Talking Design

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KEN NISCH

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WHO Ken Nisch, chairman of JGA, global leader in brand strategy and retail design; client liaison and project strategy
NATIONALITY American
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HIGHLIGHTS Godiva Chocolatier, Hickey Freeman, Hot Topic/Torrid, Jaguar, Hershey's, LittleMissMatched, Cortefiel/Springfield (Spain), The North Face, SP Market (Brazil), Fantasy World (Kuwait), The Store at the Museum of Arts and Design.

→ *Your favourite virtue?*
Wonder, resilience, naivety.

→ *The future of retail is . . . ?*
Fewer stores. More dynamic interiors, with less in them – spaces that are easier to adapt to new circumstances. And a shift in focus away from monobranding. The retail outlet will be seen more as an impresario, a host of ideas, someone who orchestrates, conducts, complements.

Retail is the second oldest profession. Shopping is innate to human nature: you want to have what someone else has and vice versa. We look at retail as transactional environments, where intellectual property is exchanged for money. So why not create a physical app store? Even though one can't buy a tangible product there, the shop can dimensionalize that bird in the tree you're listening to – and eventually persuade you to buy the app. The shop is an impetus for the transaction.

→ *What I dislike the most is . . .*
Trophy architecture, which is so destructive to the design community. People that are assigned a podium place based on what they designed in the past – when retail design should be about the future.

→ *What's the most difficult type of shop to design?*
A technology space. Because it's such a competitive field. Unaware of the contrast they should have created, many technology brands have set up outlets that failed. The environments were too flash – reminiscent of *Starship Enterprise*.

With this type of store, especially, you have to be able to stand back. Apple has done an amazing job in this respect. Although they have the most expensive stores per square metre, the space itself is inconspicuous. An Apple store environment embodies the brand but doesn't have a personality of its own. It's the product that's in the spotlight.

→ *Favourite shopping experience?*
Wherever I travel, I always check out the local farmers' market. I love the seasonal nature of it, the baked goods on offer, the smell of burning wood in winter. Shopping there is a feast for the senses, all of which are stimulated: audio, visual, olfactory.

And the social aspect, the interaction with the stallholders – who sell their products with a smile. People seem genuinely pleased to work there. Markets always provide an experience full of surprise and discovery. It's shopping as a recreational activity.

→ *Common retail mistake?*
A commonly held retail design stance is 'it should be finished when I'm finished' – thus leaving too little oxygen in the idea for customers, products, events – for accidents to happen. Take the Dior boutique on Avenue Montaigne in Paris. Even when only a few customers are inside, the shop seems to be pain. As if people are actually violating the composition of the store.

What we end up with are overly structured and designed stores that are not nimble enough. I like to compare the art of retail to painting a bridge: when you're finished on one end, you have to start again on the other side.

→ *What qualities define a good outlet?*
The dynamic nature inherent in markets is one such quality: organized chaos at its best. Big department stores, unfortunately, have pretty much eliminated these excesses. Greenhouse has done a great job at reclaiming that vibe, though, as has Selfridges.

Another key quality of a successful store is that it's engaging. Take Topshop or Diesel: when you enter one of their stores, there's a buzz. People are leaning against the doorways. These places are alive and activated by people. Good store design has that sense of incompleteness.

→ *Personal design blooper?*
Not really a blooper, but when we designed a store for a pet-food company, we spent a whole day discussing – with highly paid people – the height of a poodle marking his territory compared with that of a Great Dane. It was part of the 'understanding the customer' aspect of retail design, which influences everything from safety regulations to store appeal.

→ *How can a real shop keep up with its virtual competitors?*
The New York Times Magazine published a cartoon of a man and a woman putting their clothes back on after an indelicate moment in a bookstore. It was captioned 'This could never have happened@amazon.com'.

Yes, I can get *more* information on *more* products *more* easily from my couch, but I won't have the smiles, the scents, the feel. It gives me no reality whatsoever of the transaction. Stores can compete with their virtual competitors because they're real.

→ *Advice for designers?*
Be humble, simple, and keep your eyes open.