

# Ken Nisch

Retail's design philosopher

**Ken Nisch has been chairman** of JGA Inc. (Southfield, Mich.) since 1995. He became president in 1987, when he and Mike Crosson led a group of employees who purchased the firm from its founder, Jon Greenberg.

As an architecture student at the University of Cincinnati, Nisch participated in the school's cooperative education program and was placed in the SPAC-E department at Federated Department Stores, where he worked with the likes of Robert Novak and Chuck Janitz.



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After graduation, he moved to Detroit, working with a merchandising catalog group developing retail design concepts for clients in home furnishings, gifts and gourmet categories. His first retail design project was recognized with a design award by *Gifts and Decorative Accessories* magazine. He joined Jon Greenberg & Associates in 1980, in the client services department.

As chairman, Nisch works on an international scope with responsibilities that include client liaison and total project design – prototype development, conceptual development, architectural direction and strategic image positioning for retail operators, manufacturers and brand marketers.

JGA clients include companies such as The North Face, Origins, Dickson Concepts, Avon, Hershey's, The Smithsonian Institution, American Museum of Natural History, British Airways, Jaguar, Audi, Elizabeth Arden, J. Jill, Disney, Time Warner, Hot Topic, GNC, Brookstone and Ross Simons, among others.

[See JGA's newest project for The North Face, in Beverly Hills, Calif., on page 30.]



## What is the single biggest change in retail since you started in this business?

The constant need for creative and professional reinvention. We cannot help but be transformed by the torrid scope and pace of the ongoing evolution within the retail industry.

## Why do award-winning stores sometimes fail?

Failure or success needs to be defined in macro terms, not necessarily by "Does this store still exist?" Case in point: While the Warner Brothers Studio stores no longer exist (although winners of several design awards), the major objectives were accomplished – namely to elevate the company's intellectual properties, grow its wholesale business and support the studio's visibility. Conversely, not all successful stores are award-winning. We never see Wal-Mart in the design journals, yet \$200 billion passes through its doors.

## In 10 words or less, what do you find yourself telling new JGA staffers?

Create one idea clients expect – and one idea they didn't.

## Which store is your favorite?

Retail is dynamic, not static. It is interwoven with life. So a favorite store could be the one in which you spent your own

JGA works with a diverse range of clients, from Elizabeth Arden on New York's Fifth Avenue to Hot Topic's Torrid plus-size store. Ken Nisch says, "Open the door to creativity... create one idea clients expect – and one they didn't."

money and were treated well and with respect beyond your age. The jewelry store where you bought your engagement ring from the clerk who took you under her wing to help you make the right choice. The furniture store where you bought your child's crib.

## Which industry figure of the 20th century particularly interests you?

I believe I have learned more about design and humanity from the biographies of individuals such as [German architect] Albert Speer or Frederick Olmstead [landscape architect who designed New York's Central Park and The Biltmore Estate in Asheville, N.C., among a great many other high-profile projects]. Even Winston Churchill was a great observer of our industry. He said: "We shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us." How true!

## In five years, a term store designers will no longer be using is...

"Store designer." As a title, store designer represents a tremendous understatement of the role we assume with our clients. ☺