



# APPLIED THEORY ON *Brazil*

## NOTES FROM THE TROPICS

By Paco Underhill

**Art, theater, and retail have all been intertwined in American culture going back nearly two centuries, to Godey's Lady Book in 1830. As recently as the 1950s, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Sari Dienes, all postmodern artists, paid their bills by doing commercial retail design work. Not a well-known fact: Andy, Jasper and Bob did store windows; Sari did fixture design.**

Going back to the first retail design firms of the '50s, many of them started as set design businesses. Even today, restaurant and retail design superstars like David Rockwell earned their chops on Broadway and migrated to retail as a way of generating steadier income.

### PIONEERS IN THEATER

Theater and stores share a sense of impermanence. The stage set, the store window, the focal point, even the pop-up, are all designed to be ephemeral. Whether they are opulent or minimal, their visual appeal is seminal to their ultimate purpose—to transport and charm the viewer. The power of store design and visual merchandising, as well as stage sets, is the transitory: the visual proposition is not designed to last forever. And when done well, that's what keeps people coming back for more: they continue to be delighted and surprised by the new.

The mix of physical design, merchandise and the operating culture

are constituent parts of the design experience puzzle. Get it right and you have magic; miss the mark and you fail. The late 20th and early 21st Centuries are littered with good and bad examples of retail design experience. Three early winners that actually turned out to be losers were the Warner Brothers, Disney and Nickelodeon stores.

These three companies decided to open retail stores with very healthy licensing deals. Disney's goes back to the 1930s, when Disney-themed merchandise populated many channels of retail. Disneyana, as cultural historians have dubbed it, included toys, jewelry, watches, tabletops—even furniture.

All three brands decided to “make love” directly with their customers in physical stores. All three were clear unquestioned winners the first year they opened. All three were theatrical and charming. The first, second and third visits were special... but somewhere after the fifth visit, the charm started to fade.

The Oxford shirt with Tweety Bird on the pocket and the plastic Little Mermaid cups and bowls did not age well, particularly because they were presented year after year in the same context, with no changes or updates to the design. The store didn't evolve either, so there was no new magic to draw customers back.

On the other hand, Zara, Mango and Kate Spade are all examples

of players that have managed to keep their windows and visual merchandising exciting. Kate does it with humor, the Spaniards with an ongoing dark tension. That all three of these players are fashion driven is no irony. It is hard to sell the same stuff year in, year out. Good lighthouse brands manage to keep the same reliable ethos, but move quickly with the times.

### WHAT VEGAS TEACHES US

Theater merged with retail design is intrinsic to success. For example, theatrical design equity is embodied in the architecture of the mall. The Grove in LA, Solentuna outside of Stockholm, and K-11 in Shanghai all use design to create an exciting sense of place. They become destinations. We typically have choices about where we spend our money, so places that please us usually trump miserable stores where we have unhappy experiences.

Theme parks, media companies, casinos, zoos and aquariums, even airports are learning and trying to adapt theatrical retail experiences to their own needs. The highest volume retail locations in the world using the old dollars-per-square-foot measure are not to be found in standard shopping malls or high-end shopping districts, but rather are located inside theme parks, resorts and casinos. Surprised?

Travel and shopping are deeply intertwined in the 21st century. Paris, London and Miami all thrive

as shopping vacation destinations. Visitors arrive with empty suitcases looking to fill them up. Another example is the all-inclusive resort, where the economic proposition is to ensure that all the money spent is spent on the premises. An early example of this idea was the development attached to Las Vegas casinos. The Venetian and Caesar's Forum built malls so that the spouses of gamers never had to leave the property. And these sure weren't the typical hotel gift shops: they created a fantasyland worthy of the imagination of each casino's designer.

There are lessons to be learned in Vegas. Retail impresarios come to Vegas, look and process, then go home and reinvent.

## GLOBAL THEATRICAL DESIGN

Often where we spend our money is less a statement about what we are actually buying and more about the broader theatrical experience. Selfridges, in London, stages surprise fashion shows on its escalators on Saturday afternoons. On a weekday when the children are safely in school, it might be a wandering drag show, made all the more memorable by its setting and the security of the context. Go to an HEB in Texas on a Saturday morning and you might find a petting zoo in the parking lot or a clown performing on the floor.

More than a decade ago, a store opened in SoHo called The Apartment. It sold home furnishings and some clothing. On Saturday afternoons, the bedding department featured a chesty actress in a skimpy nightgown lounging on one of the beds. She



was happy to talk to you about thread counts in sheets. But like everything else in retail, it had to stay fresh. The Apartment lasted about a year and then closed.

I recently saw another great example of theatrical retail design, which provoked this column. And gets me back to the tropics referenced in the title. Fifty miles north of Salvador, the regional capital of Bahia in equatorial Brazil, a spate of resort complexes has opened over the past 20 years. High-end beach spas, condo complexes and small and not-so-small budget hotels cater to a global leisure traveler. White beaches, good diving and abundant aquatic wildlife are all stage set in the relative safety of a planned development, isolated from the poverty and crime that all too often characterize Brazilian cities.

## TROPICAL THEATER

Praia do Forte, a large multi-hotel development, has opened a reconstruction of a beach village as the epicenter of the property's leisure shopping. I see it as a tropical variation on the town center concept that has sprung up across North America. Cobblestone streets, open-air restaurants and lots of little shops make this project charming and attractive. Overhanging palm trees, dense flowering bushes (natural sunshade management), and yes, ambient live music, provided by half a dozen ad hoc musicians where someone taps on some drums or strums a guitar. The stores sell trinkets, handmade jewelry at modest price points and a few beach fashions. The net effect is something like a movie set from a 1940s-era tropical musical. I was half expecting Ginger Rogers to sashay past in a sarong. Unlike a real tropical seaside village, there are no stray dogs, no open sewers and no pungent drying fish. It is lovely.

Given the choice to climb on a bus and ride to a postmodern shopping mall or wander a through an ersatz seaside shopping village, which would you prefer?

A nearby resort offers an upscale version of the same thing; only a local

band plays in the center court and a lineup of female samba line dancers shuffle to the beat. At the edges of the crowd, a young woman, adorned in a wedding dress and mask, has her picture taken with visitors over and over again, in one tourist's selfie after another. We talked with her, and not surprisingly, she works for the property.

That beach village may be bogus, but it's onto something, because for each new wave of visitors it is new and delightful. How long will that feeling last? Until it gets predictable and tired. Those of us who labor in the global retail trenches recognize that in the end we are dream weavers or even sorcerers. We must use our creativity and intuition to pull in the right cultural references to create new experiences—all the time.

Is this the starting point for our virtual reality retail future? Will we visit shopping malls through Oculus Rift, experiencing hyper reality shopping through attractive avatars that we create in our best image?

Retail is an industry reflective of social change. Where we go, it will follow. What remains constant is the need to feed our imaginations, be entertained, inspired and seduced into spending our money in meaningful ways. Theatrical retail design provides the magic and encouragement to be part of a commercial community that delivers more than the sale. **RR**



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*Paco Underhill is the CEO and Founder of Envirosell, a behavioral research and consulting firm with 10 offices globally. Paco and Envirosell's work has been featured in The New York Times, 20/20, National Public Radio, Smithsonian Magazine, Wall Street Journal, and other major news media. Paco is also the author of What Women Want, which examines how women are affecting the future of commercial spaces; Call of the Mall, a walking tour of the American shopping mall; and Why We Buy, the bestselling book about retail in history. In addition, Paco's columns appear in retail: design (formerly DDI Magazine) as well as numerous trade publications. Paco is an expert on consumer trends, and is often tapped as an expert on purchase decision issues around the world.*