge and organisational knowledge loses its importance in virtue of the need to build “bridges” between the various company functions and processes, to trigger dialogue and information and knowledge transfer processes, to manage relationships, even conflictual ones, and to tackle complex problems and solutions in a proactive manner (Iannilli, 2010, p. 140). Design is among the disciplines that have most frequently questioned its role, disciplinary boundaries, and methodologies, and, in light of this, it is by its very nature an open discipline: open to change, open to transformation and open to accepting the instances of other know-how, skills and techniques, offering itself as a “facilitator of flows”. In the retail field, this system of flows and nodes is constantly changing, and

the instances that pass through it – of a managerial-competitive nature, associated with consumption transformation and driven by technological innovation – follow largely unpredictable trajectories. The discipline’s plasticity and systemic approach (Jones, 2014; Ryan, 2014) thus appear functional in handling this unpredictability by proposing open, porous, “mobile” solutions.

5.2.3 Design as an Agent of Synthesis and Analysis

The complexity of doing design, today and especially in a system as articulated as retail, emphasises the need to work for strongly multidisciplinary teams that operate in different project stages. Traditionally, design is associated with the role of director of the design process, and this is tied, on the one hand, to the ability to visualise and represent complex systems and, on the other, to the ability to create a ground for sharing and consensus between the different players involved in the process thanks to the ability of coding and decoding – carried out through representation – which is part of every design activity. Designers, often integrated within extended project teams, assume a multifaceted role that goes beyond their design responsibilities, involving the crucial function of mediators, or facilitators, between team members (Celaschi, 2008; Minder & Heidemann Lassen, 2018). Within multidisciplinary contexts, in particular, design can contribute by acting as a facilitator both at the process level (guiding through a flexible and open co-creation process, introducing creative methods and techniques, providing external information, or helping to create acceptance) and at the level of creative input (inspiring new ideas and visions, supporting exploration and visualising ideas) (Minder & Heidemann Lassen, 2018). Indeed, in optimal scenarios and by their cultural and traditional grounding, designers strive to know and understand the different disciplines’ technical lexicons and interpret the heterogeneous contributions of the various experts that make up the team. In this role, designers are often considered pivotal “synthesisers” within the project team.

Complementing this role of “synthesisers”, a second aspect also emerges, complementary to the first, which sees them as capable of

«“looking at a situation from a wide variety of perspectives”, bringing together “humanistic standpoint”, “deep understanding” and technical limitations» (Michlewski, 2008, p. 377). In this sense, the designer’s role appears apparently divergent: on the one hand, creating connections; on the other hand, bringing a different point of view and exploring further problems and opportunities.

In the retail context, designers have the potential to express a broad spectrum of competencies, including strategic design, experience design, communication design, interaction design and service design. Furthermore, by making a substantial contribution as cognitive mediators, their role can be functional as a nexus between business entities (such as sales managers, sales associates, and agents) and key participants involved in upstream processes (including the domain of consumption behaviour and scenarios, and trends research) (Iannilli, 2010). A figure of connection and integration between the different knowledge involved, in contact with both technical and managerial instances and those of consumers.

5.3 A Still Ongoing Discussion on the Retail Designer’s Role and Competencies

Considering the complexification of contemporary retail processes, objectives and even boundaries, the discussion on the skills and competencies a retail designer should possess today is running and still open (Claes et al., 2016; Iannilli et al., 2019; Morone, 2016; Quartier et al., 2020). This discussion is also informed by the retail field’s change, which has led to a multiplication, overlapping and interconnection of spaces, times, and occasions to experience products and services.

In this context, the tasks of the retail designer have become increasingly broader, moving from the area of interior design to the field of experience design and now encompassing the domains of service and interaction design. At the same time, other disciplines have become increasingly relevant, such as marketing, management, and IT. We can say that today, they are driving the transformation, challenging

design in its capacity to be a process facilitator, knowledge aggregator and synthesiser.

Within this highly fluid scenario within which design operates on different fronts and transversal across knowledge domains and expertise, the discussion about the current role and specificity of retail design is relevant but still unstructured. For this reason, discuss processes and methodologies supporting retail design appears relevant and promising. The following chapters are part of this research stream by proposing a reflection on what and how interdisciplinary tools can be helpful to facilitate the design process and promote innovation in retail and by presenting, through a series of experiments, a design-led operating model for omnichannel retail in different disciplinary contexts.

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The fashion industry is entering the dynamic global competitive market, promoting various actions prioritising design, creativity, sustainability, and technological advancement as pivotal factors. At the same time, it is re-imagining its business models to adapt to the changing landscape. The rise of pervasive connectivity, intuitive interfaces and innovative interaction channels has triggered a revolution in fashion retail, reshaping customer behaviour and expectations. The traditional retail framework has evolved into a fully interconnected omnichannel system. This transformation is characterised by the proliferation of physical and virtual channels and touch points and by the adoption of a more flexible and integrated approach.

In this dynamic context, design plays a central role, possessing the ability to impart meaning to the production and distribution system. Design-led innovation represents an incremental form of innovation that injects a nuanced range of meaning into the marketplace, extending beyond tangible objects, including discourses, expressions, narratives, visual images, symbols, metaphors, and spaces.

The book analyses the multifaceted nature of the fashion retail experience through the lens of the design discipline, aiming to contextualise the evolution of retail within increasingly complex processes, networks and interconnections, both theoretically and practically. The focus is on retail design, delving into the new skills required and the valuable tools needed to apply them in inherently multidisciplinary contexts. Ultimately, the aim is to navigate the intricate terrain of retail evolution and shed light on the evolving role of design in this multifaceted sector.

FrancoAngeli

La passione per le conoscenze