1 Store atmosphere as a preferential dimension of the store experience

1 The store as an emblematic experience

Through the years, the roles and functions of the store have gradually been expanding. Today, in fact, we've reached the point that the store is universally seen as the means that industry and distribution use to plan and manage the process of communication with consumers, and the place where this happens. Consumers, in turn, make their final choices by mediating a number of factors, both internal and external to the store, in a more or less conscious way: the physical impulses of the product (functional features, size, packaging, brand) where it's located (the store, the layout, the display) and how much it costs. All these aspects interact to influence the purchase decision process.

While recognizing the importance of external factors, the store can no longer be exclusively interpreted as a commercial sales tool. Indeed, it's through communication – the exchange of verbal and non-verbal messages – that customers adopt and modify their behaviors. Put another way, industry and distribution together establish a communication process with customers, with the store serving as the setting and the vehicle for this interaction. The primary aim is to communicate the value of the product assortment (Zaghi, 2013).

In fact, the store has great theoretical value, which parallels its concrete contribution to the consumption context: environment is the outcome of a cognitive process, not the product of an existing reality. People are the space that they perceive; better still, they produce that space by inhabiting it. This relationship, referred to as *enaction*, connotes a simultaneous exchange of subject and object, which only exists in perfect synchronicity.

In the circularity of perception and action, worlds are continually being produced by the knowing subject: a story of reciprocal coupling is being constructed between the world (or the reality that is being known) and the knowing subject. As we will explore further in this book, there is a seamless contemporaneity between subject and object, implicit in the "production" of space, space which is indelibly marked by mass media and mediatization.

Kotler (1973) was the first marketing management researcher to grasp the significance of the place where goods are purchased and consumed, in particular the atmosphere of this place. He pointed out that sales environments could be designed to influence purchase decisions, in some cases even more effectively than the product itself.

However, as we'll discuss in detail below, it was environmental psychology which set out to analyze the variables that create store atmosphere. More specifically, this discipline explores the capacity of all these different elements to influence emotional states, and consequently purchase behavior, and how this comes about.

Naturally, at a managerial level, store atmosphere is also recognized as a key ingredient for creating a purchase experience, and as such a differentiating factor. The growing number of firms coming from highly evolved distribution contexts, the rise of ecommerce, and an increasingly attentive and discriminating clientele: all these trends force stores to look for new sources of differentiation for their offerings and to find innovative alternatives for generating value and consolidating customer relations.

The literature on economics and marketing further underscores the critical nature of store atmosphere, while adopting an experiential viewpoint that accentuates multisensory perception. This approach highlights the fact that when individuals are faced with offerings of goods and services which they may often perceive as undifferentiated, the only route to securing competitive advantage is to give them a memorable purchase and/or consumption experience. To do so, all the senses must be activated (sight, smell, sound, taste and touch) to create the perception of positive emotions, which in turn lead to the behaviors that are advantageous to the company.

Summing up, then, space communicates, conveys and sells the image of the company. This image depends not only on the mix of services the store offers, but also on the atmosphere it provides. This is what shapes the perceptions that customers experience when they see the store from

the outside and spend time inside. This atmosphere is what distinguishes the store's very personality.

People who go inside and explore this retail space have to be able to relate on a personal level to its style – a combination of the atmosphere and the communication of the values that customers aspire to. The store needs to express the possibility of living the experience of the brand/store identity, sparking emotions by being unique. If the environment represents an amalgamation of the values of the brand/store (equity), it will stimulate customers in a positive way, offering them a product that is the sum of all its tangible and intangible parts. Likewise, by adapting to decision-making criteria, the store environment can facilitate customer choices, rendering them more stimulating and pleasant from an experiential standpoint as well.

2 Store atmosphere

Given that atmosphere can help establish the image and competitive positioning of a store, we need to understand how this process works. The basic premise is very simple to define, but complex to manage. As we discussed before, customers perceive the atmosphere through their senses, not by evaluating the offering in rational or economic terms. In fact, store atmosphere is connoted with aspects spanning from aesthetics to emotions. Consequently, it's no simple thing to come up with an objective definition of atmosphere, based on unambiguous dimensions and clear-cut characteristics. Atmosphere instead depends on subjective perceptions. It's the silent language of communication: an ever-present quality of the surrounding environment that can be described in sensorial terms. Specifically, these four senses are primarily involved:

- *sight*: color, lighting, size, shape;
- *hearing*: volume, tone;
- *smell*: scent, freshness; and
- *touch*: softness, smoothness, temperature.

Although taste is not directly associated with atmosphere, certain stimuli can elicit memories of particular flavors. From an operational standpoint, store atmosphere is the result of the combined effect of a series of tangible and intangible factors. These, along with assortment, price, and service

policies, contribute to creating image. The components of store atmosphere can be grouped together in four areas (Zaghi, 2006, 2008):

1. *Exterior design* is everything that communicates with people before they enter the store. This encompasses the structural elements of the store that visual merchandising exploits: the façade, the store sign, the entrance, the store windows; the height, size and unique features of the building; and the parking area. Added to these are adjacent stores, along with the look of the surrounding area; taken together, all this characterizes the store setting.
2. *Interior design*, or the elements that characterize the internal environment in terms of flooring, lighting and air conditioning systems, perimeter walls, dressing rooms, elevators, stairs, furnishings, multimedia kiosks, children's play areas and uniforms for sales staff. Again, in the vein of multisensory communication, scents, music and colors also come into play here.
3. *Layout*, that is, visual merchandising decisions for organizing space in the store, which determine the size and position of the areas allocated for sales, displays, customer service and personnel. In mapping the internal traffic flow, the store layout also sets out the width of the aisles, the display fixtures and criteria for grouping merchandise, and the display sequence and management for each department.
4. *Interior displays* tie into visual merchandising activity relating to techniques and methods for displaying items, allocating display space to products, and in-store posters and signage.
5. *Point of Purchase (POP) communication,* which refers to support material for displays and sales provided by producers with the aim of guaranteeing a recognizable, preferential, exclusive space for their products and/or brands, to draw attention to them in the store (Zaghi, 2013).

So as we can see, atmosphere is a multi dimensional concept that comes from merging several factors, accentuating one or another depending on the distribution format in question.

3 Thematic universes

We've often reiterated the need to create a store identity that is clear and distinctive to customers thanks to a unique, unmistakable image. This is an invaluable source of sustainable competitive advantage grounded in

differentiation. Developing a theme may pave the way to achieving this goal. In fact, a similar strategy is a way to act on customers' affective system, distinguishing the store by staging an original, evocative story that conveys an identity, a style, a life philosophy. "Theming" is an actual communication strategy reflecting the thematic development of the brand identity, and ultimately integrating with the interior retail space with an eye to creating a captivating environment that can immerse customers in the story that the store wants to tell.

Communication systems that revolve around themes are certainly one of the most investigated topics in the field of design. A theme might be based on a variety of languages variously associated with aspects such as: tradition, culture, entertainment, geography, history, technology, and many more. In concrete terms, the most common themes we find today are: status, tropical paradise, the Wild West, classical civilization, vintage, Arabian fantasy, urban, fortress/surveillance architecture, modernism, progress.

Whatever the theme, the key is to figure out what will actually fascinate and captivate consumers. Added to the pleasure of making a purchase and "playing store," which essentially is what shopping can be, the idea is to set the stage for product images with an eye to winning over customers. As players in a new multisensory culture, customers don't necessarily go into a store to buy. Instead they may also (or only) want to catch the latest trends, or take part in a collective performance, the dramatization of a lifestyle that they may or may not feel to be their own. More or less unconsciously, customers get a taste of the performance, the rite, the pantomime that is played out just for them, to seduce them and prompt them to buy.

So this approach to store design actually resembles set design, where the aim is to reconstruct an environment that encourages customers to become actors playing parts in a scene. On a design level, this means translating every single communication tool into a chosen theme, to make the expressive choices come together and the representational processes for each artifact converge, aligning with a repertoire of signs that blend in with or belong to the thematic universe of the store. Customers find themselves in a dramatized space where a world is constructed by working and acting on a representation, never a believable reality.

In order for all of this to occur, four guiding principles apply:

- An engaging theme has to alter visitors' sense of reality, removing them from their daily routines and establishing a new sense of place (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 – A country setting in a French pâtisserie.

- An all-encompassing backdrop must be created, combining space, time, and matter to form a compact, realistic whole (Fig. 2).
- The theme must be reinforced by offering a variety of "sets" in the same place (Fig. 3).
- The theme must be consistent, harmonizing with the identity of the company that stages the experience, as far as possible (Fig. 4).

Though by now theming is a common strategy in modern sales outlets, the concept store offers the most emblematic example of this trend. Beyond selling products, the main goal of this distribution format is selling a gratifying experience, one that's consistent with the corporate philosophy being dramatized.

Here the customer is a spectator first, and a buyer second. Being welcomed into the store and actually making a purchase become two complementary and conjoint moments in the same phase of customer service.

In every sector we find numerous companies that have opted for the concept store format. Some examples are pictured below: Agent Provocateur (Fig. 5), American Girl (Fig. 6), Disney (Fig. 7), M&M (Fig. 8), Nike (Fig. 9), Rainforest Café (Fig. 10), and Replay (Fig. 11).

Figure 2 – Stepping into the past in an English pastry shop.

Figure 3 – The bedroom in an apartment morphs into a store for 55 DSL.

Figure 4 – High Tech Milano has the look of a charming souk, where customers can wander around and be inspired by new ideas and motivations to make a purchase.

Figure 5 – The dressing room resembles an alcove in Agent Provocateur store in London.

Figure 6 – American Girl Place in New York welcomes children into the world of the famous dolls, without missing the opportunity to teach them a lesson in positive values.

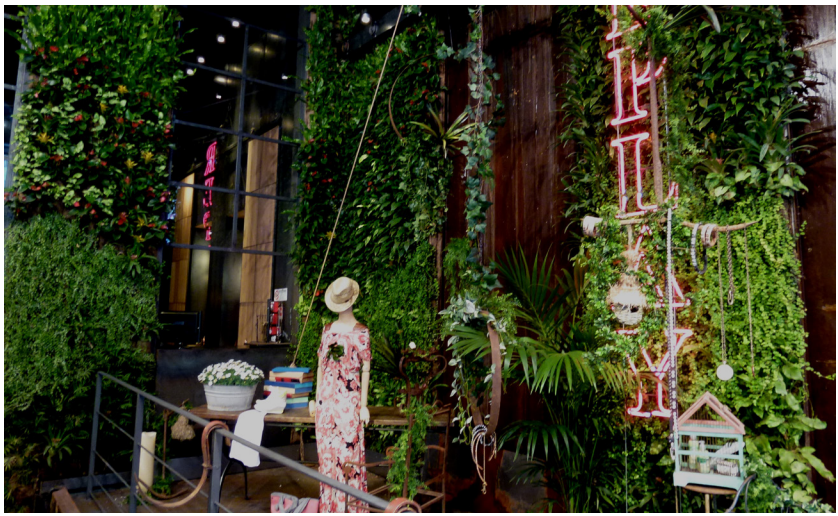
Figure 7 – A detail of the magical atmosphere of a Disney Store, where enchanted castles and fantastical worlds, out of space and time, delight old and young customers alike.

Figure 8 – Millions of candies and giant M&Ms characters tower above customers at M&M's World in New York.

Figure 9 – Gigantic mannequins look like real-life basketball players striking incredibly dynamic poses that reinforce the positioning of the brand and craft a theatrical atmosphere at Nike Town in New York.

Figure 10 – The Rainforest Café in Chicago faithfully reproduces the theme of the chain: from indoor waterfalls that create torrential rainstorms, to aquariums, to tropical plants that create a frame for the exotic environment.

Figure 11 – At Replay in Milan customers can breathe in the country atmosphere thanks to natural materials glowing with special-effect lighting: from the wooden shelves and flooring to the resin tables, to porphyry and more wooden flooring, to vertical gardens – all this creates a highly theatrical scene.



In Italy, the undisputed pioneer of this philosophy is Elio Fiorucci with the concept store he invented in the mid-1960s, inspired by Carnaby Street in London, a temple of the youth culture of the times. The first Fiorucci department store, designed by the sculptor Amalia Del Ponte, opened in May 1967 in Milan's Galleria Passarella. The famous Italian singer Adriano Celentano performed at the grand opening of the store, which presented a style that was perfectly in tune with the spirit of the times: iconoclastic, free and carefree, full of color, sensual, seductive, unique. Here's a description from the newspapers of the day: "The entire space is opaque white and shiny cornflower blue. It's the biggest, craziest, most extravagant store ever." The multisensory environment owes its success in part to a captivating dramatization based on the cultural values of love, imagination and irony. The Fiorucci store headlined as a newsworthy, cultural event that created media buzz simply due to its very existence.

4 Interaction between the atmosphere and the customer

Initial attempts to model the influence of atmosphere on customer reactions date back to Mehrabian and Russell's work (1974). Within the context of environmental psychology, these authors proposed a causal model to explain the relationship between environmental factors and individual behavior. Basing their study on the cognitivist paradigm, Stimulus-Organism-Response, Mehrabian and Russell proved that physical or social stimuli in a given environment, together with individual personality, directly impact people's emotional states and consequently their behavior. Specifically, four groups of variables constitute this model: environmental stimuli, personality variables, emotional states and response behaviors.

1. *Environmental stimuli*. The effect of the environment on individuals' emotional spheres is assessed by means of the information rate, i.e. the amount and intensity of information that people are capable of absorbing when they come in contact with various characteristics of the environment.
2. *Personality variables*. Individuals can express different orientations with respect to hedonism, which means they can be receptive in different ways to environmental stimuli. Specifically, the authors differentiate between *screeners* and *non-screeners*, pointing out that the latter are more inclined to use all their senses in combination.

3. *Emotional states*. We can use three categories in analyzing emotional reactions elicited by environment-generated stimuli which subsequently mediate behavior.
   - *Pleasure (P)*, connoted with feelings of well-being, joy, happiness, or satisfaction;
   - *Arousal (A)*, the level of stimulation and activation; and
   - *Dominance (D)*, knowledge of and control over the environment; the freedom to act.
4. *Response variables*. All the behavioral responses of an individual can be classified as *approach* or *avoidance*, and are found in four possible situations:
   - a physical desire to stay or leave a given environment, associated with the intention to visit that place;
   - a desire to simply look around, in other words, not to interact; this relates to seeking out and coming in contact with environmental stimuli;
   - the desire to communicate with others, or to avoid interaction and ignore the chance to dialog with other customers or personnel; and
   - the increase or decrease in satisfaction with respect to expectations, relating to the frequency of store visits and the time and money spent there.

In 1980, a variation of Mehrabian and Russell's model was proposed by Pratt and Russell, who eliminated the dominance factor. In fact, their research demonstrated that pleasure and arousal were totally independent in all circumstances. On the contrary, dominance seemed to require cognitive interpretation by the subject in question, and as a result was dependent on the other two factors. The new bi-dimensional model specifically identified two related dimensions as the outcome of every interaction of pleasure and arousal, and generated eight descriptors for emotional reactions to environment: pleasant, arousing, exciting, distressing, unpleasant, gloomy, sleepy and relaxing.

The PAD Model (Pleasure, Arousal and Dominance), introduced by Mehrabian and Russell, was applied for the first time in a commercial context by Donovan and Rossiter (1982) to demonstrate the relationship between the physical environment, and emotional states and behaviors of customers in the store. These two researchers also showed that dominance did not seem directly related to any behavioral response. Their results sug-

gested the need to re-conceptualize store atmosphere in light of its power of persuasion.

At a store level, the PAD model validates a series of observations made by Lillis, Markin and Narayana (1976) a few years prior, based on their exploratory study on the social and psychological significance of space. Here are their key considerations.

Space is a key modeler and modifier of behavior. The relationship between environment and behavior is increasingly clear: while people shape space, space in turn shapes people's behavior.

As a delimited environment, the store impacts customer behavior through the psychology of stimulation. The environment is capable of creating expectations and influencing behavior through stimulation. (For example, people lower their voices and stop smiling when they walk into a bank.) It follows, then, that store designers can evoke desired expectations by exploiting the psychology of stimulation. Generally speaking, a commercial setting is full of stimuli: innovations, the element of surprise, the quantity of information. Customers who are exposed to input from various design factors will experience a variety of emotional states which revolve around three major axes: pleasure/displeasure, excitement/boredom, influence/passivity. Behaviors spring from a combination of these emotional states based on attraction or repulsion. Attraction translates into a desire to inhabit the space, to spend time there, to explore, to interact with other people or objects in the space (via visual and/or physical contact). Attraction is also expressed by a desire to return to the same space again and again. Repulsion, instead, manifests in a feeling of discomfort and malaise that gives rise to anxiety, boredom, a disinclination to socialize, and lastly a desire to leave and never come back.

The store impacts customer perceptions and attitudes. Store design, the essence of atmosphere, is a source of information for customers. Store features can be designed to encourage intense sensorial involvement (lighting, department divisions, layout, displays, colors and so forth). Perception, instead, is a highly psychological activity relating to the process of converting sensorial input into meaningful data. Customers learn while they perceive, and what they learn influences what they perceive. A well-known fact is that reactions to physical space impact reactions to the shopping experience in a given retail environment. Behavior not only depends on perceptions, but

on attitudes as well. Attitudes are commonly understood as states of readiness to act which, when triggered by appropriate stimuli, translate into action. Summing up, then, the environment, design, and structure of the sales outlet can not only supply the proper stimuli for turning intentions into behaviors, but can actually modify customers' attitudes and impact their final choices.

The use of space and the design of the store can be planned to trigger desired customer reactions. Like a Skinner Box, the sales outlet can be planned to reinforce customer behavior. The essence of store design can be summed up in: observing and analyzing the boundary between behavioral states, from an environmental and behavioral standpoint; defining alternative behavioral states; and controlling environment contingencies which engender and maintain the desired alternative state.

After the pioneering studies of the 1960s and 1970s, marketing literature on the topic of customer/environment interaction has been and continues to be particularly prolific. Following the stream of environmental psychology, a great deal of research has fully corroborated that every element of store design influences individual perceptions and behavior, either directly or indirectly, in terms of: final purchases, store image, perceived quality of service, time spent in the store, attitude toward the store, aesthetic and hedonistic pleasure, self-affirmation of individual identity, and consumption of personal transpositions, such as utopias.

From a methodological standpoint, some researchers considered the impact of single variables of atmosphere through laboratory studies; others, instead, dealt with atmosphere as a holistic concept. Despite their differing approaches, all academic investigation concurs in asserting that atmosphere, although unrelated to the product, is a critically important factor. In fact, atmosphere deeply impacts perceptive processes, and likewise the nature and intensity of the feelings consumers experience. These impressions are subsequently linked to an image of the store, and can reinforce or challenge the consumer choice.

So we can conclude that psychology also takes into account the affective and emotive component to explain customer behavior. The intensity of emotional reactions to a store is actually directly related to elements that are intrinsic to the perceived "form." To clarify, a store can release a lived experience; the image of a store is the product of a reaction between the customer experience and the components of the physical environment. In

other words, the "form/design" exerts influence on consumer behavior, which also depends on the methods for perceiving and storing information: form is knowledge, emotion, and relation.

4.1 *Spheres of action*

There is a vital difference between proposed atmosphere and perceived atmosphere: the first is the set of sensorial qualities that the store designer tries to incorporate in a given space; the second, being the fruit of subjective perception, can vary greatly from customer to customer. In other words, merchandise is located in a space that has certain sensorial elements which are perceived only in part by each individual and in an entirely subjective fashion. These elements act on customers' cognitive and affective systems, influencing the information they note and their emotional state, and as a result, the probability that they will make a purchase.

Atmosphere can impact purchase behavior in three ways:

1. as a means for creating attention;
2. as a means for creating a message; and
3. as a means for creating perceptions.

In the first two cases, atmosphere actively intervenes on the decision to choose a given store by transmitting distinctive stimuli which might convey, for instance, the level of attention that customers will receive. This not only highlights the differences between distributors, but also supplies the basis for identifying the stores where they can make purchases.

In the third case, instead, atmosphere directly impacts the decision-making process in choosing a specific product, encouraging impulse purchases in particular. As regards this last aspect, the literature on psychology affirms that a pleasurable, comfortable sales environment elicits feelings of happiness and satisfaction that can enhance buying behavior, especially impulse purchases.

Specifically, research offers a series of empirical findings showing that a pleasant environment:

- engenders a positive state of mind which makes individuals feel inclined to reward themselves more generously, and act with greater energy, spontaneity and freedom;
- makes shopping more fun and fulfilling;

- prompts customers to stay in the store longer, spending more time browsing; and
- increases interaction between shoppers and sales staff.

Naturally, there is no such thing as an ideal atmosphere, because every market is made up of unique individuals. In light of this, we should keep in mind that in purchase decisions, the "situation" is important, that is, all environmental factors that determine the context in which a certain item is purchased in a given space and time. Five of these factors are key:

1. *Physical setting*, that is, the physical and spatial features of the environment;
2. *Social setting*, referring to anyone who interacts with customers while they're making their purchases, including sales staff and other people in the store at the time;
3. *Temporal perspective*, in other words, the amount of time customers have to make a purchase;
4. *Defining the task*, that is, the motivations behind the purchase; and
5. *Antecedent states*, or the temporary physiological states and moods of customers.

In light of our discussion above, what's clear is that atmosphere proves to be most important in highly competitive arenas, where other retailing tools have gradually been neutralized, and a strong homogeneity in distribution has emerged in terms of assortment and price. In such cases, atmosphere can play a key role in generating a differential advantage, becoming a useful tool for attaining a distinctive market positioning. Likewise, atmosphere is also vitally important when products are marketed by targeting specific social classes or customer categories with particular lifestyles. In these circumstances, atmosphere must be consistent with the market segment in question.

Therefore, to have a successful offering, planning the general atmosphere of the store is essential. In fact, firms must coordinate all the different ingredients of atmosphere, especially because they have very little time to capture customers' attention. Experts calculate, for example, that a store window has a mere eleven seconds on average to transmit its message, while inside the store, around twenty seconds is enough to shape customers' overall impressions.

Consequently, a sequential planning process must be followed that is extremely consistent across every phase.

More specifically:

- defining the store's target segment;
- understanding the profile of these customers (discovering whether or not they're interested in a purchase experience);
- pinpointing the variables of atmosphere that reinforce the emotional reactions that customers are looking for; and
- determining whether the resulting store atmosphere can compete effectively in the market.

In summary, what appears clearer than ever is the impossibility of competing by utilizing traditional marketing levers alone, such as product benefits. For example, today such benefits are beginning to all look alike due to the intense competition on consumer markets. So the key to differentiating products is to offer the emotion of an experience, integrating products into a new amalgamation that takes into account the complexities of the personality of each individual consumer. Experiences provide sensorial, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and relational values, which are exactly what brands can leverage to satisfy a need that has been emerging for some time: to build a true relationship with the consumer.

5 A unique experience

At this point we can draw a clear and incontrovertible conclusion: planning displays means, first and foremost, taking on the perspective of the customer. The aim in doing so is to observe, or better still, to live the entire customer experience firsthand, assessing all the opportunities for establishing a relationship between environment and behavior. If we begin with the assumption that environmental stimuli can create expectations and shape behavior, designing spaces and displaying products are activities that can be deliberately and consciously planned to trigger desired reactions in customers.

So the store must become a medium that has the capacity to excite emotions and engage customers in a gratifying experience. From a simple information collection point and a place to buy goods and services, the store has to turn into a place where people want to pass the time, where they find entertainment. The concept of a store is no longer simply the outcome of architectural choices; instead it represents a system in which

design means realizing the distinctive elements of a brand/store based on emerging or consolidated aesthetic and communicative trends.

In other words, the store can and must stand out, reinforcing its identity by activating and nurturing an effective and immediate communication process, one that connects with customers in the final stage of their purchase decision process. This means guaranteeing a spectacular context that offers a unique experience in the very same moment in which customers are actually making their purchase. An engaging environment that sparks their interest, while spotlighting product functionality as a priority value: the setting in which all this unfolds represents an increasingly critical success factor. What's more, the store needs to be interpreted in recreational terms, so that customers derive satisfaction from the store visit itself; the possibility of a purchase is secondary. The store becomes place to live the experience of the brand/store identity, where people find pleasure spending time during their visit.

The economic crisis of recent years has redefined purchase models, making hedonistic needs even more pressing. The gradual increase in the weight of ecommerce can't help but reinforce this trend. The growing desire to satisfy needs that are educational, not only functional, makes the hedonistic approach to the store even more relevant today. When people go shopping they're looking for an experience that goes beyond the purchases they may make. More and more often, in fact, it is experience that represents a basic driver for the desire to visit a store. Customers aren't simply searching for a product; instead they're seeking a gratifying experience; the store visit itself becomes the ultimate goal of shopping.

Today more than ever, especially in light of the growing popularity of online commerce, the store must put on a show, beginning with the atmosphere it creates in the retail space. This space must be designed not only to sell, but also to communicate and enhance the offering, perhaps by organizing events to draw in customers, bringing them in contact with the offering and tempting them to try out the products. While it's true that customers more and more often buy a product for its unique, inherent connotations, the store must still enable them to evaluate the entire impalpable universe encapsulated in the values of that item. New concepts must be conceived and designed so that customers feel called on to live and share a multisensory experience, one that immerses them in a symbolic universe where they play an active part. They can also use sensory stimuli to intervene in an emotional sphere as well as a physical one.

In other words, once and for all the store must become a relational platform which tells a story that customers can live and enjoy, starting from the moment they make a purchase. The values of the commercial offering are described in a consistent context, where all the visual merchandising and multisensory communication levers are designed and managed to create and enhance desire, also through techniques leveraging emotions and sensory perceptions (Zaghi, 2013).

If this doesn't happen, then the question is not so much what the future of the store will be, but if there will be a future at all, in light of the changes underway in purchase behavior that are driving the dissemination of the showrooming phenomenon.

6 Cost-benefit analysis in an experiential approach

As we've said before, the experience strategy paves the way for innovation and competitive differentiation which are more difficult for competitors to imitate, especially if they are linked to territorial and environmental specificities. Nonetheless, the costs associated with this strategy may be greater than what a distributor would normally spend. These costs can be broken down into five categories:

1. *cost of planning and monitoring*, relating to creating and designing an experience, and later tracking results;
2. *cost of purchasing materials* to set the stage for the experience and create a unique atmosphere that can clearly stand out from the competition;
3. *cost of personnel* as far as training employees, and external personnel when needed to stage special events;
4. *cost of space,* meaning the opportunity cost of using space like a stage, or hosting events that substitute product displays; and
5. *cost of communications* linked to the need to give visibility and notoriety to the experiential positioning.

Beyond the possibility that some cost items might be overlooked when calculating profits, other risks inherent to experience-building strategies derive from neglecting to clearly define the expected benefits.

First, creating an experience can translate into a search for the *novelty effect*. In this case, there is a chance that the experience itself remains only fleeting and temporary, if its "staying power" isn't shored up by incremen-

tally renewing key elements of the activity. The reasoning here is that the novelty effect tends to wear off quickly, leaving in its wake a passive attitude that won't generate significant medium-term results.

However, there is also risk associated with applying joint strategies which attempt to build experiences by utilizing complex atmospheres and integrating multiple communication tools. The danger is that they may give rise to a superfluous or ambiguous positioning. This would turn an opportunity for differentiation into a series of conflicting and confusing perceptions, leaving customers with a feeling of discomfort and without a clear understanding of the dimensions of the positioning. In these cases, the store can lose the centrality of the products in the offering, completely transforming the focus of its core activity, often without making a deliberate choice to do so, but as a consequence of a process that is not properly controlled.

7 The expert in quality relationships

Experience design isn't a discipline. It's about defining a design philosophy, a method for approaching design from a relational, holistic, evolutionary and complex perspective. There is no professional role that does all this; in other words, there's no such thing as an experience designer.

Designing an experience means reversing the traditional viewpoint of a designer, which is often too dependent on an aesthetic, functional or merely commercial ideal. It means taking the perspective of the user instead, or better still, the client: the person who will use the store as a step – a very small step – in a long and complex process. We need to remove the store from the purely subjective vision of designers, who work by following their creative sensibility and respecting their art, personalizing objects and situations with their own added value, with the value of the company. In other words, formulating individual, quality solutions.

The designer must take on a new role, conceiving space designed around experience, where the customers are the ones who produce the space by inhabiting it. Subject and object exist only in perfect synchronicity. This new role catalyzes and coordinates various professional figures, interfacing with all the stakeholders involved in the process. This new professional must understand, above all, how to satisfy the growing need for well-being, how to minimize the environmental impact of human activities, how

to regenerate and enhance the quality of space from a social standpoint. At the same time, this role calls for engagement in creating settings of meaning and places for symbolic sharing.

In other words, even before the project takes shape, the designer must know how to visualize and materialize the relational qualities implicit in the architectural space of the store, a place where relationships are highly concentrated, where sharing is strong and the communication dynamic is intense. This role calls for skills that are more proactive and organizational, rather than creative, as far as interpreting the quality of exchanges. This is in a world where space for symbolic mediations is continually expanding.

8 New trends in store design

This brings us to the conclusion that in the years to come, stores will be more and more closely connoted with shared traits which are already emerging in the evolutionary trends of store design. This is a response to customers who are constantly evolving themselves in the ways they consume and make purchases.

The principle distinguishing features of the store of the future will be:

- open sales spaces with layouts that give the feeling of transparency and lightness;
- wider aisles, corridors and spaces for moving around in the store;
- light colors, pastels, white, ice;
- different types of flooring to differentiate sales areas;
- light, modular, highly specialized solutions;
- variable, adaptable lighting with points and bands of illumination to spotlight products;
- informational communication intensified by the use of images, colors, symbols;
- rest areas where customers can relax;
- consistent store image even in accessory service areas;
- non-invasive multimedia kiosks for customer assistance;
- integration between internal and external image, sales and service; and
- emphasis on the total integration of store environment and store/brand identity.

In the past, the protagonists of consumption were physical in nature, organic and structural characteristics, use values – all having to do with products. Today, and very likely in the future as well, consumption subscribes more and more to the logic of a game, to expressivity, well-being and pleasure; following instincts and not needs; driven more by aesthetics than by ethics. The intangible service component replaces the tangible one, in a context where market competition centers squarely on services, which are non-material and far more multidimensional in terms of perception and assessment.

Immersed in the great flow of change, postmodern consumers are flexible, and love to wander along meandering pathways, because their most distinctive traits are eclecticism and synchronism. They leave more room for emotions and sensoriality; they use consumption as a way to communicate, to signal their identity. They express greater autonomy in the world of production, and they want something out of the ordinary, something never seen before. In the purchase process they resort to creativity and imagination too, but more than that what they're looking for is a game, seeking pleasure in their exploratory approach to shopping.