the case for shopping well:

komorebi[hub] a retail incubator

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Does retail have to be relegated to other negative economic forces in our city like gentrification, unaffordability, blandification?

In a globalized economy, cities begin to look like one another, and even neighbourhoods within those cities are becoming homogenized at an alarming rate, dominated by chain stores and podium towers with hypermarkets. But neighbourhoods work best for residents when they are diverse, small grained, and are run by locals. The public – our cities – need to intervene to preserve identity and livability.

Light filtering through the trees generates moments of warmth and discovery. The proposed ethical retail incubator is a space where the borders of retail diffuse into public space and amenities, generating moments of discovery. A forest of shops that dissolves the binaries of indoor-outdoor and public-private, allowing for new interactions with a business, a unique place to meet friends, or a moment in a commute that differs from the everyday banality of a changing city.

We need to rethink how we interact with our cities and propose how retail can be a good social driver in the urban landscape.
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Dedication

This is for my Mum, thank you for supporting me all this way. And also to my friends who helped me laugh when I wanted to cry.

I would like to acknowledge that this research was conducted and written on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, Sto:lo and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.
What’s the deal?

Shopping nowadays is more complex, more pervasive and more vulnerable than ever. From the rise and fall of the department store to the ever increasing numbers of online stores, the ways that retailing has been done has continued to make an impact on the landscape. Whether one believes that consumption is a negative or positive activity is moot; the unfortunate truth is that shopping is so thoroughly melded into our social, political and economic systems that people cannot avoid it even if they want to.

Given its pervasiveness, retail then also needs to change. In order to address the challenges cities face, it is in the best interest of the city to engage retail and the consumption industry more directly. Arguing the case for a publicly-owned, publicly mandated and managed retail space offers unique opportunities for future retailers and for the community to have direct engagement with the stores that serve them with less risk in investment. The project proposal is just one possible iteration of how this new public retail typology might function and how it might look (Figure 1). In this case, an ethical retail incubator in Vancouver, British Columbia, would allow for new businesses, who are active participants in the local and global economies, to thrive in a city that is ever more unaffordable and unsympathetic to the plight of small businesses and entrepreneurs. Such an incubator would permit the growth of the local economy, provide an anchor in a community that has up until now been losing its identity, and address the overall unease of an ever gentrifying and homogenizing citiescape.

The Neighbourhood in Crisis

Cities around the world are feeling the effects of gentrification, redevelopment and real estate prospecting. More and more, neighbourhoods are becoming unlivable places for citizens because of exponential rising costs of living. Homelessness, suburban flight, and homogenization of neighbourhoods is increasing, making where people live and work more vulnerable to economic and political forces beyond their control.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF), a UK sustainable economics think tank, describes this phenomenon as Clone Towns. It is defined and identified by when high streets and other major shopping areas are dominated by chain stores, and leaves these areas susceptible to larger economic forces. The recession in 2008 made it especially clear in major cities throughout North America and in the UK how vulnerable these homogenized streets really are. Without the same stakes in these neighbourhoods as small businesses have, chain stores are more than happy to leave their leases, as it would be cheaper for them than to stay and lose money while they wait out a recession. It creates more vacancies throughout the neighbourhood, leading to desperate landowners to sell, have the lot redeveloped, and create new

lease prices that are even more expensive for local businesses to afford. The NEF’s survey of British towns and cities revealed that clone towns were pervasive, easily identifiable, and were a symptom of neglected public policies. Jane Jacobs told us as early as the 1960s that neighbourhoods are the heart of our cities, and that diversity in enterprise makes them beat.1 Diversity begets diversity. Jan Gehl insists on creating towns that prioritize pedestrians, by promoting contact and opening up the street.2 Clone towns do none of these things. We have to ask our local governments, policy makers, urban planners, architects, and ourselves, the questions whose answers we have not avoided facing. Who do our cities belong to? Who do we design for? Who has rights to access space? How easily can they access it? When we think about retail framed with these questions, one could start to think that the city has been handed over to chain stores and corporate interests.

The NEF report on clone towns suggests that cities implement policy to reverse the process of homogenization. This is echoed by other economic NGOs and thinktanks, like the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. While grassroots activism helps shed light on the issues caused by unchecked development, policy and legislation is where effective change can occur. These include using planning law to protect locally owned stores; apply local proximity protection; tackle upward-only rent; introducing a retail takeover moratorium; closing loopholes around floor space restrictions; introduce a local competition policy; and many others.4 Though it would be reactive to the situation across Vancouver, and, with The Independent’s construction, in Mount Pleasant, some of these have been proven to work. In several major cities, including San Francisco, New York, Phoenix, and Palm Beach, variations of these initiatives have been implemented and have been found to be successful in preventing the city takeover by big chain stores. These policies are just some of the ways to allow small businesses to stay open despite the tight financial strains they may be in, while also giving new businesses an opportunity to become successful.

One of the paradoxes that cities have created in trying to address to increase diversity in cities, addressing social, economic and environmental is the idea of “sustainable development.” Barton identifies this paradox as an irreconcilable set of different priorities - to be environmentally and socially conscientious on one hand and to promote economic growth on the other.5 This same paradox does not exist however when conceptualizing a “sustainable neighbourhood.” Imagining the neighbourhood as a small unit within the city - which collected together intensify diversity in the city - has allowed many theorists to speculate on the livability of these places and consider what are the qualities that the users want to see. Neighbourhoods don’t necessarily want to grow economically, their inhabitants see sustainable neighbourhoods as a place where they feel they belong: “an attractive, convivial and healthy place that balances privacy with

community and local provision with city access. The Freiburg Statement on New Urban Neighbourhoods outlines a set of principles which have shown bolster healthy neighbourhoods:
• heterogeneous social composition, with special attention to the needs of children, elderly and low income groups;
• a pedestrian-dominated public realm to facilitate ‘good social life’ and provide an attractive human-scale environment;
• diversity of use – housing, work, shopping, civic, cultural and health facilities in a fine textured, compact, low rise urban fabric;
• active and frequent participation of all segments of the population in planning and design of the area, thus an incremented not authoritarian design process;
• architectural identity that is rooted in the collective memory of the region, reflecting characteristics most valued by the local community;
• pedestrian, bicycle and public transport networks within the neighbourhood and linking to the city as a whole, discouraging automobile use;
• ecologically responsible development principles consistent with social responsibility and cutting energy use and pollution.

This multi-solution approach is non-hierarchical and integrated. Neighbourhoods could try to encourage any or all of these for positive effect on a neighbourhood. For instance, if developing ecologically responsible communities, creating locality will reduce carbon consumption because inhabitants are not commuting from suburbs for work and school. There are innate positive feedback loops within these strategies when trying to preserve or produce social and environmental sustainability.

This is not nostalgia for how neighbourhoods were. Neighbourhoods are vital in creating community and developing sense of place within a city. Neighbourhoods are necessary for people to live, work and play. They host a full range of services and amenities that make it possible for individuals to have a sense of safety, a feeling of home, and foster identity building while living within a selected space in a city. However, with livability becoming a greater objective of cities and neighbourhood groups, some of these strategies as they relate to the scale of the retail shop will have a significant impact on the relationship of street to storefront, and the place between built spaces. When thinking about how people live and work in their neighbourhoods, it is necessary to think about how retail fits into the landscape. These spaces, as mentioned, dominate our streets in its many forms. They scale up and down in size, and retail in all its subtypes makes up a large majority of commercial areas and are visible on our streets and in our lives in ways other businesses might not be.

If considering how many people are impacted by retail to just maintain their livelihood, the statistics are staggering. In British Columbia the second largest group of employees belong to the retail industry, and in Figure 3 we can see how the industry has grown over the last five years. In every neighbourhood are people that rely on and enjoy retail. The presence of these workers and their workplaces creates a range of

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6 Ibid, pg 11.
activities on the street with people occupying the street at all times of the day. There is connectivity between living and working in a sustainable neighbourhood.

People want to see their neighbourhoods thrive. This is true of people from all walks of life. Retail’s position as a dominant industry in the landscape opens up the potential for a community to reclaim and negotiate the character, identity and health of the street.

This architectural proposal seeks to tie the policy, people and space together. This space could be a physical manifestation of what these policies would do for the city. By creating a publicly owned retail site, the city can manage the tenants and carefully select small business enterprises that would most benefit the community. The mandate, an incubator for online ethical retailers (see Appendix A for further research), would provide places for new businesses to test their product, supported by the comings and goings of regular public life. Whether that may be dropping off a child for a summer day camp, attending an art class, or passing through just to catch a train, the potential of public activity will bolster new business.

Retailers would have the benefit of being provided a commercial space that is heavily subsidized in rent, for which they could apply for. A managing body would look at applications, and give priority to businesses which are currently online and are having trouble transitioning to a brick and mortar store. For instance, an Etsy shop owner that cannot secure a long term lease agreement, nor even get a business loan from the bank, could apply for a lease. To promote a diverse and vibrant storescape while also helping to keep costs down for retailers, the leases would also be short term. While a traditional store may require an average five year lease - and therefore the owner would require a larger loan to help pay for that - the terms of the lease would not exceed two years. Depending on whether one wanted a more permanent establishment to develop a strong clientele before moving on, or need a space for a three week period to test a new product idea, this proposal allows entrepreneurs to think more creatively about how they want to build their business.

What can be said is this. This research and the design proposal seeks to address how we, as the public, can use retail as a tool to undo the damage that has been done to our shopping streets. Being strategic about how we program space can encourage our neighbourhoods to thrive, and to give people the opportunity to take their entrepreneurial spirit and draw them back to our most vibrant neighbourhoods. Without people, there are no businesses, no neighbourhoods, no cities. We need to prioritise people, not companies, and - hopefully - everything else will follow.

The Site

2500 Main Street was chosen as a testing ground for this new public retail typology (Figure 2). This site is located at the intersection of the Broadway corridor.
and Main Street, where it occupies a unique and critical place in the landscape of Vancouver. It is the point where the semi-industrial False Creek Flats turns into commercial and residential blocks to the south. At Main Street, which cuts through Mount Pleasant north and south, also marks where the city becomes East Vancouver. Kingsway, the road which moves southeast, is the main artery to get to South Burnaby. However, its current use as a parking lot makes the site fade into the background of people’s image of the landscape. On multiple occasions, people, when asked, could not think of what occupied the site, nor where it was located in the city.

The parking lot only has two dozen spots, but is valued at over $12.6 million. Its value has dramatically increased since 2005, when it was valued at $1.1 million. This is largely due to the building of The Independent, the multi-use commercial and residential podium tower next to the site. In a bit of marketing propaganda, they advertised the height of the 21-storey tower, topped with a green roof, to symbolize the height of Vancouver’s first-growth forest. The tower is viewed overall quite negatively by the community. It creates a stark contrast from the low silhouettes of surrounding buildings (the next tallest buildings on Main Street are only 25-meters tall) and casts a long shadow across 2500 Main Street for much of the day. This tower symbolizes the effects of development, gentrification and homogenization in such perfect terms to contrast my proposal against. The ground floor has a Freshii, Starbucks, and Poke Bar on the Broadway side, and a Thierry Chocolates is going in on 10th Avenue. The second level has a 30,000 sq. ft Nester’s Market. In many ways, the tower is an affront to the historical and current character of Mount Pleasant.

Mount Pleasant was established as Vancouver’s first suburb and from the outset was intended as a place for people. It quickly became a popular place to live, and after streetcars were installed, became a bright and vibrant neighbourhood. The people that lived there worked in the light industrial area of the False Creek Flats and the downtown. From the beginning, it was a place for people.

The site is also slated to become the Mount Pleasant station for the Broadway Expansion to the Millennium Skytrain. Currently, over a million rides are taken on the 99 B-Line, which is the express bus which travels between Commercial Drive Station and the University of British Columbia campus. It is the main bus line that has connected the cities east of Vancouver – Burnaby, Coquitlam, etc – to Vancouver’s largest campus. The implementation of this station in Mount Pleasant will likely increase foot traffic overall as the Lower Mainland’s population continues to grow, and especially as more and more people move further east for affordability. Currently, this bus line has over 17 million riders every year. When considering that there is also the 9, 5, 19, and 8 buses that also come by this intersection,
Design

It became important early on to decrease barriers; the need to make the site accessible for all kinds of people was the first priority. Traditional retailers have the tendency to favour able-bodied people with the most disposable incomes. And of course they do; they want people to be able to spend the most amount of time shopping, to maximize the total spend per transaction. Given the premise of the argument that public space paired with retail should be in benefit and service to the community, the priority becomes how to engage as much as the community as possible.

Therefore, there were two sets of needs to consider. The first were the needs of potential retailers of the space, who needs to store, secure, and display merchandise.

The second are the needs of visitors. Those are less defined, as the multitude of uses throughout the site varies these requirements depending on who is using the space. For commuters using the train, there is a demand for efficient movement of people through space. In other words, ample and simple circulation from the station to their next location. For shoppers, it would be a diverse set of amenities, including places to sit, eat, and of course multiple places to shop. For the community, it would be spaces for public use and entertainment.

Flexibility and porosity became the ephemeral priority for the scheme overall. Thankfully, these two concepts paired well together. Porosity meant that one program could spill into another, and potentially not exclude or create a barrier to anyone. Flexibility meant designing space that could be a tabula rasa for a new tenant. These two elements would allow for the many needs and uses as outlined above.
Figure 13 Exterior southeast view of the proposal
Determining how that would translate into the program was a complicated process, and required measuring out several quantifiers (Figure 9), including how people spend their time on site and types of programs with how long they would need to lease or rent a space, what the space requirements might be depending on type of retailer, and how open or secure public and private programmed space would be. One result was the scales of retailing space, and especially a need for a pop up stall of a very small scale, which I called the Pop Up Pod. These could land in the open public space, and could be rented out for a day just by checking one out online either on or off site. In another instance, a small retailer that sells kombucha may not need as much security as another small retailer that sells fine jewelry. Or a public space rented for a one day yoga workshop may need to ensure privacy for attendees, whereas a dance demonstration may want to encourage passersby to stop and watch a performance. This way of thinking about the flexibility of space began to present a series of challenges.

As a corner lot that faces an alley, the site is open on three sides on the ground plane. To maintain accessibility throughout the site given the grade change from the north to south ends of the site - roughly a .67 m change - it became critical to treat the ground floor in this same vein of thinking. Where could be open, and where could be closed? What needed to be secured, and what spaces could feel as porous as possible, allowing for people to pass through with ease?

It was at this point that I began to think about this project as a sort of forest of shops, where one would land at a new spot, and then be filtered through to the next.

The Party

Using the forest as a metaphor created new ways of thinking about how space could be shaped and also how the “trees” could work to the benefit of retailer and shopper alike. For one, creating public space with lots of greenery has been shown to improve the quality for the users. Therefore, lots of planting would be included to create a landscape, as opposed to leaving just the built material overall.

One necessity for both sides of the transaction is having some way of displaying and viewing product, and using the forest metaphor allows that. Considering the project through this lens made this project more fun, more beautiful, and, in a bit of satire, more critical of The Independent and their own use of the forest imagery.

Circulation and Light

Like a forest, it was important to allow the visitor who shopped to feel like they were meandering through the site. In the -1 level, the number of users of the train dictated an immediate ascension through the site to the ground level, and to allow for easy flow of people through the site. Access to multiple points of the edge of the site also became critical. The north exit to Broadway remains open at all times, with bike storage and places to sit for bus connections. The west side of the site however is treated atypically of both transit and retail.

A large, occupiable stair dominates the west facade, shrouded in a screen of columns from the street; a roughly 2-meter space between the facade and the edge of the stair creates a light well below, permitting natural light to get below ground. The stair is 4.5 meters wide, with landings of 2 to 3 meters long. At half floors, the landings jut out into the space for the light well, occupying a part of the site that is unique to the stair and prioritizes looking out over the neighbourhood and the street.

The floorplates float on the column structure, and are cut away, creating a void through the centre and edges of the site for light to reach through to the site at the ground level. This also allows for views up and through the site for easier wayfinding.

Tectonics

To create a sense of lightness, hollow profile steel columns seemed the best option for the structural system. On a 4.5m x 6m grid, 200mm diameter columns were placed throughout the site. Additional systems for seismic forces were not resolved, though the initial grid system seemed like more structure than perhaps was necessary.

Additional columns of 50 mm diameter would begin to help to shape space throughout the site, creating meandering pathways, screens, and places for which to apply fixtures for merchandising for retailers. In much the same way that Junya Ishigami used thin columns for the Kanagawa Institute of Technology (KAIT) project, the intention to minimize walls allowed for the expression of the column to be embraced and utilized in a practical and aesthetic way.

To continue to create a space which is light, private in some places and more open in others, the actual enclosure could not be just a wall. Neither glazing nor a wood frame wall seemed logical in this scheme. While looking at more precedents, including the Acne store in Seoul by Sophie Hicks, the restaurant in Olot by RCR, and others, it became more and more apparent that a polycarbonate system would be a practical solution.

Polycarbonate affords some privacy to people inside the store, while still allowing people outside some idea of the products and the goings on within. This keeps in line with principles of accessible and universal design principles. For instance, it is well documented that transgender people like knowing that they could be seen in case of assault, but that when trying on clothes and such prefer extreme privacy. For workers, not feeling like they are in a fish bowl allows for them to feel like the product, and not themselves, are on display. Polycarbonate also has great applications when used with lighting - an integral part of display for retailers - which begins to get into the next layer of detail in the project that was not achieved for this particular research.

The combination of a steel column and polycarbonate wall panel means that the building can be disassembled and reassembled if need be. Potential demolition
would mean that the materials could be reused more easily than a gypsum wall board and reinforced concrete construction.

**Conclusions**

This particular experiment is just one possible iteration among the many countless designs that could work within this context. As a project that is responding to the neighbourhood, there are a multitude of characteristics in the neighbourhood in which to draw design inspiration from. This iteration draws on research conducted in accessible, gender neutral design principles (see Appendix A), and the experience and perceptions of the designer. Believing in a space meant for the community, if ever there was an opportunity to see such a project come to fruition, I would have to insist on lots of public consultation. There is nothing that a designer can do that could replace the feelings and desires of a whole community.

Further, continuing to explore the way the small details of this building would be beneficial in communicating and working with retailers. Determining how the fixtures work would be of great benefit to understand the day-to-day workings of the project.

Despite these, however, this proposal does manage to make us think about retail in a new way that would overall be of benefit to the community. It is contextual, thoughtful, and at the core of it tries not to impose itself on the community but rather hopes, with perhaps a bit of na"ive optimism, to invite the community in.

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**Appendix A Retail for the Now and for the Future**

Like cities, retailers face an unique challenge in today's economy. The second digital age transformed the consumption landscape and consumption habits, forcing hypermarket store chains to close and for legacy stores to undergo a massive change of their business models so as not to be swept away by the wave of online stores that have crashed into an already saturated market. Many brick-and-mortar stores have closed and many companies have declared bankruptcy, including well known companies like Sears, Toys 'R' Us and K-Mart. Other companies have seen quarter after quarter of loss in sales. Retail is a dying industry, experts have said.

Nothing could be further from the truth however. Statistics have shown year over year growth in retail, averaging about a 3% increase nationwide in Canada since 2014. Japan and the United States are showing more growth than ever in the retail sector, leading in the world in retail growth per capita. Retail is not dying; consumers are becoming more conscientious, choosing new experiences and new companies in the industry. Transitions to digital retail have contributed to the renewed success in retail. This change in interface allows retailers a great number of new opportunities to engage consumers.

The great benefit in engaging retail architecture and design in trying to make steps to preserve neighbourhoods is that shopping, is being reinvented, reinterpreted, refashioned, reborn, rechanneled and repackaged to appeal to the desires and trends of consumers. It is an industry that follows trends, and can be manipulated to respond to the crises of neighbourhoods and existing brick-and-mortar stores. Architecture can play a role by pushing the status quo in retail design in positive ways.

Online retailers have been especially adept at responding to trends, because they do not have as much capital invested in staff and leases and can use that more flexible capital to introduce new products, start new initiatives, research and experiment. This is a downfall of traditional retailers. Zimmerman and Teufel state, who invest their research and development budgets into organization, cost-optimization and leveraging economies of scale. The online retailers can respond to customer critique and interest more readily, as they have a direct line to their customer base via phones, tablets and other technology. They take advantage of social media to market for free in even more an intimate space than what the television did before; we take our phones everywhere in our homes, including our bathrooms and bedrooms.

These brands, which we inadvertently carry around in our pockets, become a part of our identity. There is a shift in advertising towards identity creation by being unapologetically ‘you’, but to be the best ‘you’ that you can be, focusing on well-being, state of mind, and happiness. Women are identified as more vulnerable

Ethical brands are a new type of business in the retail industry that pursues ethical retailing in many traditional retail businesses. They use many of the new and exciting retailing forms that maintain a company's customer base and how retailers have impacted the growth of consumption and a global economy. Architects have begun to use new and exciting retailing methods listed above, and provide architects a unique opportunity to address issues of social and ecological inequality and unsustainability that currently exists in many traditional retail businesses.

Ethical Retailing

Ethical brands are a new type of business in the retail industry that pursues sustainability in comprehensive ways through their business practices. They are crucial to architects who want to engage the street with a new, more socially minded approach to store design. An ethical retailer should, due to their brand philosophy and company culture, actively pursue a store design that is socially and ecologically minded. These businesses are emerging in every product offering: clothing, shoes and accessories, food and grocers, beauty and skincare, health, electronics, home decor, furniture, sports equipment, books and stationery. The expanding niche that is an ethical shows that neighbourhoods can't be complacent in using these stores to also promote local sustainability as well.

They are innovative businesses, counter to the traditional models as mentioned before, that often begin as online retailers. They are responding to technology, but also to the role of a new class of consumer. The “conscientious consumer” is a new type of customer in retail that is belief-driven. That is, they seek out goods and brands that are ethically sourced, socially minded, and transparent about business practices. A new ethical brand could start and operate out of a person’s home for months while they build a loyal customer following that might reach across a whole continent. Eventually, they may decide to rent an office space that allows for the storage of their goods as well as space to employ new staff, but they are not required to invest in an expensive storefront in a commercial district to make this transition; they could get a low rent place outside of the city if need be. The physical presence of an ethical brand on the street could be nonexistent for some time. However, they would grow their presence online; free social media accounts can help to disseminate their brand name to a much wider audience and that would amount to a much larger revenue stream. This allows for more fluidity with capital to invest in better, more eco-friendly materials and manufacturing processes, better wages and benefits for employees, research, studies or pilot projects. Without having ever stepped foot in a store, they may have a large client following from their ability to grow their online presence and hype.

Ethical brands are also supported by a network of blogs, apps and other ethically-minded businesses to support searches for customers who are interested in finding new sustainable businesses. These online services provide information to consumers about a range of ethical brands, their policies around using fur, human resources, and other materials. They will also use that information to highlight their favourite brands, adding to the free online advertising that these brands take advantage of already. The intent of these sites is to educate consumers but also add to the image that brands have transparency about their business practices. Good on You - an app and website that catalogues and reviews brands by their business practices - will rate brands poorly for not having enough information about sourcing, for instance, even if the company might source all their materials from fair trade, organic cotton farmers. Ethical brands run counter to traditional retailers; if you have something to hide, then it is probably doing damage to your business and brand image. Therefore, the radical transparency model keeps these businesses accountable but also gives them a way to market to customers.

Since these brands build their visibility online, marketing is a crucial
component for these brands. Campaign shoots and online catalogues have begun to feature “real” models. This means the brands will use models of different races and ages, and there is especially a trend to use many different body types. Since the internet is also a place that is inherently non-sexed, online stores can be incredibly inclusive places to be using these kinds of images. The ability to purchase online, from the comfort of one’s home, makes the entire experience much easier for women who may be uncomfortable to go out shopping (especially transgender women and men), people who have mobility issues, or non-binary people who may feel excluded in participating in trying on garments.

These particular initiatives demonstrate how ethical retailers can play a crucial role in the health of our cities as they drive businesses continue to grow. The argument is not that this form will replace retail, nor should it. As mentioned, diversity is required on the street. The case to be made is this: ethical retailers can offer a form of retail that resists the homogenization of our streets. These brands could engage the street in ways that is not just to attract new customers with a dream. They could communicate onto the street certain messages about social inclusivity, ecological consciousness, and the desire to work as much for their business as the community that they are entering.

Fixtures of Retail

Architecture has the innate ability to impact the landscape of consumerism - the brandcape - and restore an image of the city, while also the potential to catalyze economic patterns of growth and urban renewal. Store design may appear simple on its surface, but many studies demonstrate the complexity in strategies to make stores impact the street in positive or negative ways. For instance, lighting strategies of windows in Warenhauser in the Weimar period was shown to violate the personal space of pedestrians by being too bright at night and disrupting the streetscape. Display is an intrinsic part of markets, commerce and retailing since the 19th Century. Its impact on the landscape has only intensified over the last nearly 200 years. Mun’s studies and drawings on store fixtures demonstrates how display and visual merchandising had become a science, where each component and material was carefully considered with customer preconceptions to communicate the brand to the consumer. However, the prescriptive nature of his writing doesn’t necessarily apply to today’s retail industry (see Aesop case study).

What can be extrapolated from Mun’s work however, through the analysis regarding siting, materials, shopfront design, signage, sales floor dimensions, cabinetry, is retail needs to respond to and design these elements differently than it did 50 years ago. The first is reimagining the pragmatic aspects for the daily business ventures. The second is to consider how display and store design impact customer perceptions and shopability of a store. A third point is to remember how the store fits within the context and identity of the neighbourhood. By thinking about surrounding context and breaking from traditional store design thinking, it subverts the dichotomy of the rational marketplace (male) and irrational consumer (female). These three points can create differentiation, and implemented through various areas of the store and business. The physical store includes frontage, packaging, signage and overall store design; digital store is the web and devices; media through advertising and marketing; and experience aspects are events and promotions. These are critical customer touchpoints to build a relationship to the customer with the brand.

Traditionally, the ‘heart’ of the store was considered the cash register. Located centrally in the store and the place where the exchange of goods takes place, it is a critical part of the store experience. Ketchum recommends designing from this point outwards, but the store designer and the customer have two different perceptions of the store and very different priorities. And the design of this space hasn’t changed much - if at all - in the last hundred years. So designing from the perspective of the customer is imperative, when tablets and phones and other interactive displays are supplementing or replacing the cash register. Stores do not have to prioritize the cash desk; in the case of an ethical brand, focusing on the transaction most in the store actually would run counter to their business philosophy. That is, to prioritize the customer and employee experiences and to not feel like transaction is the most important part of the entire experience.

In this same vein, Teufel and Zimmerman see the trend of store design moving towards a holistic or comprehensive design approach, rather than just looking at the single fixture in the store. They have laid out fifteen principles of a holistic store design, and while holistic here does not mean the same in sustainable design and store brand principles, it means ways retailers are approaching the entirety of store design to curate a new retail experience. What this approach is not is to use the facade as a kind of architectural billboard and the interior as something different and separate. An example of this might be the renovation of the facade of the Louis Vuitton store in Ginza (Figure 4 and 5). Holistic store design also prevents drift. The concept of “drift” is the tendency for a product vision, aesthetic of in-store
experience to move away from an initially strong or consistent realization. This is critical for the neighbourhood diversity; the stores have to single-handedly.

While some of these do not work in an ethical retail setting - for instance, exclusivity, curation and trading up intentionally target wealthier groups and therefore exclude underprivileged and underrepresented populations - others are effective to communicate an ethical brand ethos. In particular, I believe that storytelling, authenticity, contextualisation and participation are applicable to convey the ethical brand and would translate into a store design that would be community-minded.

Some companies are already using these strategies. Authenticity, for instance, is an important way for brands to connect with their clientele. For this method to be successful in building a healthy neighbourhood, it must get away from the self-referential cycle of authenticity as a trend. Instead, it has an obligation to consider the meaning of being genuine, especially in the larger context of the community the store inserts itself into. Achieving authenticity affects the identity of self as much as the identity of the street. When achieved properly, customers believe that the brand characterizes trustworthiness, loyalty to its neighbourhood and sustainability. Communications and design can provide systems to test the criteria and develop feedback cycles to continue to promote this trait. Authenticity creation are guided by an attitude of humility toward material and source, with an awareness of contextual history.

Storytelling is another tool that ethical brands can use to foster a strong positive relationship with their customers and to their communities. This is because storytelling itself is an important part of human culture over time. Narration has changed with media, giving the audience a fragmented story line, and therefore a good story is now an exception rather than the rule. The desire and appeal for good stories is growing, and a store design that can communicate a brand’s story within the storyline of the community would be a unique part of the landscape.

Another that is important to develop long-lasting customer relationships and allow those customers to have autonomy is participation. Customers recently have a need to participate in their immediate surroundings, disallowing politics and industries to control all the aspects of the landscape. Companies have responded in a number of ways; with the customers themselves establishing cooperatives, employing participatory mediation processes in their development, and allowing customers to participate in the conceptual value adding process. How these strategies manifest in store designs then would vary, and as such is difficult or near impossible to create a definite formula for design and display for every store in every location. This is maybe the largest difference from traditional retail architecture. For a store to be ethically designed, it cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach that many marketing and production teams have in retail companies. It has to apply these strategies to each customer touchpoint to be successful.

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21 O’Keeffe, as quoted by Marcus Baumgart. Designing Retail Success. https://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/designing-retail-success-1/
22 Teufel and Zimmerman, pg 125
23 ibid, pg 253.
24 ibid, 208.
25 ibid, 208.
Appendix B Precedents

The exploration of precedents was critical in moving forward in the research and design phases of the project. Store design is incredibly innovative, and melds architectural and interior design seamlessly, and as such required a thorough look at both local and international projects. Because of the dual natures of store operations—creating a space to shop in for customers while also creating space for the pragmatic aspects of running a store—precedents span several types and sizes of store program.

Little Mountain and Mejuri Pop-Up Shop

Founded: Little Mountain 2011, Mejuri 2015
Products/Services: fine jewelry
Location: Main Street, Vancouver B.C.
Size: 850 ft²

Little Mountain, a small rentable space for temporary stores and weekend-long events, hosted a piercing studio by Mejuri in March of 2019, which the author was able to attend. This event converted the small store into a showroom for gold and silver fine jewelry that is usually only sold online, providing long-time fans of Mejuri an opportunity to try on products before buying, something they had never been able to do before. The rentable commercial space of roughly 850 ft² gave these same customers a glimpse into a fully branded experience that they had never had before. For some, without this experience, they may never purchase anything from Mejuri at all. The added value of getting a free ear piercing with a purchase makes the first experience for customers something special.

Mejuri practices transparency in their pricing, stating on their homepage that they “said goodbye to traditional 10x markups and sell directly to you. Making fine jewelry actually accessible.” They are also transparent about their desire to market directly to women, giving women an opportunity to buy fine jewelry without needing a special occasion. Their customer makeup is roughly 80% women, which is in keeping with the statistics that demonstrate that roughly 75% of consumers are women. Women are led to believe that buying luxury items for themselves demonstrates independence, and this identity of self-actualizing, independent woman is one that is propagated very much in recent years as a form of feminism. Described as “liberating” feminism, it conflates financial independence with female achievement and self-worth. Being critical of this messaging is important for understanding the integral role that gender plays in jewelry stores for both men and women. The business has seen tremendous growth since they launched their site in 2015, prompting the company to open a permanent showroom location in Toronto (Figure 11) and then New York City (Figure 14). But these pop up events are becoming crucial to Mejuri’s ability to grow their clientele.

Little Mountain is an ideal space for other businesses to host small consumable experiences like a piercing studio or fundraising events. It states that it’s a place to cultivate community and champion entrepreneurship. It acts as a satellite location for even local companies to use to test new product offerings or experiment. The versatility of the space makes this possible. The aesthetic is very minimal; the shop is a shell with few fixtures that are transformational, offering options like hanging curtains for privacy for fitting rooms or large white walls for placing fixtures or signage. The benefit of a pop-up shop is that it offers small, start up businesses an opportunity to test having a storefront to attract clientele but also allows online exclusive businesses to build their brand.

Mejuri is unusual as a fine jewelry brand in that it uses hype to promote
products through their website and their events. They tap into the feeling of FOMO – the fear of missing out – in both experience and object desires. Every week they release a range of products that are offered in limited amount, and by hosting only pop ups with few showrooms it creates hype in being able to shop in a physical location as well.

Therefore, it was not surprising to see the line ups of women that were waiting to enter Little Mountain to also take advantage of a free ear piercing with the in-store sale of a pair of earrings. All other merchandise was purchased through iPads and the stock to be sent to the shopper, but their displays allowed for people to try on items that they ordinarily not be able to do if ordering from their online store.

An opportunity to speak momentarily to the marketing director, who also hosted a panel with some of Vancouver’s newest businesswomen, allowed the author insight into why Mejuri chooses to do pop up stores and showrooms instead of full stores. It allows the business to engage their customers in new ways, creating experiences to identify the brand with, and to also keep overheads low since less room for stock in necessary in large cities where rents are high.

Aesop
Founded: 1987
Architects: Schemata, Simplicity, Snohetta, etc.
Product/service offering: beauty and wellness, spa services
Location: Worldwide

As a brand that rejects standardization and normalcy, Aesop is far more than just a skincare company. The company has an online blog and magazine – The Ledger and The Fabulist, respectively – where it publishes work from writers like Zadie Smith, Geoff Dyer, Rachel Kushner about design, art, architecture, wellness. The company collaborates with architects and designers around the world to create a spectrum of stores that defy ordinary store design definition. When not hiring big architectural names like Frida Escobedo or Snohetta, it has an in-house design team that is as respectful of community, culture and history as any other notable designer. The dedication to not have imposing stores becomes apparent when approaching one of the Aesop locations from the street: it is easy to pass by the store without noticing it because designers strive to make the storefronts blend into the fabric of the neighbourhood. What might actually catch a passersby attention more is the scent from inside the store, which draws you in to enter. There, the interior designs are always striking, with well conceived details and an attention to material that architects wouldn’t normally associate with beauty companies.

However, it is the transparency and the dedication to celebrate good design that also makes this business worth researching. Aesop’s subsidiary website, the Taxonomy of Design, is unlike all other websites and web pages I have seen dedicated to store information. Normally, these information pages have very basic information, such as the store hours, location, and the ways to contact the store. Taxonomy of Design is a catalogue of stores, providing in-depth information of materials and designers, to videos explaining the design principles of each store. With over 200 stores worldwide, no two stores are alike. Vancouver has three locations – Gastown, West 4th Avenue, and Main Street – and there is nothing similar between any of them. The only two consistent built fixtures in Aesop stores are the cash register and a sink – every store has to have running water – but they often become feature areas in the stores and provide a place in the stores to congregate around. Other requirements are the neatly presented products, good acoustics, good lighting and good air quality. All of these are integral parts of any ethical store, as they make the quality of the experience much better for customers and employees alike.

The amber coloured bottles are often treated as a display item rather than just product, which is often the case in many stores to display their wares in enticing ways. In the Melbourne store, the bottle is used within an antique apothecary chest, a reference to old medicines and potions made anew. Designers have the room to be creative and reinterpret the brand and product displays over and over again. But the designs are never flashy, loud, or self-serving. The store designs strike a balance between hedonistic and utilitarian design. The simplicity in the product display and product packaging speaks to utilitarian store designs, which Borges describes as masculine, whereas the more luxurious material and
spatial choices are considered hedonistic and intrinsically more feminine. As Dennis Paphitis, the company founder, has said, the stores are designed to increase correlation between interesting, captivating store spaces and customer traffic within a store. By creating this balance, the brand is able to attract men and women in ways that traditional retailers may not be able. The company doesn’t shy away from using a range of materials and colours and integrates such original components like mosaic tiles from the original building. It also uses pop up stores for experiments and hybrid formats.

Aesop opened its first stores because, despite its diverse designs, retailers that first carried the product line could not be communicated in a way that the brand wanted. Paphitis said in an interview with Dezeen that because they were able to open a store and “control the smallest, most innocuous details such as temperature, lighting, music, smells, tactility, and the materiality of a space this has a very profound impact.” Of course there must be a solid and serious product offer to have legitimacy, but these peripheral factors actually compliment the product line up. It was liberating and we were able to express ourselves as who we are.

All of the stores are worth noting in their own way, but two stood out to the author as particularly notable. The first is the Vancouver Main Street store. This location is the third in the city, and is so unlike the first two locations but it’s at first not entirely clear what the inspirations are from. The West 4th Avenue location is known for its uncharacteristic salmon pink facade, but the interior contrasts matte and polished surfaces to distinguish the history of the building which used to be two stores which the designers combined. The Gastown location uses cut pine to create a grid (Figure 15), referring to the area’s roots in the lumber trade. The Main Street Store uses purple tones as a tribute to the colour of the dusk sky when looking towards the North Shore mountains from the vantage of upper Main Street where the store is located. The raw concrete and industrial fixtures refers to Arthur Erickson, one of Vancouver’s prominent modernist architects, and in particular his work at 1979 Eppich House in West Vancouver, which used recycled bullnose concrete slabs as well.26

Another case study of note is the Kyoto store. For this location, Schemata Architects use the bottles as a metaphor for Japanese calligraphy scrolls, alluding to the traditional arts that are lauded in Kyoto. There is also a water pump feature, which refers to the importance of the river that cuts through Kyoto. Schemata’s knowledge of the significance of water to Japanese culture is evident with their other stores they have worked on for the brand.

This brand takes advantage of comprehensive design principles, impacting each of the customer touchpoints and engaging with both contextualisation and storytelling in their designs. Despite the pricepoint for these luxury goods, customers don’t feel like they are excluded from experiencing the store.


T-Site Daikanyama
Architects: Klein Dytham Architecture
Location: Daikanyama, Japan
Project Year: 2012
Founded: 1983
Product/service offering: books, magazines, stationery, cafe, movies, music, travel agency, pet care/hotel, cosmetics
Total Floor Area: 5,907.47 m²

The Daikanyama T-Site is a bookstore complex. Tsutaya, one of Japan’s largest bookstores, has been active in engaging a younger demographic, and this site is one of those moments in this attempt. By injecting themselves into Daikanyama, an up and coming area of Tokyo that boasts a series of small, niche boutique stores, and employing Klein Dytham Architects (KDA) to make this store, it begins to weave itself into the “cool” fabric of the neighbourhood. Daikanyama and the adjacent Naka-Meguro wards in Tokyo are well known as up-market but relaxed low-rise shopping districts. T-Site is unique in that it also responds to Hillside Terrace, a series of buildings by Fumihiko Maki of SANAA.

The store-complex uses each of Klein Dytham Architects design skills – architecture, interior, furniture and product display – and ambitiously tries to define a new vision for the future of retailing. It does present a new bookstore typology, choosing to sacrifice ground floor selling space for public access and to retain trees on site, providing a very different shopping experience that runs counter to Tokyo’s most famous shopping areas like Shibuya and Ginza.

The overall concept was driven by the client’s desire to inject a fresh take on the brand through the design. It captures new customers who find the location and space trendy while giving loyal, older clients a new experience. KDA used the theme “Library in the Woods” to drive the concept, as it had to preserve the trees on the street side. This limitation became an opportunity.

The concept of a single store was separated into three distinct buildings on the site, allowing for even more greenery to occupy the space between, rather than just in front. The ground floor is connected by a “magazine street” - literally a whole area dedicated to magazines and periodicals for each of the genres that occupy each separate building - and above by a floating corridor. The product ranges and services link old and new to reach a much wider audience than Tsutaya’s regular demographic of 50+ year old customers. Each section is also run by a concierge, often over 50 years old as well, to make it more accessible for their older customers to approach them, while younger sales people float through the store to assist a fuller range of customers.

The façade, a lattice of T’s, evokes feelings of complex Japanese joinery while also explicitly incorporating Tsutaya’s T logo into the building. Larger T’s are disguised into the building through the plan and elevation, incorporating the business brand into a three-dimensional organizing element. Rather than design a store that felt like many new bookstores around the world that feel clinical, KDA incorporates a range of materials that feel as tactile as the books themselves. Aged timber flooring, warm lighting, wooden furniture that provides ample sitting space to read before buying a book. Desks use books and magazine as the legs of the table. Each pavilion is also organized and merchandised with its own character. The literature section is tightly packed to evoke Tokyo’s Jimbocho second hand book district, while in other areas overhead shelves are used to make the space feel more intimate. Allowing lots of natural light into the building allows for comfort when perusing the books and reading a chapter or two to see if you want to make a purchase.

T-Site’s attempt at remaking its identity and communicating this identity is successful in many respects. Many aspects of this design were reincorporated into other Tsutaya locations, like the façade design at the Nakameguro store location. Without overtly saying from the exterior that the pavilions belong to a book store, they do manage to entice people on the street, and the reputation of the store as a welcoming space to be to peruse has made it a popular place to meet friends, get coffee and study. Its success has made this a destination for visitors as well, who are able to sit and rest and eat and visit other neighbouring stores without ever feeling like this location is out of character with the rest of the community.

28 "T-Site Daikanyama." Klein Dytham Architects, 2019, http://www.klein-dytham.com/daikanyama-t-site/#itemId=55ad80c4e4b035a7b844b99
Reigning Champ  
Architect: Peter Cardew  
Location: Vancouver & Los Angeles  
Founded: 2007  
Project built: 2012  
Product/service offering: Clothing and accessories

“They’re interested in the theatre of it, and it’s that theatrical aspect, you see, that compels the drop-ins to order the product online, after they drop into the bricks-and-mortar store. In the modern digital world, it is no longer enough for bricks and mortar stores to simply display their wares; they must also attract customers through entertaining them.”

As far as how stores succeed in communicating their brand, Reigning Champ certainly manages that with their stores. As a premium outlet for athletic wear – a woman’s basic cotton pull over hoodie retails at $130 CAD – the store design communicates the exclusivity of the product line as much as the architecture itself. Michael Turner of Canadian Architect magazine wrote that these spaces function as a “celebration of un commodified space.” His statement is very apt; so much of the building is actually not programmed to sell anything. Rather, it is another way for the brand to give their customers a fuller interpretation of brand. And Reigning Champ can do this, as the majority of their sales are generated online and therefore the company can forfeit that selling space for the brand vision instead.

Cardew is known as an award-winning architect for his attention to details and minimalist aesthetic. He employs these with this project as well, but in achieving the objective of communicating the brand ethos, Cardew sacrifices making the project contestable. The West 4th Avenue store especially is notorious for being an intimidating space; the author found out that the store staff and management have a near weekly discussion on how to encourage passersby to step over threshold.

Once inside, one cannot help but feel very exposed. The hard, planar surfaces – concrete flooring and square white tiled walls – make every noise echo and shoppers are as on display to the street as the products due to the floor to ceiling double height glass façade. There are also no moments to retreat from the ever present gaze of the staff, unless if one were to enter the changerooms. Even there, the customer would feel more exposed as the doors are low. An intentional design decision by Cardew, for ease of passing items over the top of the door, these doors go against one of the main design principles for creating non-binary changerooms. HCMA’s research into designing for inclusivity expressly lists that creating privacy where most needed to enhance comfort includes the use of full-height enclosures. The store was made to emulate a boxing ring; the lighting and material choices all reflect that sense of masculinity.

The most successful part of the Cardew’s design for an ethical design are the custom modular shelving system and other fixtures. The system has components that are easily reachable for accessibility, and the ability to change the system without creating unnecessary waste is a key point in ethical retail design. Bibliography


30 HCMA, “Designing for Inclusivity.” Pg 25


Quartier, Katelijn, Stephanie Claes, and Jan Vanrie. “Rethinking the Education of Retail Design, what are the Competences a Retail Designer Needs in this Fast Evolving Discipline?” *The Design Journal*, vol. 50, no. supi, 2017, pp. S1285-S1292.


Statistics Canada. *Table 20-10-0065-01 Retail trade, total sales and e-commerce sales*


