“...a thought-provoking look at buying, selling and the places to do it. Kepron brings to light the complex relationships between shopping, brain science and emerging technologies... an intriguing vision of shopping places in a digital future.”

— Daniel Pink, author of TO SELL IS HUMAN

RETAIL (r)EVOLUTION

WHY CREATING RIGHT-BRAINED STORES WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE OF SHOPPING IN A DIGITALLY DRIVEN WORLD

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AIA, LEED BD+C, RDI
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To my Mother who,
taught me perseverance in the face of adversity,
nurtured my creative spirit and was always in the stands at every game.

To my Father who,
fostered my fascination with the future, by example taught me the virtue of making
with one’s hands and that if a job was worth doing it was worth doing well.

To my sons Nick and Ben who,
who have grown me up, and who inspire me with their unbridled creative energy,
and who will live the future of shopping that this book envisions.

To my wife Lu who,
has opened my heart and mind by unconditionally sharing hers
for more than thirty years.
Author’s Note to the Reader

Retail (r)Evolution is a book for retailers, designers, sales associates, store managers and anyone else for whom shopping is part of their everyday life. It’s a provocative glimpse into the relevance of shopping and the places created to do it, and crosses centuries and continents, wireless networks as well as the human brain’s intricate landscape.

Retail (r)Evolution integrates topics and themes including:

- The profound role of shopping as a social paradigm in understanding ourselves in a larger context, through ritual, storytelling and play.
- How customer experience is not ‘out there’ in the architecture, merchandise assortments, graphics and in-store technology, but rather in the customer’s mind and created in a dynamic relationship between customers’ brains and the environments they inhabit.
- New developments in neuroscience and how the brain plays a role in decision-making as well as the pleasure (and pain) we experience when shopping.
- How the rise of digital technology, the adoption of mobile devices, and the influence of online social networks are not only changing the way we communicate with each other, but rewiring our brains as well.
- Why digitally enabled, socially networked customers will be more informed, and become expert marketers in their own right, as pervasive use of social networks makes individual shoppers into their own brands.
- How the nature of the store will change to be a Brand Performance Place that allows for customers to engage in “Collaborative Creative Consumerism” and where retailers will implement “Technempathy” as a way to engage customers with technology in the service of building empathic relationships.

In three sections, I will draw on my more than twenty years of experience as an architect, artist and teacher, hopefully to provide a meaningful look at the nature of shopping places in the past, present and future. Promoting the idea that shopping is first and foremost a social paradigm, I’ll look at how we as customers all need shopping, not just for dry goods and sundries but also for belonging to a larger whole.

I’m going to explore how the connections brands make with their customers become cemented through empathic extension – truly understanding their customers’ needs and aspirations. Providing relevant places to engage customers will require a new understanding of what will drive them to continue to visit stores in a world where everything can be found through the smartphone or other wearable digitally connected device.
I’ll take you on a shopping journey, from a look at the historical relationship between people and the shopping experience as a method to connect to the cultures they live in, to some discoveries in neuroscience and how they can help us understand what happens when making a decision in the shopping aisle…to the world of possibility when retailers and customers co-op the task in integrating technology in the store and collaborating on making shopping places that are more relevant for an increasingly savvy customer.

What does the availability of technology mean for the longevity of retail stores as a meaningful place to exchange goods and services? How does the store remain relevant when we can buy everything from our mobile phones or other digital device? In the end, despite all of the potential dystopian views about the rise of our digitally driven culture, the store will not go away. As environments change to adapt to a digitally enabled customer, it will, undoubtedly, be different than anything we have known to date. The core of customer experience, however, will remain – engaging with people, building community, and understanding ourselves and how we fit into a larger context.

Customer experience, after all, is not so much about what we carry home in our shopping bag as it is about what we carry home in our hearts and minds.

Thank you for reading, and for your interest and curiosity about the Retail (r)Evolution.

Let’s get started...
Acknowledgments

Writing this book – my first book – has been a massive undertaking, fascinating journey and a life-changing process. Throughout this process, the running narrative under my research, writing, and efforts to tie the whole together, has been the story of how this book came to be. But more than that, it has reminded me, often daily, of how I got here, how my ideas have been formulated, how none of us grows in our careers and our lives without those pivotal relationships and people whose guidance, support and inspiration serve as a kind of GPS on the long and winding road. Without them this book would not have been possible.

My interest in retail design as a combination of art and science was cemented while working with the visionary Joe Weishar. Joe’s book, Design For Effective Selling Space was my first ‘text book’ on the practice of merchandise presentation. I thank Joe for the years under his excellent tutelage.

To Jackie Glanz, who has offered her unwavering support for twenty years of my involvement in the industry, I extend my immeasurable gratitude. She has taught me the value of never burning a bridge, how to sustain and grow customer relationships, and has always been there as a steadfast supporter along my career path.

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From George Homer; Brazilian born, New York native, visual merchandising consultant who I have shared tuk-tuk rides in Bangkok, BBQ in Sao Paolo, and a slice of a tatami mat while visiting a Japanese monastery, I gained and awareness of merchandise as a design element.

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Thanks also go to Bill McHenry, Ken Albright, Nicola Evoli, and Andreas Kussner. leaders in the store fixture and display industry who offered their time for an interview and opened the doors to their manufacturing facilities so that I could deepen my understanding of how mannequins and merchandising units go from concept to sales floor. In this group, I also include the inimitable Joe Baer, who, through his yearly “Iron Merchant” challenges at IRDC, taught me that great ideas can come in a flash and be built in sixty minutes.

To my wonderful retailer friends Bevan Bloemendaal and Sharon Lessard, thank you for the time you shared early in this project to talk about retail place-making from the point of view of the retailer. From our conversations over the years, I have a stronger appreciation of the power of design to express the essence of a brand and make meaningful shopping places.

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Asif Kahn cemented the idea for me that mindfully integrated digital-out-of-home technology would not lead to a dystopian future. Instead, my point of view changed from grave concern to hope with a realistic awareness of the pitfalls of technology. I thank Asif for his extraordinary, cutting-edge presentation that changed my mind about how digital technologies and location-based marketing will profoundly shape the shoppingscape.

For years, I watched other designers lead firms, create great projects and speak at conferences. Unbeknownst to them, they have also been my mentors. I studied them and learned the best practices of retail design. Thanks to industry giants Denny Gerdeman, Elle Chute, Andrew McQuilkin, Lee Peterson, Brian Shafley and Kathleen Jordan for inviting me into their offices and offering their precious time to share their passion for retail design, their tireless commitment to supporting the industry's professional associations and their deep insights into the future of the business.

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Understanding that the customer journey in a digital world extends beyond the narrow vertical of stores, has been a discussion topic with my great colleague friend Daniel Montano. Thank you for growing my understanding of customer experience-mapping and how the relationship shoppers have with brands is broader than it has ever been.

Since 2004, I have had an association to Little, the company at which I am now a Creative Director (a title I share with Daniel Montano and James Farnell) in the Brand Experience Studio. I am proud to work at Little, to contribute to the extraordinary culture of authentic people who are passionate about great design, thought leadership, and have an enthusiasm for innovation.

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More Than Getting Stuff — Shopping as a Social Paradigm

Boyhood and Believing

Growing up in Montreal, my childhood friend Jeff and I spent our boyhood summers in search of adventure. Every weekend the Super Bowl took place on his side yard. The long bomb with the Nerf football was over the roof of his house and, if we timed it right, it came down in the right spot as you turned the corner around the fishpond.

We were Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee when leaping onto the red wagon in his driveway to escape the Ring Wraths chasing us across his front lawn just as Sam and Frodo did when leaving the Shire.

We both were in love – with the same girl – and we rode our bikes back and forth in front her house a thousand times, hoping she would come out and see us. (She never did.)

We joined the diving team at the pool and learned to do back flips as well as belly flops. We bought guitars when we were sixteen and made tapes of ourselves playing the Eagles.

And, we taught ourselves how to juggle.

We spent hours juggling. We juggled against walls and off the floor. We learned tricks such as eating an apple and tossing it around your back or under your leg. And the thing we learned about juggling was that at a certain point you had to stop thinking.

Once you got the idea that one ball went up, and as it was coming down you tossed the other one up, and as that one came down you tossed the other, and so
on—you had to stop thinking and start relying on your peripheral vision and muscle memory of where your hands would be so that they could catch and toss the balls.

In fact, you didn't even look at the balls as they traced arcs up and down in front of your face. We had to trust ourselves and the knowledge that our bodies knew what to do. We learned by repetition and the actions became encoded into our system.

While looking through the flying balls you had to feel your way forward trusting your body memory, intuition and perceptual senses.

Decades later, when presenting at the retail tradeshow, GlobalShop, I stood in front of more than 300 hundred people with three yellow balls in my hand. Over the next 60 minutes I was prepared to deliver a talk about the brain and making relevant and emotionally engaging customer experiences.

The presentation was to focus on what makes, and would continue to make, great shopping places. And, as I prepared, I looked for a way to describe the power of the relational, emotional, intuitive right brain and why it was so important for us as shoppers, retailers and designers of retail places. My goal was to have the audience understand that the world of shopping was in the midst of a paradigm shift. Fundamental change was taking place in our culture and the nature of shopping places was about to undergo a dramatic transformation so that a few years from now we might hardly recognize it.

I was about to assert that when creating engaging shopping places in the future, it will not be enough to continue on a path that has held price point, overwhelming product assortments, and the linear logical sequential approach to doing business, in positions of prominence. These things would no longer serve as differentiators between retail businesses. In a world where shoppers would not have to go to the store because the modern emergence of digital technology allows for convenient shopping any place any time, what would drive customers to go to the store would not be something new but something that we have held at the forefront of our collective human development for a few million years.

What customers will really want will be for products and service to be imbued with both utility and significance. The design—of products, services and entire experiences—will become a critical factor in making shopping places relevant in a world of ubiquitous access and abundant choice.

But beyond the fact that products, services and experiences will have to be beautiful and transcendent, shoppers will desire, as they have for centuries, the feeling of connection, relationship, being valued and that they can find meaning in the shopping aisles as well as the dry goods and sundries.

In a thin slice of 60 minutes I was going to try thoughtfully to cover the relevance of shopping and the places we create to engage in the activity. My slides would lead
the audience across centuries and continents, wireless networks as well as the brain’s intricate landscape. All the while I would assert that, even though we have been designing and building stores for years, we are not as aware of the fundamental – brain-based – drivers to buying decisions as we should be, that an understanding of neuroscience is increasingly a prerequisite to creating truly engaging customer experiences and that shopping, as a social paradigm, would not change despite the upheaval that digital technology is inducing throughout cultures of the world.

Shopping as it turns out would remain one of the key social experiences of our culture. However, how we do it a few years from now will look and feel like something we have only been able to imagine as something out of a science fiction movie. Future shopping places might in fact be stranger than fiction.

Juggling it seemed was an apt metaphor. By juggling I could demonstrate the issues at hand and talk about intuition – our gut feeling – that we have long held with a certain suspicion. Not our fault. We have inherited a long tradition of not trusting our emotions and even blaming them when things don’t go the way we want or expect. Plato, Descartes, Freud and a host of other left-brain rationalist advocates have had us relying on our ability to reason our way to nirvana for a few millennia.

But this was not always the case. The truth is we have, in all of human history, relied more on our emotions and desires to engage in social relationships to move the machine of evolution forward, than reason alone.

We are social beings, bound to the innate need to come together in community, cooperate, share, and use our imaginations to create. Over the years these parts of us have not changed, but the ways we satisfy these needs have been in continuous evolution. Advances in technology have modified the speed of change, moving it from generational evolution in incremental steps to something more akin to revolution. The ways all generations now enlist technologies to communicate are changing, ushering in new ‘languages’ and all the while our brains are adapting.

The ways shoppers see the world and their role in it are at a transition point. Through the chapters of this book we will look at the nature of shopping as a social paradigm and the challenges that creators of shopping places will face in a world where the way we socialize is under rapid and profound change.

So, with a deep breath and a prayer, the balls flew.

I believed that my hands would adjust to find the balls as they dropped through the air. And, I believed that my message would find an accepting audience of retailers and designers who would apply it to creating more effective and relevant shopping places.

To better understand where we are today and the forces that are diving change in the creation of shopping places, we need to take a look backwards into our shopping past.
Trade Routes, the Agora and Mall-ing of America

Over twisting trade routes across continents, through sprawling bazaars, across the counter at the general store, or through the mail after making a purchase with your smartphone – shopping has given us a way to make meaning of who we are, how we interact, and how we live.

The shopping experience has always been about more than simply getting stuff. Historically, shopping has at its core exchange, forging trusting relationships and connecting to a world beyond us. The Greek Agora, the suburban mall, the laptop and the smartphone, have all connected us to our families, communities, nations, and our world. In doing so, they have each added to the intricate weaving of our personal, cultural and human tapestry.

While trade between individuals, tribes and nations certainly traces back to the early days of organized social groups, the silk trade route is best known for the establishment of organized trade across vast geographic areas. Along the ancient silk trade routes, selling and buying brought interested parties together in exchange. Twisting their way across the landscape, trade routes connected the Eastern Mediterranean to Central Asia and another connected Central Asia to China. In doing so, worlds merged as traders shuttled all manner of goods across barren deserts, over mountain passes and across vast continents.

As caravans laden with goods moved from place-to-place, more than spices and silk changed hands.

In the social transactions between merchants and buyers, people bartered and traded one thing for another. Cattle, agricultural products, shells, coins, beetle legs and even dead rats served to get ‘this for that.’ Bartering as a system for commercial exchange meant you had to be able to find someone who needed say, a cow, to be able to get what you wanted. Furthermore, herding cattle or any livestock across miles of desert was a terribly inefficient way to get things done. Eventually coins and paper money replaced the barter system and retailing has never been the same.

The impact of the developing trade routes on local as well as national economies was profound. Countless people were employed in the production of silk and spices. Economies grew in support of the transport of goods and towns flourished along trade routes providing the amenities for travellers ferrying products across the continents.

The transport of goods from great distances also brought with it other consequences, such as the spread of the bubonic plague from the east to the west in 534, 750, and 1346 C.E. The last incidence, referred to as the Black Death, was responsible for one of the largest decimations of population in human history, wiping out approximately two thirds of the population of London and killing nearly half of all other Europeans in a four-year period.
On the other hand... great things happened, such as the spread of ideas. The stories travellers told fostered cultural mythologies as well as the sharing of ideas about foreign politics, mysterious religions, and emerging technologies.

It is not surprising that Buddhism, specifically Mahayana Buddhism, became one of the great traditions of the world as it spread along the trade route from India to Asia. Merchants along the trade routes became supporters of monasteries, which in turn became convenient stopping points for caravans. Monks would pray for merchants venturing out along the 'Silk Road' and silk eventually found a place as one of the central materials used in Mahayana rituals.

Seldom did one individual travel the full length of the route. Instead, a multitude of caravans crisscrossed the continent, sometimes boarding sailing vessels that ventured across the Mediterranean towards Rome or the Pacific Ocean towards Japan.

As they traversed the landscape and open waters, traders formed networks upon which rich oral traditions grew as a means to carry out commercial transactions and share experiences between cultures. People forged mutually beneficial relationships that supported trade and shopping places grew at the intersections in a growing web of ancient social network connectivity. The ideas they shared changed individuals and nations.

The centerpiece of socio-cultural and commercial life for ancient Greeks was the Agora. The Athenian Agora sat at the base of the Acropolis, and was both literally and figuratively at the center of the Greek city. Three roads passed through its center including the main thoroughfare of the city, the Panathenaic Way, which led from the city gate, the Dipylon, to the foot of the Acropolis. The Agora housed courts, fountain-houses, public office buildings, the mint, a library, concert hall, temples and in 150 B.C.E., the Stoa of Attalos.

This ancient two-story arcade could arguably be classified as one of the first shopping malls. Its direct physical relationship to the other civil offices and religious structures that were the foundation of Greek society is a critical point connecting commerce to social-cultural ideologies. Early on, the act of shopping was connected to the city’s administrative, political, judicial, commercial, social, cultural, and religious activities.

These aspects of citizenship all found a place together in the heart of this ancient city and did so in relationship to the shopping trip. If you were not going directly to the library after buying some eggs, it is likely that by happenstance or sheer proximity you learned about the goings on of the city, about the politics of the state or a court case. By being in the social mix you learned the news of the day, drew inferences about its relevance to you and became connected.

The Agora was an ancient version of a social networking site.
As the centuries passed, shopping places continued to grow, both in size and importance, in every corner of the planet. Outdoor trade fairs, seaport commercial districts and covered bazaars became focal points of cultural life and commerce. For more than a thousand years, shopping centers, combining all manner of goods and services, continued to provide jobs, growing local industries as well as national economies that had become reliant on international trade.

Over time, shopping areas migrated from seaports and city centers to places somewhat disconnected from everyday life in the cities. ‘Going to the mall’ would become a purposeful journey, a destination, rather than a daily activity to the local merchants to get the dry goods and sundries. While buildings housing multiple merchants existed in Europe that could have been considered precursors to the shopping center we know today, it wasn’t until the 1920s in the United States that shopping centers got their start.

The idea of creating a shopping place away from the hustle and bustle of the city center has been credited to J. C. Nichols of Kansas City, Missouri, who built Country Club Plaza, as the business area for a large residential development. A differentiating feature of this new form of shopping was that multiple forms of retail were brought together with a unified architecture, parking lots (since the automobile had become entrenched in American culture as the form of transportation), and that it would all be managed and operated as a single unit.

Throughout the ’20s, “Strip Centers” would continue to pop-up on the outskirts of cities, providing shoppers with multiple convenience shops, a large grocery and drug store, and of course plenty of parking. When Grandview Avenue Shopping Center opened in Columbus, Ohio in 1928, it boasted 30 shops and parking for 400 cars.

By the time the 1930s came around, the idea of shopping centers was becoming more prevalent across the U.S. When Highland Park Shopping Center was built in 1931 by Texas developer Hugh Prather, the mall was beginning to turn inward with storefronts facing away from main thoroughfares. This was a significant departure from traditional street level retailing where malls would become their own entity referencing only themselves, having their own architectural personality, public services and utilities, providing consumers with self-contained places to shop. Throughout the ’30s and ’40s the ‘mall-ing’ of America continued.

Post-World War II America was ready to shop and malls grew in size and number. In the 1950s new malls were anchored with full-line versions of major downtown retailers. The turning inward of shopping centers continued with Northgate in Seattle (opened in 1950) and Shoppers’ World in Framingham Massachusetts, which signaled the first incarnation of an American mall with two levels (opened in 1951). Five years later the idea of the two-level mall was moved a step along the mall’s evolutionary path by enclosing it with a roof. The opening of Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota marked a turning point in mall development, boasting
the first fully enclosed mall with air conditioning and two department store anchors bookending the building.

By 1964 the number of malls in America had grown to 7,600.

In the eight subsequent years, the number of malls in the U.S. doubled, topping out at 13,174 properties. And, a number of new formats were being developed to satisfy a growing suburban population as well as reconsidering city center opportunities. Notable among these were Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, which was the first of the “Festival Marketplace” genre, and the country’s first vertical mall, Water Tower Place in Chicago. Water Tower Place has since been considered one of the county’s most successful mixed use developments combining retail, offices, condominiums and, of course, parking.

The ’80s were the American mall developer’s heyday with more than 16,000 locations built between 1980 and 1990. Not only did malls become more plentiful, but they also grew to enormous formats with “super-regional’ centers becoming popular with shoppers. And then, the saving and loan crisis set in, making it extremely difficult to get credit to build new properties. Leading into 1993, a sharp decline in building starts resulted a 70% drop in shopping center development.

Throughout the mid to late ’90s mall development slowly recovered and new formats began to emerge. Factory outlet centers were quickly becoming all the rage. Looking for a bargain on name brand goods, shoppers would flock to the outlet center for the day and load up on discounts on the brands they typically shopped at full price. Over the past 14 years the number of outlet malls has almost doubled from 183 in 1990 to more than 225 today.

Malls have become entertainment venues. Gigantic malls such as the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota and the West Edmonton Mall in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada cover millions of square feet offering everything from ice-skating, to roller coasters, to submarine rides. Filled with themed dining, movie theaters, play areas, churches, municipal offices, libraries and museums, the American super-mall is a reincarnation of the Greek Agora for contemporary society.

As the Greek Agora was the epicenter of early Greek culture and commerce, the mall is a revenue-generating powerhouse. In many towns they have become a key source of economic development and tax revenue. “In 2012, shopping center-inclined sales were estimated at $2.4 trillion, an increase of 2.8% from the previous year. In 2012, state sales tax revenue from shopping center-inclined sales totaled $136.2 billion, up from the $131.6 billion collected in 2011.”1 Shopping centers are big employers with more than 9% of the country’s workforce performing shopping center-related activities.

As the U.S. climbs out of the “Great Recession,” shopping mall development is increasing slightly. Mall related employment was up 1.3% in 2012 over 2011 and as of May 2012, there were 112,874 shopping centers, up from 112,620 in 2011.
Shopping centers now cover more than 7.47 billion square feet of gross leasable area (GLA) in the U.S.

Total shopping sales in 2012? $2.4 trillion!

It’s safe to say that Americans love shopping and the ‘mall-ing of America’ has given American consumers compelling places to do it.

Ideas and Commerce – A Convenient Connection

“A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on. Ideas have endurance without death.” — John F. Kennedy

Early in the development of commercial exchange it became clear that the spread of ideas was connected to the selling of goods and services. Today, companies with a social conscience use their national and international networks to promote ideas within their brand platforms such as sustainability and compassionate capitalism. Kohl’s, Timberland and Starbucks have robust sustainability programs that are integral to their brand platforms that are a win-win-win benefitting the retailer, customer, and environment.

Frequenting these retailers implies support of their programs. Using your “Kohl’s Cash” to buy your back-to-school supplies is a vote for producing clean energy through solar power. Buying “EarthKeeper” footwear from Timberland is saying “yes” to reducing landfill sites and planting trees in deforested areas of China. And, investing way more than you should on a cup of coffee at Starbucks is worth it because 75% of all new company-owned stores are to be certified under the LEED® green building standard (not to mention Starbucks’ other extraordinary efforts in ethical sourcing and community involvement).

These companies have it embedded in their corporate DNA that people drive businesses and that business promotes ideas and ideals.

With future generations of shoppers’ growing cynicism towards the world of corporate governance, it has become critical to understand that for a brand to remain relevant it’s not just what you sell, but what you stand for that is most important.

So, there is meaning attached to the stuff we buy. It says a great deal about who we are and how we feel about social or environmental policy. Sharing that message starts with a smile, a genuine welcome, a good pair of boots and maybe a cup of coffee.

One of the keys to the success of every positive exchange of goods or services is the experience born out of the social interaction between seller and buyer. The face-to-face interaction between two or more people and the body’s corporeal connection to the world around it are profound components of the experience. What we take away from a shopping outing is far more than the dry goods and sundries but a profound, and yet intangible, element of the interaction – ‘experience.’
Today’s consumers expect the companies they love to do more, be more and offer more than good products or services at an acceptable price. For the customer, shopping environments are more than a space to carry out a transaction between two parties; they are the three-dimensional embodiment of the brand and a venue for interaction with the people who act as its ambassadors.

How customers ‘feel’ about the time they committed to shopping a retail place is the best indicator of whether or not they make a purchase and becomes a committed adopter of the brand. In the end, it’s not the stuff they get, but the positive feelings they hold about the people they interacted with that helps to make shopping experiences memorable.

Positive customer experiences are more about interactions between people and the exchange about life stories than they are about the stuff we get while shopping.

People.

It may sound simple, but this crucial element to creating great shopping experiences can be the most disappointing aspect of a trip to the mall, a main street store, and even a company’s website. The emotional takeaway often determines whether or not the one-time shopper ever becomes a long-time customer.

3P’s – Product, Price, Place – and People

When I started in the industry, my employer, Joe Weishar of New Vision Studios in New York, was one of the leaders in teaching the ‘why’ rather than the ‘how’ of effective visual merchandising and store planning to retailers across the globe. He would continually reinforce the idea that it was the product that was the star of the show and that the architecture of the space was playing a supporting role.

As a young architect new to the world of retail design, schooled in believing that my role was to save the world from itself through creating “A”rchitecture, this was a good, albeit hard lesson to learn.

It is essentially true that great merchandise displayed in an effective way can lead to increased sales, despite the aesthetics of the ‘architecture’ that act as its wrapper. Not to discount the value of good design – after all my career has been dedicated to creating effective and aesthetically pleasing selling places. But, my appreciation for what ‘design’ meant in the service of retail’s prime objective of selling merchandise, has been necessarily reshaped over years of walking sales floors, moving fixtures, watching customer interactions and discovering what really drove customers to buy.

I can now tell you that it isn’t the design of the display table that makes a stack of sweaters sell out.

I would have loved to believe that it was all about the store design, but I was often reminded that pretty designs may win awards but don’t insulate the retailer from
bankruptcy due to poor merchandising, over ambitious buying, not being able to tell their story in a relevant way or bad customer service.

I was schooled in retail to believe that product is the leading lady. You can sell merchandise off of milk crates, fold-up tables or a colorful blanket splayed on the sidewalk like street merchants in New York. Or, even out of the back of a car on a college campus as Phil Knight did when growing Nike. Any of these can be effective places to bring your goods to market. It’s what’s on the table or in trunk that matters.

If product is the star then the merchant is the promoter, director, producer and stagehand. If shoppers don’t have great social experiences with the merchants, they may just have some good-looking stuff in the back of a car, or on a table, a rack, or a wall.

But is simply having nice stuff the goal?

For some, it most definitely is. Nice stuff does make us feel good and if you are selling commodity items, nice may be enough. The problem with ‘nice’ is that it is swept by fashion, temperament, culture and all things transient. There is no anchor in the soul of a customer with ‘nice’.

If, however, you are connecting customers to a deeper set of brand ideologies and building experience memories that become part of the fiber of the customer, then the social paradigm that has always been part of the shopping experience must be held in the foremost position among the intricacies in creating great retail places.

While we may have considered the 3P’s – the right ‘Product,’ at the right ‘Price’ in the right ‘Place’ – as the basic tenets of successful retailing, there is an element that is missing in this equation. When we think about opening the doors to success in retail place making, the traditional three pillars of successful retailing leave the applecart unstable without the fourth P – ‘People.’ Without customers, ‘Product,’ ‘Price’ and ‘Place’ don’t accomplish anything.

With the increasing influence of the Internet, crowdsourcing and the growing idea that more and more things are becoming ‘free,’ we will see that ‘Price,’ as a differentiator in the creating of great experiences, will fade. You can commoditize almost everything, but putting a price tag on experience and the connection born out of a truly empathic relationship is both more difficult and potentially priceless.

The social aspect of the shopping experience will grow to be ever more important as the creation of shopping places morphs in response to the world of social media, downward pressure of manufacturing and supply costs, and the ability to buy anything, anytime, anywhere through a smartphone.

If we can buy anything, anytime, from the palm of our hand, why would we ever go into a store?

We go because of the people and the experience of connection.

This mere fact, as we will see in later chapters, is at the crossroads of reinventing the shopping experience of the future.
The very core of all shopping experience faces a dilemma. In a world that allows for communication in disembodied ways and shopping at arm’s length, people are losing their ability to truly engage in empathic relationships.

- If we believe that the foundation of great shopping experiences has for millennia been based on the social aspect of the exchange, how then can the store as the place of connection between customers, brands and the products they sell stay relevant in a digitally driven age?
- If shopping places exist at all in the future beyond the virtual portals to unlimited goods and services, what type of interaction will be found there?
- How does the ‘social interaction’ aspect of shopping take place when customers are not in the store?
- What roles do product and its presentation through display and effective visual merchandising play in environment?
- In a world of abundant choice and downward pressure on price, will the products we buy become less relevant as part of the shopping experience?

**The Social Contract**

Merchants and customers they serve enter into a relationship that relies on an implicit set of rules. It’s a sort of social contract. When customers buy products or services, there is an implicit dialogue that goes on in their heads that might sound something like, ‘I am going to buy this thing, and in exchange we will have an agreement of sorts that extends beyond the product. From you I will learn a host of relevant and sometimes inconsequential facts about the news of the day, fashion trends, how to prepare a meal and information about far off lands.’

The social aspect of the shopping experience has always been a fundamental part of the exchange. The expectation of connection with the retailer or brand is an aspect of the shopping experience that is far more profound in shaping the memory of a shopping trip than the things customers carry away in their shopping bags. Relationship can drive sales more than cutting prices. Build a bridge with a customer and they will cross a raging torrent to get to the store.

Customers rely on the relationship with merchants and they will often go out of their way to go back to places that simply make them feel good. The idea that the experience has to ‘feel good’ is not new in the world of creating great shopping experiences. It’s the intangible nourishment of their relational right brain through personal connections that helps to promote the likelihood that customers buy what the store is offering.

In fact, we rely on the feeling of satisfaction after a shopping experience to determine our sense of loyalty to a brand or retailer. The sense of satisfaction and the experience being ‘complete’ depends on how the social aspect of the engagement played out.
If the product or service does not deliver on expectations or on the basic functions it was purchased to accomplish, of course there is a problem. But, the residual emotional feeling associated with the experience trumps everything else. Those products or services that are paired with exceptional service are perceived as exceptional because the emotional connection to the people selling them fosters a relationship between buyer and seller.

The late Peter Glen, customer service advocate and contributor to (then) VM&SD magazine, would rail on retailers who overlooked the very idea that they were first in the business of providing great service.

His columns about his incredulity and indignation with those who failed to deliver on the basic tenet of retailing being primarily a social paradigm were amusing, enlightening and a wakeup call for those who opened their doors every day to customers. Assuming the brand’s product delivers on the basic functions it purports to offer, building on the social aspect of the engagement weaves the ties that bind customers to brands.

Before the days of buying books on Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble completely changed the way customers thought about a bookstore. When going to these massive literary strongholds you didn’t just have an opportunity to buy from an extraordinary assortment, but also to be in a ‘place’ that was crafted to allow you to linger, curl up in a big cozy chair, read magazines at will, and have a warm cup of coffee and pastry as you pored over the pages of a favorite novel. There seemed to be little pressure to buy and more of a promotion to stay and experience the social nature of the store.

There are few retailers who understand the profound dynamics of engaging customers and social interactions, as does Starbucks. No matter where you go in the world, each of these environments is crafted specifically to engage customers to be in a place that is both unique and also referential to the locale in which it is placed. Delivering more than a good cup of coffee, these places seem to go out of their way to provide an emotional connection to other people as well as the brand.

Apple stores have been the benchmark against which retailers, retail architects and designers, and even customers, compare what it means to be shopping for consumer electronics. Apple stores are exquisitely detailed with beautiful materials and clean contemporary geometries. The stores are well executed, but when you get beyond the details of architecture or environmental graphics, what you notice more are the shoppers. Yes, of course these stores have product, but your perception of even that is dwarfed by one’s appreciation of the number of people engaging in conversations with each other and sales associates and playing with merchandise for as long as they want. Apple stores have become a landmark for tech-community interaction. Upon entering you’re always asked if you can be helped and your name is recorded on a list so that when it is your turn, a sales associate can focus on you as individual with specific needs rather than just another customer. Most people will wait because
a social connection has already been made. If time pressed, customers often make an appointment to come back later.

The underlying message? ‘You are important and we understand that time is a significant consideration for you on the shopping trip, let’s not waste it and get right to solving your needs.’

Shopkeepers who appear genuinely interested and grateful that customers have made the effort to come to their store, welcome customers and invite them to enter a relationship. In doing so, they open themselves to all the things that make relationships rewarding and disappointing, enlightening and disillusioning, a challenge and a walk in the park, a soft place to fall and to be viewed with skepticism.

Retailers who understand that shoppers are often times looking for more than the products they sell, let customers know they have their interests at heart. That they are good listeners and have appropriate answers to customers’ questions and concerns. They talk to shoppers and ask questions. Respond to Tweets, blog comments and customer calls. They are inventive about how their offering can satisfy a shopper’s needs. They ‘know’ their customers both because of their ability to collect data from previous shopping trips and customers’ connections to social networking sites. And, despite the fact that customers are more informed today than they have ever been, retailers often teach shoppers something they didn’t know about the brand, its products and maybe even the customers, themselves.

Too much to ask of a retailer? I don’t think so.

The lyrics to the opening song of the popular ’80s TV show Cheers had it exactly right:

“Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name,
And they’re always glad you came.”

Connecting to customers in relevant and emotional ways remains the underpinning of the relationship between the customer and merchants today and into the foreseeable future. Our drive to engage socially has been built into our collective human DNA over millions of years.

We are social beings, driven to connect, collaborate and coexist despite what the six o’clock news tries to make us believe. Violence towards each other has always been a part of human history, but we would have wiped each other out of existence long ago if it were not for the fact that we are hardwired for empathic connection.

Shopping places are the links, the connective fiber, between the nodes of customers on a vast consumer network.
Shopping places are playgrounds that provide frameworks that support interaction between customers and brands. A store is the three-dimensional-ization of all that a brand is.

Despite the emergence of online shopping opportunities, the store will remain a crucial place to create customer community and a brand experience. It is a gathering place to tell stories and share in a common social experience between like-minded individuals.
Great Un-Expectations

When I was studying to be an architect at McGill University, the curriculum included a course in landscape architecture. In one of our design projects we were given the challenge of choosing a space in Montreal and creating an environment that responded to the surrounding conditions in a manner that was respectful of its historical background, while taking into account the present-day activity. The objective was to shift the perception of people occupying the 3-dimensional ‘space’ from empty, leftover and underutilized to one that engaged, had purpose, created profound memories and was a destination – a ‘place.’

I chose a little crack of a space between two buildings in the Vieux Port of Montreal. The space was really more of a circulation route between the waterfront and the cobblestone streets a block into the old port. It was one of those leftover, interstitial spaces, the kind that held no significance and was overlooked as the city grew up around it. It was a space bounded by a building on one side and high brick wall on the other. The inlet and exits were narrow and the view from inside was a slice of blue sky. Definitely not a destination. However, at a certain point it opened as if taking a breath, and offered up the opportunity to create a place of repose. This leftover space became a study in transformation and my understanding of the elements that define the characteristics of ‘space’ versus ‘place.’
Something then, as it still does now, intrigued me about the in-between places, the back alleys, the gardens behind walls and the narrow spaces that act more as circulation corridor than a place to be in for any period of time.

When shopping in foreign cities, I prefer the markets, twisting roads, and covered passages leading to hidden courtyards. These less traveled areas of the city delight you with novelty and the discovery of something you might feel was hidden from everyone else’s eyes but yours. They are rich in textures, smells, colors, and have individual site-specific qualities that enhance a sense of place. They elicit your emotions with sensory experiences and they are better when shared with other people.

In Miami, I walked along Collins Avenue looking for places such as these. I was ready to turn around and walk back to a spot I had arranged to meet some friends, when instead I turned to peer into a shop window.

Beautifully appointed mannequins and a blue horse with a rich brown leather riding saddle drew me into the foyer. Blue painted ceiling fans spun silently above, creating a welcome breeze. Large glowing orbs suspended in rope netting and oversized tassels hung as pendant lighting. While fully captivated, I had not yet entered the store.

I paused to take in a single mannequin display at the end of the long room and while I could have just enjoyed the entryway and walked out, the environment invited me to explore further. I moved through the archway into the store, leaving the street behind. Casually moving through merchandise presentations on tables made of large steel chain links, I found my way to the back where my search for something different was fulfilled.

A doorway led to a walled courtyard. Deep blue furniture sat upon red terra cotta tile. Tropical plants softened corners and in a powder blue wall across the courtyard, another door. Without thinking, I was on my way through the ‘in-between’ space of the courtyard to a place beyond.

This out-building at the rear of the lot was the boys’ and girls’ department. With whitewashed rustic wood planking for wall cladding and ship window portals for mirrors, this place reinforced my feeling of immersion. I felt as if I were in some other place. Not on Collins Avenue. Not in Miami. This was some other location that I could fill with imagination.

The ceiling was painted blue with floating clouds. It was as though the roof had been peeled away and you stood looking at a postage stamp-sized clip of the open sky framed only by the outline of the painted wooden walls. This was a ‘place.’ This place was unique, imaginative, and mostly, unexpected. It was Tommy Hilfiger.

The goal of great retail place making is to be remarkable – ‘worthy of being noticed especially as being uncommon or extraordinary.’ And, while every store visit offers
the opportunity for customers to share a story of their experiences with others, they often go without remark. Many places we shop seemingly don't bother to capture our attention with memorable moments and captivate our creative imagination. Those that do seem to understand the value of making shopping experiences that touch us in an emotional way and have us chatting up a storm about what it was like to be part of the place. Nobody remembers average. However, something worth commenting on can now reach a multitude both by word of mouth and across social media networks that lace together individuals into a global community of shoppers.

I have had similar, remarkable experiences to the Tommy Hilfiger store elsewhere: the stair in the Anthropologie store on Regent Street in London with its living wall, the hawker stalls creating outdoor food markets in Singapore, being under the diaphanous tree-graphic ceiling of Globetrotter in Cologne, Germany, and climbing the stair in the Hollister Co. store in SoHo New York with its deep shadows and illuminating screens showing real-time video feeds from Huntington Beach. There have been many of these places that I have come upon on my shopping journeys. And, there have been an abundance of shopping environments that don't move the needle on the emotional connection scale. Place making is an emotions game. It is a body-memory experience and mission critical for any shopping place.

In most of my remarkable shopping moments, I didn't expect the discoveries that I now so vividly recall. And, I remember them not just as vivid images in my mind’s eye, but in the way my body felt as I walked through them. The unexpected element is a key feature of creating memorable places that delight our senses. The experience of something new within a context of those things we expect heightens the memory of place. Our brains love the unexpected, and they are able to pick up small anomalies in the patterns we perceive in the environments around us. In fact, we learn through being exposed to novelty. The pleasure centers of our brains are set up to respond to the unexpected by releasing neurochemicals that can make us feel good. We don't, however, need to stumble upon an oasis to get this sense of pleasure by the experience of a new place. Novelty can come in very small packages too. Small changes in the shopping places we are used to such as a change of color, new signs and other graphics, new merchandise, or the change in an arrangement of a group of fixtures are noticed by our perceptual systems. Not much in a store goes without being noticed by the customer's brain. What the customer pays attention to, however, has everything to do with where, and how, these interruptions occur as they move through a space or flip through the pages of a website on their mobile phone.

We are very good at understanding patterns. In fact, we rely on pattern recognition to help us make sense of our world. Patterns in the places we go help provide scaffolding for understanding our environment, giving things in it context. Expecting the patterns to remain consistent is a hallmark of how our brains process the world. When the unexpected occurs our brains take note. In future chapters I’ll
explain why our brains crave unexpected rewards, how these rewards create pleasure and why I think we must incorporate these moments of delight into retail places.

Customers who go to the same shopping places on a regular basis – call them ‘brand loyalists’ – expect both consistency and change. That is, they need the structure, or a baseline, for understanding the brand experience in the store. Structure is provided by factors such as architecture, an approach to merchandising, the way sales associates engage customers, the graphic content of the environment, music, scent, and product adjacencies.

So while we recognize the aesthetic of re-used/re-purposed/re-imagined eclecticism of Anthropologie stores, they are all different – and the same. Starbucks stores rely on three different design concepts, which are re-imagined using the same palette of design language, materials, and graphics approaches. Regardless of where in the world the store is, it draws on recognizable elements that are consistent with a well-established brand story.

They are the same in principle but unique in each location. Each of course responds to a different set of site-specific requirements, which will always require some inventive thinking since there is invariably a column in the way, a change in level or some other peculiarity to the space. However, the conscious effort to make each location different in design fosters an atmosphere of creativity for both the retailer’s in-house store planning teams as well as design firms. Furthermore, it has the added benefit of the portraying a point of view about being relevant to the local community. And, it gives the customer a new look, novelty within a structure, whether they are in different areas of a single city or shopping across a network of international locations. These variations on a theme create customer experiences of novelty within the familiar.

Remember ‘cookie cutter’ store rollouts? They were very popular in the past but lacked a sense of ‘place.’ No one particular location differed from the next. While this created a quick and easy reference point for customers to connect to the brand, it didn’t speak to our need for novelty.

These places delivered the same products, in the same environments, in the same ways in multiple locations. This of course greatly simplifies the logistics of product manufacturing, delivery and store build outs, but it worked contrary to our proclivity towards the desire for something new. Customers want their stores to be unique to them, even when they are shopping an international brand.

Stores that don’t reflect the local surroundings lack a sense of place because they can be, well… any place.

Place making is not about creating environments that seem to have landed here on earth from some other corner of the galaxy. Those environments may be trendy and cool but verge on being disconnected from meaningful integration into the
communities they serve. Customers need the store to be both recognizable to provide some sense of consistency and they need it to change, evolve and accommodate the growth of the relationship between themselves and the brand. When brands build strong relationships with brand loyalists, there are constants on which the relationship is founded and the implicit understanding that change is inevitable.

In a world where rapid change is a foregone conclusion, how the store accommodates the evolving needs of the customer is in the midst of an unprecedented upheaval. As in any good relationship, as one partner grows, the other faces a challenge, to change as well or go it alone in the pursuit of the status quo. Retailers who do not stay in lock step with the change of their customers run the risk of disconnect and being replaced by others who are more attuned to the customer's needs.

Each of the great shopping places we visit is designed to create experiences that are about more than just selling products. The goal is to create a sense of belonging that resonates with the customer. Either because it summons old memories, conveys a sense of community, engages the senses or simply feels familiar. The dance between retailer and customer in the store is an intricate bit of footwork.

Objective: don’t step on your partner’s toes.

As an architect whose specialty is the design of retail places, I want people to ‘dance.’ I want customers to buy of course, and the shared responsibility between the retailer and me, the architect/retail designer, is geared toward creating a place that motivates buying behavior. The best that I can hope for is that I create environments that enhance that likelihood.

But, I learned a long time ago that it is not entirely about me the architect/designer, my personal design agenda, or my definition of beauty. I had to put those things aside, both to lead and learn to follow in the dance. In the world of creating ‘retail dance floors,’ the customer and brand are stomping out the tempo. My job is to give them a flat floor and help keep the music playing.

A customer coming to the store does not necessarily guarantee a purchase. Often the store design, merchandising and attitude of sales associates seem to be counter-productive to selling anything. We’ve all got stories of shopping experiences that were not enjoyable.

What can a retailer do to make it better?

Create places for engaging the creative emotional brain and promote genuine connection.

Craft in-store merchandising strategies that consider online buying behaviors.

Tell stories that support the key brand principles. Grow a culture of knowledgeable and truly engaging sales associates.

And, make experiences that are relevant, allowing shoppers to ‘dance’ in the way they want instead of making them follow numbered footprints on the floor.
It becomes complicated, quickly.

Generally, the customer doesn’t have a clue of what it takes to make shopping places come alive. They show up. The rest is up to the retailer. The job of delivering quality places to engage the brand, and the products it sells, requires the same tireless commitment each time the front door swings open.

**Closets vs. Kitchens**

There is a difference between the closet that holds my shoes and the kitchen in my parents’ house.

My closet is storage space. It holds all my stuff. It is organized (well, mostly), utilitarian, and lacks any sort of emotional connection or aesthetic that promotes feelings and memories. Interestingly, when I take the jacket I really like off the hanger and hold it up in my room, it is as if that garment metamorphoses from a weaving of thread to a vessel of memories, a suit of armor, a conversation piece and a display of my sense of well-being.

The jacket in the closet is simply a jacket; it has no inherent meaning. Off the rack, the jacket takes on a role, a personality. Taking it from my closet to my room I experience it in a different way. The context of being in a ‘place’ gives it qualities that are not about thread count, color, and whether or not it is the right look for the dinner party, concert or office meeting.

My parents’ kitchen, unlike my closet, has the unique character of holding every memory of Thanksgiving dinners and the stuffing my mother makes, the over-cooked broccoli and her pumpkin pies. It holds the conversations with my brothers when we used to laugh over childhood adventures. It holds the memories of discussions of school, girls, the exam the next day, and plans for the future. It holds the memories of baking Christmas cookies, making art, and sound of my dog’s feet racing across the floor to his bowl, which he always ran into and spilled in the corner.

This area of my childhood house has the unique ability to echo with emotions. It connects to me in a profound and embodied way. My body remembers.

There are fundamental differences between ‘spaces’ in which we simply carry out a transaction and ‘places’ that engage us in embodied experience making. The success of shopping places is hinged on retailers’ understanding that connections to their stores and their brands, are cemented with more than just the products they sell and the price points they provide them at. Positive shopping experiences promote connection through building trust and delivering on expectations in an environment that supports the emotional connection between people.

When teaching a design course at Inter-Dec College in Montreal I had students arrange their desks to create a space in the middle of the room, creating a sort of corral. I then asked a student to stand in its middle, stretch out her arms and turn
slowly while walking about and then, when she was ready, to stop and be still. I then asked her to report what she felt, how she experienced herself in relation to the space and its perimeter.

Alone in the circle, individuals reference themselves and the bounding edge. They talk about how they feel about being close to the edge – safer, further away – not as much. When in relation to something or someone else, a dynamic evolves. Relationships build and one thing influences the other.

When one person is in the space the energy occurs in a straight line – between the individual and the edge. When another enters the space the energy connects the two of them with the edge as well and a new bounding box occurs. The large open space is segmented to create a space between people.

After a short pause, I asked another student to get in the corral, hold out his arms and spin slowly while moving through the space. When he came within a few steps of the other student I asked him to stop and report what he felt about his relationships to the bounding edge and the other student. What ensued was an intriguing conversation about objects in space, how proximity to other things created context and tensions, both literal and figurative, and how the proximity between two objects energizes the space making it more than an area of floor marked off from the rest of the room by a row of desks.

Another student climbed in spinning and stopping. Then another. And another, until the entire class was in the ring. Asking everyone then to sit on the floor, the desks became walls instead of waist-high fencing. The rest of the room disappeared. With our focus on relationship to each other we had created ‘place.’

‘Places’ are more intimate, and I would contend, more profound, due to the relationships built between people not walls. Places are imbued with emotion that creates the experience of being connected.

Cavernous stores, those that are measured in the tens or hundreds of thousands of square feet, are so out of human scale that they have a challenge creating a sense of place. Huge volumes packed with merchandise are a recipe to overwhelm, not only because our brains can't process all the visual, auditory and other sensory information, but also because the sheer size disconnects the customer from experience on a human scale.

So while department planning helps break down the assortment into digestible chunks of similar products and adds clarity, enhancing our ability to take it all in, it has the other benefit of making places out of spaces. Departments, shops within shops, allow for connection in a more personal way than if you were simply to provide a labyrinthine space with row upon row of merchandise.

When shoppers scan a store environment and its densely packed sales floor, it often becomes awash with visual patterns. Groups of individual products begin to blend into a sea of sameness and the connection to a branded ‘place’ begins to fade. As the
size of a shopping environment grows, promoting abundant choice as the key business strategy, the proportion between the numbers of people versus products reverses. Fewer shoppers within a defined area put more space between them, replacing opportunity for personal connection with rows of stuff. Shopping trips become more of a search for commodities and deeply engaging experience takes a back seat to loading up the shopping basket and moving on to the next task on the to-do list.

The enormity of vast mountain ranges, wide open planes, enormous city squares or even stores that measure in the hundreds of thousands of square feet can indeed be awe inspiring. However, their impact is more about giving us a feeling of our diminutive size in relation to the world (or universe) around us. Though there may be a transcendent feeling to experiencing such places, we always ‘come back to earth’ as it were, to engage in relationship with people.

Walk some of the largest shopping places in the world, like the bazar in Istanbul with its seeming endless corridors of shops, and you discover that beyond the initial impact of its scale, the memory goes next to the interaction you had with a shopkeeper. In remembering my shopping trips through bazars, the twisting alleyways loaded with products have blended into a visual pastiche that are an echo in comparison to the vivid memories of bartering with individual store owners and the excited exchange between the man trying to make the sale, my interpreter, and me.

Times Square in New York is both enormous and a visual delight. But, if you emptied it of people, it wouldn't have any of the impact when throngs of people fill the area to welcome in the new year or simply come together to take pictures on the corner amidst its digital backdrop.

The experience of memorable places is made more profound in their sharing with others. I would suggest that the experience of place is less about architecture than what happens between people. The place between people is magical because in it, the energy of connection is shared. We will look at the idea of a ‘concept of mind’ later in the book, which suggests that our minds exchange information and energy binding us together in a collective experience. Connecting to the hearts and minds of customers happens in the experience between us, in our face-to-face connection.

Great shopping experiences find their way into the customer’s emotional memory, creating lasting body memories built on participation. One actively needs to ‘do’ something. You can’t just passively shop. You have to go into the store, walk the sales floor, try on or pick up merchandise, and have an exchange. This of course is a challenge in a digital world were one can access the full breadth of any retailer’s assortment from a home computer, laptop or handheld device. These new digital shopping methods seem to be in direct conflict with the idea that we need to engage in shopping with our physical bodies, among others who share in the experience, in order to be memorable. There are indeed challenges to engaging shoppers in an
embodied and meaningful way through a screen. That is of course if we assume that experience exists only in the shopper's body. We will see later that it is a mind-body relationship that drives experience. Our bodily connection to the physical environment is a driving force in the making of experience, but without the brain and shopper's mind we have nothing.

In the future of a digitally driven shopping world we may well see experiences that require less bodily interaction as augmented reality and virtual constructions take us places in our minds alone. Given that we have a few hundred million years of human development behind us, where we physically interacted with the world, I don't think the need for direct physical engagement will disappear. Purely digitally driven experiences, such as virtual reality shopping environments, will certainly be available. But, these virtual 3D ‘places’ are still a challenge for most of us who find the body’s connection to what we see through a VR headset to be slightly disorienting and, for some, have the after effect of making one feel nauseated.

As we move through space we learn about the environment. Our bodies understand the difference between walking on wood, concrete or a moss-covered forest floor. We understand these surfaces differently when we are in bare feet, in socks, boots or sneakers. Our skin knows the difference between a sharp winter wind and a humid breeze after a summer rainfall. We understand our environment, and indeed ourselves, from the feedback we get from our bodies.

When we enter stores we are adapting to a host of changing sensorial inputs. Our eyes are adjusting to different lighting, calibrating to fluorescent, tungsten or LED luminaires that replace the natural sunlight. Our faces and skin are reacting to changing humidity, temperature and registering if there is a light breeze in the space.

Our ears are taking in the change of auditory stimuli from the street or mall concourse. Taxis and the roar of busses leaving the stop are replaced with the sound of air conditioning, cash registers, music, and people talking. Even our noses and taste buds are picking up scents either intentionally manufactured to perfume the space or incidentally because the person you walked by just had chicken with garlic sauce at the food court.

I often find myself walking through stores touching everything. tabletops, merchandise, wall surfaces, and floor fixtures don't escape my desire to touch and feel my way through the aisles.

There are a host of physical attributes of shopping spaces that come together in this intricate dance to create a ‘place.’ Architecture, lighting, materials and finishes, colors, textures, product adjacencies, visual merchandising and display, graphics, etc., are all part of the retailer designer’s toolbox to make great environments to shop. This sense of place can be found in the grand bazar, main street or malls, the general store, bakery or café.
Shopping trips have not been just some utilitarian pastime. Beyond the exchange of goods and services they have always served some other emotional value. Whenever we engage with some shopping place, we are connected to them with both our bodies and minds. These two aspects of who we are come together in the making of experiences. Memorable shopping trips are built on a series of enactments that require the codependent relationship between the customer’s body moving through three-dimensional space and the customer’s mind, which makes meaning from it all.
The Rites of Purchase

Every morning, customers file into their local Starbucks coffee shop, order their beverage with the impossibly long name and go on their way to work. While it seems rather simple, this repeated process is full of activities that make coffee drinking a ritual in their daily lives. Even in countries like China, trips to buy a steaming cup of coffee are beginning to replace a long-standing tradition where tea was the ‘drink of choice.’

The purchase of the drink is only a small part of the chain of events that make the experience so popular. The scents, sights, textures, standing in the queue, idle chatter with other customers, reading the menu board (even though you already know what you will order), how the baristas welcome you (with your first name if you’ve been there enough), waiting for the hot cup to be placed on the counter, adding your milk and sugar, and then heading on your way – are all part of a process that is coded into your memory as what defines the morning ritual of getting coffee. The whole sequence of events is crucial because it sets up your day triggering a recognizable order that you come to rely on to help the day make sense. Not just because the drink warms your core or because the caffeine finally jolts you awake, but because the repetition of the experience puts the work week of Monday to Friday in a context that differentiates it from the weekend.
The time of the day, place on the street, people you see and talk to, objects you see and hold, the smells and sounds all coalesce to create sensory patterns that make the experience meaningful.

Starbucks understands the ‘power of place’ and that a customer’s embodied participation in the experience is key to cementing the relationship between the brand and those who buy its product. In fact, a campaign a couple of years ago drove the message home with window graphics that encouraged customers to “Take comfort in rituals.”

Ritual, and our participation in them have been fundamental to the development our culture for millennia. Through participating in ritual we come to understand ourselves in relation to a greater context. I have heard it said that ‘repetition is the mother of skill.’ In the case of ritual, ‘repetition is the mother of understanding.’

As shopping has become a key feature in our socio-cultural development, it has in many ways taken on many of the key features of ritual. Getting your morning coffee is a ritual that many of us can relate to, but the idea of shopping trips being like a ritual transcends coffee to all sorts of goods and services. Great retail stores have become profound ritual experiences because they are in part built on lasting body memories of places we shop.

In this chapter we will look as the elements of ritual experience and how they are part of most shopping trips. Participation in ritual shopping activities can enhance customer experience and in doing so, enhance connections in the retailer-customer relationship. As stronger bonds grow between people and the places they shop, a sense of loyalty and commitment develops that in turn promotes return visits, which every retailer wants. Rituals we participate in become part of the fabric of our lives. They are roadmaps that plot the course of how shopping experiences should unfold and what they mean to us as we travel along the customer journey.

One of the challenges in discussing the idea of ritual is the natural tendency to see it through the filter of religious studies. While I don’t want to suggest that getting a cup of coffee and participating in religious ceremonies are the same thing, they do nevertheless share common principles that make the experiences we have while shopping important to us and meaningful in our lives. As we investigate underlying principles of ritual we will begin to see how the concept can be broadened beyond our immediate perception of it as religious practice to incorporate the things we do every day, such as shopping.

The notion of ritual first appeared as a formal term of analysis in the nineteenth century to identify what was believed to be a universal category of human experience. Theories abound about whether ritual requires one’s direct participation or that you
can, through mere observation, be engaged in ritual. In fact it is both. Participants and observers are co-creators in the ritual, each playing instrumental roles in its propagation. Whether we watch or directly participate, we learn about the culture in which the ritual is enacted.

Participants of rituals ‘act’; those who observe, ‘think.’

In a simple way, we can think of our culture as being composed of essential and discrete performances that can be displayed to others outside our community. When others are exposed to these demonstrations, they alter or reinforce their thoughts and feelings about our culture and how they should act or think in relation to us. When we repeat these activities at specific times of the day/month/year they become embedded not simply as routine, but as acts that have more significance to our understanding of our world and ourselves.

Through their enactment, these performances become a sort of script to be used by performers and observers to enhance their understanding about the group’s key systems of beliefs and practices and what it means to be a part of the society.

For the outside observer who watches these enactments unfold, these performances are sometimes the most real and observable units of the cultural structure. Their performance “has a definitively limited time span, a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance.”

If we think of ritual as performance, something that is enacted by someone, then it follows that ritual performances produce feelings not just in the minds but also in the bodies of their performers. What is important to remember about the body’s connection to understanding is that we don’t, for example, understand religion by simply having knowledge of the religious doctrines, but by going to church/synagogue/temple every week. We go and engage in the performance of the rites.

If we apply the idea of direct participation in ritual acts as generating meaning in the individual, we might also say that we don’t really know the potential pleasure of shopping or buying something by having a friend tell us of their experience in a store, but from doing it ourselves. When we begin to see rituals as performances we get a better understanding how important our body’s involvement is in understanding experience. As we physically engage in the performance of the ritual acts, we can come to more fully appreciate concepts that are otherwise inaccessible.

In a digitally driven culture, social networking is changing the way we communicate, promoting the ‘performance’ of life moments as video or photos uploaded to the Internet for mass consumption. If ritual is a cultural performance lending meaning to the participants or observers, then the nature of ritual may also be in the midst of change. Handheld digital devices are moving key context establishing ritual enactments from performances at specific times in specific places, to happening...
anytime, anywhere we can capture digital images and present them to the world. This is going to have a significant impact on how shopping as ritual unfolds.

A few years ago I bought shoes at Nordstrom. While they looked great in the store and seemed to fit just fine, when I got them home they were simply un-wearable. They sat in a closet for almost a year until I took them back. No questions, no guilt just a quick and pleasant return by a sales associate who was all too happy to make my experience something that I would in turn share with others.

I had heard about Nordstrom’s legendary customer service but not actually ever had the first-hand experience. The stories were always impressive, but it turned out that actually shopping at Nordstrom was the only way to fully appreciate what was otherwise only hearsay. Having direct experience allowed me to fully understand their policy about putting the customer first.

In this case ‘doing’ was ‘believing.’

“Ritual does not simply represent the belief that it references, but it instead communicates and transmits important cultural knowledge that is called into existence by the very performance of ritual.”4 The Nordstrom brand culture is driven by a set of ideologies that put customer service first. It is probably outlined in a customer service manual someplace at the corporate headquarters, but it is played out on the sales floor (as well as the Internet) in the interaction between customers and sales associates. Brand values and culture are made real by their being enacted.

This of course points out the critical role of sales associates and how they interact with customers. Through their actions during an exchange on the sales floor, website or social network, customers come to understand what the brand stands for. Sales associates play important roles in the performance of brand rituals. How they do what they do conveys a message about what matters to the brand and what value the brand places on the customer.

Through participation in shopping as ritual both consumers and sales associates take on identities that are embedded in the rites. The scripts that brands weave into their brand presentation and the acts we follow when shopping in their stores are parts of ideological stories. Through our participation in shopping activities we adopt them as our own. In this way, shopping helps to create our identity.

I am more aware than ever about the nature of shopping as a ritual. Shopping’s ritual qualities are not to be relegated just to Christmas, or other special occasions for that matter, but to virtually every day we engage in the practice.

Shopping, as ritual, is not defined by gender, cultural, economic, religious, or racial boundaries. Shopping’s ritual qualities cross all of these boundaries and join us together in communities of collective understanding about what it means to be an adopter of a brand, to shop one retailer over another or to be a member of community, a culture and the cosmos.
Shopping is an Embodied Experience

While we experience stores in large part with our eyes, our bodies fill out the understanding of what it means to be in a retail place. We are three-dimensional beings in a three dimensional world and our bodies ‘remember’ what it feels like to be in different places.

The idea that our bodies participate in the experience of shopping should not be considered lightly since it is through our bodies that we come to full understand ourselves in relation to our world.

Far from simply being a mode of transportation for our head, our bodies are instrumental to the experience. ‘Doing’ shopping is a key component determining ‘being’ part of the experience. You don't simply think about shopping, you get up and ‘go’ shopping. And, while it is only a poor approximation of the full-bodied experience of being in at the mall or market, you still have to ‘go’ to you computer to shop via the Internet. Even while shopping via your smartphone, you are still someplace, actively engaged in some sort of physical movement, more or less.

An ancient adage attributed to Confucius some five hundred years ago claimed:

“I hear and I forget.
I see and I remember.
I do and I understand.”

As a strongly visual-spatial learner, I completely appreciate this as a mode of learning. I understood drawing more deeply when, standing at the easel, I would take on the pose of the model myself, shifting my weight from one foot to another or tilting my torso this way or that.

It wasn’t until a tutor made me assemble 3D models and draw the engineering problems of my architecture education, that I fully began to understand the relationships between the mathematical algorithms and anything in my world. The problems of steel design, structures or electricity were taken out of the conceptual world of my thoughts, into a built world that I created.

Both thoughts and actions are involved in shopping. Fully understanding what it means to be an adopter of one brand over another, or engaging in one shopping place over another is not something that you do at arm’s length. You get in there and get involved playing both roles of participant and observer. We are both the makers of the experience and the beneficiaries of things well made.
Participating is Key

“Just Do It” is arguably one of the best slogans created in contemporary branding as well as being the cultural mindset of Nike. It is also a call to action, to participate. To get up, get out and get with it.

Repetitive patterns of ‘doing’ can be considered simply to be humdrum ‘routine.’ As innately creative beings, we tire quickly of those activities that are simply repetitious in nature. And so, it is not so surprising that innovative technologies have often been turned towards alleviating us from the repetitive, time-consuming activities such as household chores and industrial production. Vacuums, dishwashers, washing machines, lawnmowers, and a host of other household appliances help out at home so we may engage in loftier pursuits.

Ritual, while often having repetition as a key component to the rites, is something more profound. “Not every pattern constitutes ritualization, but every instance of ritual presupposes a process, a dance-like quality of interaction between an ecosystem and people” that has meaning grounding the participants in context to the world around them.5

“The most widespread [ritual] actions are spectating, purchasing, and consuming. They are done partly out of necessity but mostly for the sake of participation.”6 Shopping as a collective series of enactments gives meaning and context to all of our lives.

It is important to note that we do not have shopping done to us. While we may be simply observers of shopping behavior as we walk through stores at the mall or discover our way through an open-air market, we also help to create our experience by actively participating in its making. The degree to which we actively engage in the experience of a shopping trip is proportional to how profoundly the experience becomes part of us. The more we take part in the experience with our bodies, the more it is embedded in our emotional core.

This will become important in the future of retail place making, as an entire generation is becoming a cohort of digital content makers. Today’s digitally enabled youngster will likely find future retail places to be a mix of ‘old-school’ embodied experience combined with opportunities to engage with interactive digital interfaces. The ritual performance of shopping experiences will have a completely different look when we consider the emergence of a shopping culture whose personal performance is an every-moment opportunity that is published to their social network via the Internet. We will look at the implication of this paradigm shift and the creation of in-store customer experience in Part 3.

There is a part of all shoppers that loves to be served; that likes the doting waiter, the overly attentive sales associate, the reliable doorman. It feels good to be treated with a little extra care. Every customer wants to feel appreciated, and to
know they are of value to the retailer. The less they have to do, and more others have to do, the better.

On the other hand, there is also a part of all of us that loves making stuff. If shoppers can disengage from the social pressures of ‘ought to’s, do’s and don’ts, the self-consciousness of adult group decorum slips. These moments reactivate the child-like enthusiasm to engage in making the experience one’s own.

Retail places such as Make Meaning, The Paint Bar, Build-A-Bear Workshop, and the trendy burger joint on midtown Manhattan’s east side, 4Food, incorporate the notion that when customers engage in the making of their experiences and co-author the narratives they have of a shopping trip, they not only buy a heft of merchandise but they also really have fun doing it.

In today’s retail marketplace, many stores are created with the too-simple assumption of a one-size-fits-all approach to shopping. Of course that’s at odds with the idea that we generally want to feel ourselves as being individuals, with needs, wants and aspirations that are unique to us. In a digitally driven world that continues to promote the idea that posting personal details on social network sites is a definition of who we are, we will continue to see specification within product categories into subsets of subsets of demographics until the individual is the epicenter of a retailer’s marketing focus.

The degree to which retailers and brands can personalize products and services, will be an indication of their ability to keep in pace with the dynamic nature of digital world. Customers will come to accept that everything changes in so far as the changes suit them, personally.

The “NikeiD” program, while having been available for some time, is a step by an international brand and retailer in the direction of allowing customers to customize their own shoes. By engaging customers in creating the color, graphics and other details of their running shoes, they allow them to be a part of an international brand-mindset at the same time they are presenting their own individuality to the world. Mass-customization will go from being a trend to being the status quo, where production times are reduced from months, to weeks, to days to hours – when 3-D printing eventually goes mainstream.

In a world where we are both looking to support our long-held social imperative of wanting to belong to a group, we work equally hard at making our experiences ‘unique.’ Ownership of property is an important factor in self-determination. Our perceptions of experiences become our reality and as we participate in making them, we also fashion our identity.

A significant part of ‘buying in’ to one brand or retailer over another is our desire to incorporate the brand’s ideologies into our own belief systems. We want our brands to belong to us as much as the products we buy from them. You have likely described
a store you often go to as ‘my store.’ Not just because you mean to describe it as the one that is close to where you live in the physical sense, and not that you actually ‘own’ it, but that it has been included into your set of relationships, things you are deeply connected to and that in some way have made it part of who you are. A sense of ownership develops that ‘gets you where you live,’ emotionally.

People who adopt brands or retailers into their lives actually defend their choices of buying products or services from them. They need to; it would be like not standing up for a family member. Being a brand loyalist says a lot about our beliefs and values. And so, it is not surprising that once we adopt a brand or retailer into our lives, we commit ourselves to living by what it stands for because it has in a way become equally part of our character.

I’ve seen people argue over whether their store is better than someone else’s. They’ll say that ‘my store has the best… whatever,’ and they’ll drive a country mile to get what they need there. What they ‘need,’ however, doesn’t fill just their pantries, but also satisfies their hunger for an emotional connection to something greater than themselves.

Part of the idea that customers connect to brands or retailers in a sort of personal relationship comes from their direct participation with retailers at multiple touch points along the customer journey. In the service of satisfying the prime objective of retailing – to sell goods and services – customers engage in sorts of activities while they are both in and out of the store. All of these brand connection moments become part of the process of shopping. Today we understand that these are spread across geography and digital form factors. You can be both in your home and on the go, on your mobile device or in relation to some other interactive digital device. Each of these touch-point fits into the ritual of a branded customer experience.

I believe that given the opportunity, people generally like to get involved with their stores. There are some retailers who take this idea directly to the sales floor where the entire concept is built around customers making the products they’ll buy. Beyond making art, candles or stuffed bears, there are companies who developed retail concepts that extend beyond the sole purpose of displaying and selling of products to becoming more actively engaged in the building a sense community with customers. They do so by offering opportunities for connection through in-store activities that involve direct participation.

The Home Depot, WYSH-Wear Your Spirit for Humanity, and Lululemon, get customers into their stores to make things, participate in seminars and do yoga.

Retailers that actively engage the customer in more than simply making a purchase in the store see the long-term benefits of increased dwell time. The store becomes more than a place that has stuff; it has heart. It becomes a meeting place for
like-minded people who choose to be engaged and show their loyalty through being return customers and brand advocates.

So, The Home Depot has adult customers crafting wooden dump trucks on a Saturday morning with their children, WYSH invites customers to educate themselves about parenting, journaling and to customize T-shirts, and Lululemon has people vowing to be more Zen-like while bending themselves into a pretzel. Customers learn more about themselves and build a bond with the brand through fostering an emotionally connected community.

And, by the way… these are all done outside of what we would call traditional store hours. Customers get up early, or go after the kids are asleep, to participate. They are motivated by doing/making/enacting and if they happen to pick up some hardware, buy a t-shirt or a yoga mat while they are there, then, all the better for them and the retailer.

Both the participant and the observer are engaged in the experience. Each takes part in the enactment of certain myths but does so from different vantage points. Because you are an observer of ritual doesn't mean that you are apart from it. As we walk the mall or shopping places we are both observers and participants. In either case, each individual is vital to the unfolding of the shopping ritual.

While it is true that the prime objective in creating great shopping places is a commercial transaction, successful merchants understand the power of ritual. They create customer experiences that are about lasting memories built on well-crafted ritual enactments of their brand platforms.

So what about the idea that some find shopping to be likened to a religious experience? Do we really attribute that much gravitas to shopping?

Recent work by Martin Lindstrom proposes that not only do customers have strong feeling about their relationships to major brands, but also that exposure to them results in lighting up the same areas of their brains that are activated when exposed to images of religious icons.

In a study conducted by Lindstrom, people were shown images of strong brands and religious icons and their brain activity was measured in an fMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) machine. When people viewed images associated with strong brands such as the Apple iPod, Harley Davidson motorcycle or Ferrari automobile “…their brains registered the exact same patterns of activity as they did when they viewed religious images…” According to the Lindstrom study, “…there was no discernable difference between the way subjects’ brains reacted to powerful brands and the way they reacted to religious figures.” In fact, the reactions in our volunteers to brands and religious icons were not just similar, they were almost identical.”
So despite the original assertion that we would try to disconnect ritual from the idea of religion, it seems that while shopping for major brands, the customer’s brain, in the end, is apt to light up as we experience images of Budweiser, Beckham and the Bible. From the point of view of brain activation, the processes that we embed into our shopping rituals imbue them with special meaning in a similar way that we have come to perceive significant spiritual or religious icons or activities.

**The Media and The Message**

When rituals are thought of as performances, the enactments can be seen as the ways in which the cultural content, unique to a particular group, is organized and shared on particular occasions through some specific media. The sharing of content can be done in a number of ways including dance, song, procession, theatrical performance, presentation of images or any combination of all of these. Looking at retailing through the lens of ritual, it is easy to see how a brand’s culture is spread among the shopping population. While we expect the foundational principles of a brand’s culture to remain constant, the way they are being performed today are in the midst of transformation. More than ever before, brands and retailers have multiple distribution channels for their messages. Participation in brand/retail rituals is no longer relegated to the store alone but occurs within an intricate, three-dimensional web of customer-brand/retailer interaction.

In our technologically enhanced and socially networked world, the way in which a brand’s culture is shared – or performed – is multifaceted. The store as the single medium for retail ritual is morphing and shopping is becoming multidimensional.

Permanent stores, pop-up shops, websites, mobile applications, social media networks, public events and appearances by brand ambassadors, as well as multiple channels for advertising, marketing and PR, all contribute to the distribution of the brand message. Each of these customer touch-points offers the opportunity for people to engage in a part of the brand’s ritual performance.

Throughout the ritual retail performance, there is of course, directly, or indirectly, the selling of products or services as well as a brand’s cultural identity. Retail rituals engage customers who are sometimes active participants and at other times simply observers. In either case, individuals become aware of core messages that the brand wants customers to understand.

If we think about the multitude of distribution ‘media’ that brands put to their use in selling both products, and by association, ideologies, we can appreciate Marshall McLuhan’s now famous saying: “the medium is the message.”

McLuhan asserted that the medium affects the society in which it plays a role, not only through the content that it delivers but also by the nature of the medium itself. Take mobile phones as an example; it would be very hard to argue that the
cellphone revolution has had no impact on society. And so, it is not just that brands or retailers can distribute messages on handheld devices, but that the devices themselves are fundamentally changing the way the message is conveyed – and thus the message itself – as well as society.

Mobile devices are changing communication methods and creating ‘new’ languages such as texting. A new world of digitally enabled communication is pushing rapid change upon societies and cultures around the world and in turn revolutionizing how customers and brands communicate. Each of the ‘form factors,’ be it desktop computer, cellphone, tablet, or digital screen, engages customers in new way of participating in retail rituals. Each of them has different levels of effectiveness in reaching the emotional center of the customer and in their combined uses, we as a shopping culture are being affected.

With the emergence of new media to convey brand messages and engage in shopping ritual, things will get complicated since the message is linked with, and changes with, the medium carrying it. This means that retailers and brands are likely to be challenged with adapting core principles to multiple platforms. Not all screens are alike in their ability to engage and ‘sell.’ Furthermore, this change of brand messages to fit a particular form factor is not going to be a one-time thing. The world around us is in dynamic change that is moving at an unprecedented pace.

It stands to reason then, that brands need to find ways to both distribute ‘culturally specific’ messages that stay true to core beliefs while being re-shaped by the medium they employ as a delivery system. Not all messages are the same at every point of interaction along the shopping journey. They can't be if they are being carried by different mediums. In-store and on-screen messaging of brand ideology are, at their cores, from the same wellspring, but at the point of customer interaction, different.

In a dynamic digital environment, customers will come to expect rapid change as a given and those responsible for content creation will need an infusion of support. We will see in later chapters that this is likely not to come from advertising and marketing agencies but from the customers themselves who will actively participate in making content. This type of direct interaction with shopping places will re-shape the paradigm of retail ritual entirely.

Sacred Ground

We have looked at the idea that ‘spaces’ and ‘places’ are different in the previous chapter and that ‘place making’ is a key differentiator in making shopping experiences more profound. From the point of view of places being fundamental to the ritual nature of shopping, we can look at the types of places we create as either being supportive of ritual or a distraction from it.
According to Ronald Grimes, “Space which is empty, uniform and abstract, is given shape and life so it may become a ritual place such as a burial ground, dancing ground, or cathedral. All of these are curiously vacant and even haunting, when the actions of ritual are not occurring in them. Ritual place is a matrix of ritual life.”

If you have ever been in a restaurant, store or theater when they are closed, you’ll understand the feeling in the Grimes statement. Without people, these spaces are slightly eerie. The feelings of how important other people are to our experience of places become very acute when they are missing. In many instances, we rely on others to round out our experiences with emotional content and the sense of connection to a place.

Shopping can of course occur inside and outside, in places that are specifically designed to support it, and in those that can spring up over the weekend and disappear by Monday. But to what degree does the design of the place have an influence on how a shopping ritual unfolds? Well, if shopping is a ritual activity, then everything in the process is specifically crafted to move the ritual forward. Everything is ‘designed’ to heighten the impact of the performance. In this way, you might say that every element a customer sees, touches, smells, hears, and does in a shopping environment is crucial to the feeling shoppers have about the place and brand. But, this is not always the case. Often there are things that designers think are important, but go entirely unnoticed by the shopper.

A focus on architectural expression is often a misappropriation of time, energy and money that seeks to satisfy some architectural imperative rather than really understanding what customers notice as they walk the sales floor. This is not to discount the deeply influential roles architecture and design have in the creation of place, but more of a call to always see the making of shopping places through the eyes of customers walking the sales floor. This customer-centric point of view comes from fully understanding customers by seeing them through both demographic and ‘psychographic’ lenses. Understanding the customer from the point of view of their psychology also requires an understanding of the customer’s neurobiology.

As a retail architect with this point of view, I have spent years creating retail store concepts that are required to be efficient and beautiful places for customers. I have not yet had a client who has asked me to produce a design concept that was over budget, unattractive and that couldn't accommodate the merchandise making up the assortment. All retailers want places that motivate customers to act – to make a purchase. Acting in retail ritual performances results in experiences that lead to the adoption of a brand and its products, with the eventual end result often being a sale.

The architecture of shopping places has always been fundamental to the experience. ‘Architecture’ though, is not necessarily a base requirement for ritual since
spaces may be also defined through actions alone. Ceremonial dances around fires, for example, may mark out circular boundaries simply by the movement of the dancer’s feet through the dirt. There is no architecture that facilitates the enactment of the dance, but there comes into existence with each step a clearly defined ritual space nevertheless.

So in creating store concepts, retail designers are always balancing brand, customer, merchandising, and design.

What is important with regard to architecture and ritualizing is that the built environment supports the enactment of the ritual and propagation of ritual ideology. Cathedrals, in their glorious architectural expression, have for ages, been designed to support Christian ritual and through them feelings of transcendence. However, uplifting and profoundly spiritual experiences can also come from standing on a mountaintop. Architecture is a key factor to the experience but it is not necessarily a prerequisite to the enactment of ritual. Everything that the store designer puts into the store, however, must support the telling of the brand story and its enactment in the ritual of shopping.

You can build almost anything these days allowing architecture to push the boundaries of the laws of physics. What is important is that the store architecture emerges from a clearly defined set of brand truths/ideologies. This set of rules can be said to act as a retail experience platform upon which all of the decisions about the shopping environment are cross-referenced. The experience platform serves as an ideological outline that helps to chart a path for design decision making in the same way that liturgy does for the enactment of religious rites.

Seeing through ritual space is partly how we orient ourselves and define the sequence of the ritual. So it is with understanding shopping places from the point of entry. We have already discussed the number of sensorial changes that one’s body is adjusting to when walking into a retail place. There is no difference when entering a place of ritual.

Immediately we understand that we are ‘in’ as opposed to being ‘out.’ What we see from the vantage point of this transition zone is key to the unfolding of the ritual. Sightlines from the entry point lead us into the space. The body follows the eyes.

Boundaries between individual classifications of merchandise within the shopping environment and those between one brand’s storefront and the others in the mall, or on the street, need to have clear identities. These points of entry/exit may be permeable allowing customers to flow between one area and another. They should at the same time define a zone of activity and distinguish the nature of the interaction between itself and the adjacent space.

Storefronts are particularly important in distinguishing ritual shopping place. They signal a clear demarcation between the space of the ‘profane’ – outside – and the ‘sacred’ inside world of the brand.
Passing through the entryway should signal an arrival in a new world apart from the collective social place of the street or mall concourse. This happens by introducing a number of perceptual cues. Looking back to the Tommy Hilfiger store experience in Miami, all of the elements of the entry sequence served both to highlight the differences between the street and the interior as well as this particular retailer from anyone else on the block. They played with my senses, not in any Machiavellian way, but by consciously addressing customer emotion through sensory responses to the changes in environment. The store set up the ritual process by defining entry into the space as a remarkable moment.

Regular customers are like a congregation. They have member status that affords them certain privileges. They move freely through shopping places, with a familiarity of the assortment and store layout. They have a deeper sense of belonging to the brand (or the brand belonging to them) than those casual shoppers who by happenstance find themselves in the store because a window display caught their attention or that they are part of a group ambling around the mall for the afternoon.

The regular customers, from time to time, are rewarded for their commitment. Their ‘membership in the club’ affords additional perks as such as greater discounts and gifts. For example, I have preferred status with my airline of choice. This status allows me to check in, get through security and upgrade to first class when a seat is available. Average customers, while part of the retail ritual entourage, usually have lesser sets of perks than those who have demonstrated brand loyalty by loading their closets or pantries with a retailer’s merchandise. ‘Loyalty programs’ are a good illustration of how being a committed follower of a retailer or brand is promoted through dispensing rewards in the form of added value and discounts.

Shopkeepers or company owners, store managers, sales associates and other employees play roles higher up the hierarchical ladder. As a result, boundaries in the shopping place are more permeable to them. In the end, the way in which one crosses boundaries in ritual places is an indication of who you are and the role you play in the ritual process.

Delineation between men’s and women’s areas, the front and back of houses, or in front of the altar as opposed to behind it, exist within an established hierarchy. Boundaries might only be implied but we have learned by observation (and direct experience) the decorum necessary to allow for the appropriate rituals to unfold. Through multiple shopping trips we all have become exceptionally good at picking up and understanding the cues to how a space is used.

You don’t climb behind the altar and you don’t get behind the cash wrap counter unless you are a religious leader or a store employee.

From the entry area, sightlines leading along strong axes either to merchandise presentations, display points, graphics, etc., elevate the importance of these elements.
in the space. They also help in the establishment of hierarchies informing the customer about what is important. Whether it is a new arrival, seasonal display, text-based message or lifestyle graphic, or a sales associate happy to help you find what you need, these elements of customer experience are key to the unfolding of the shopping ritual. Terminations of these axes, as in one’s view down the nave of a church, need to culminate in things that matter rather than in featureless dead ends. If the retailer is going to get customers to look there, and they will, what they visually focus on in this view has to be an important element of the ritual.

Ritual Objects

Think of a famous clear green cola bottle with an hourglass shape. The Coca-Cola bottle is known worldwide.

Whose perfume bottle is square? Chanel.
Which chocolate bar comes in a triangular-shaped golden box? Toblerone.
Andy Warhol made whose soup can label famous? Campbell’s.
How many of you have kept the box that your iPhone came in?
Or the “Little Brown Bag” from Bloomingdales to carry lunch in, until the handles wore thin?

Think diamonds and a turquoise blue box and Tiffany & Co. is, inescapably, the image we see in our mind’s eye.

Products, and packaging, too, become part of the ritual. Created to make products more visible on the shelf and occasionally beautiful in its own right, the wrapper has come to signify the brand and that we, as consumers of its products, are believers. Often product packaging, apart from the actual contents in the box, can become iconographic, taking on, and projecting outwards, the essence of a brand. Our re-use of product packaging is another way to demonstrate group belonging and a sense of well being to society at large.

Packaging is like retail ritual residue.

Often associated with ritual enactments are objects that are called into service to represent some part of the story. Goblets, bowls, knives, statuary, tapestries, furniture, pipes, masks, animals and clothing are but a small selection of items that have traditionally found their way into ritual enactments.

Ritual objects are meaningful not because there is necessarily anything intrinsic about them that makes them sacred but because we infuse them with significance. They are reminders of sacred personages, texts, and events and as such are revered by those participating.

The ritual object’s power may be everlasting and it may be kept under lock and key with someone to look out for its well being. It may also be transient, only in effect
when being used in ritual, but not lasting beyond the ritual itself – being burned, eaten or tossed into the water. The value of ritual objects is that they are able to distill a whole complex of meaning into a single item that projects meaning to others who are either participating in the ritual or watching it happen.

Stores are loaded with ritual objects called merchandise. The striking difference between ritual objects in the case of shopping places, and those used in more traditional ritual enactments such as religious ceremonies, are their number in shopping places. While there may be only one chalice, perhaps a few statues, or one sacred cow, ritual objects in stores can number in the thousands. And, they are not only used by a selected leader of the ritual but by all those who are engaged in the shopping activity. All participants have free access to the objects of retail rituals. Unlike a small selection of objects that help define the ritual process in religious enactments, a plethora of products (and the qualities of their design, manufacturing, and in-store display) come to signify the brands that stamp their logos on them.

In the case of a store, every piece of merchandise has meaning, even when there are twenty of the shirt in five color ways on a rack. In a sense, there is a democratization of the ritual object in retail stores. Even though you and a few thousand other people across the country will buy that little black dress, all customers inherit the same level of brand DNA by wearing it.

By wearing, using, and consuming merchandise, we take home a piece of the ritual. The value we attribute to the things we buy is both a function of what it does as well as what it ‘says.’ You could equally carry the items jammed into the bottom of a luxurious handbag in a paper lunch sack. But when they are loaded into a $4000 Louis Vuitton shoulder bag, who cares if the cap is off the lipstick and there is a bunched up Kleenex at the bottom of it all? You are telling others that “it’s good to be me and oh, by the way, I’m better off than you.”

In fact, should you be a consumer of Louis Vuitton products at all, you are truly buying an object of a high rite since no LV product is sold other than in its stores or through its company website. If the handbag doesn’t sell, it is eventually destroyed, thus taking ritual object in the shopping sphere to a more sacred level. These practices control the brand quality and promote the ideology of luxurious exclusivity, driving the pricing structure of a purse to be on par with a work of art – sacred art at that.

In this way, merchandise becomes an extension of the ritual space. Both figuratively and literally, a little bit of the store goes home with us every time we make a purchase and take the merchandise out the front door.

Open for Business – Crucial Times

Ritual is also bound by time, both in the sense of having a beginning, middle and end and as being specific to a time of the day, week, or year. “Ritual is formative of
the ways we bide our time. In ritualizing we concentrate, and thereby, consecrate, time.”

Shopping experiences unfold with specific timing and there are those who will attest that time disappears altogether when they are in the midst of a great shopping experience.

As rituals, shopping trips have historically had well defined beginnings. They usually started with a customer's arrival in the entryway of the store. In the contemporary digitally driven world, however, the beginning of the engagement is being redefined. The start of a shopping experience is no longer thought of as starting at the front door but more likely via a mobile device or home computer. In fact, this retail ritual 'beginning' is now in a state of dynamic change. Shopping experiences can start almost anywhere and customers can begin the process whenever and wherever they want, not just when and where the doors swing open at the start of the typical business day.

Every customer experience has a rhythmic tempo, or structure, that aids in its unfolding similar to the way the timing in a piece of music takes a listener from beginning to the end of a song, or the way a theatrical performance has scenes, acts and closing numbers. We experience stores with storefronts or homepages – opening scenes – we shop various merchandise groupings and displays – acts two and three, and we hand over the cash at the cash-wrap counter – closing number.

While we can see the same general structure to the sequence of events in almost all stores: enter, shop, buy – the tempo, length of acts or how frequently the chorus returns can also be distinctive between brands and various retail places. Stepping into a fast food restaurant, ordering your meal from a menu board then eating it in fifteen minutes on hard plastic tables or counters is very different than fine dining at an upscale restaurant where you might linger with a cocktail in a lounge, go through multiple courses, each with a palette cleanser of cold sorbet, then dessert and coffee.

Changing the timing of retail ritual influences how customers feel going through the process. Some retailers have changed the way in which customers shop an assortment, such as IKEA, who changed the way we shop for furniture and home goods. Their stores lead you on a choreographed sequence of product vignettes. The path of travel is deliberate, and it takes time to follow it from various showrooms to checkout in the warehouse.

Sephora, which revolutionized the cosmetics category with an 'open sell' approach, also changed the timing of the ritual process. They broke down old department store paradigms of selling cosmetics behind counters by allowing customers to shop at a pace that allowed them to discover on their own. Self-directed discovery and trying products prior to buying them set customers on a path that satisfied their need for novelty, and self-determination at a pace that they could control.

In these two cases, retailers changed the ritual timing of shopping their stores, making it the process unique to them. Despite being just one of a multitude of retailers
in the categories of home furnishings or cosmetics, they have crafted customer experiences that are recognized the world over for not just changing the way a store looks, but for how it functions in the service of a brand’s ritual performance.

Ritual time can also be considered in the sense of being a series of moments, something that people anticipate and which can be defined apart from the regular flow of events. The sequence is recurrent and something that is planned for. This sense of ritual time is ‘circular’ and over time has been played out in the form of seasonal ceremonies and sacrifices. This is the way many who talk about ritual time conceptualize it. We all know this type of retail ritual timing in the form of shopping trips that are part of Christmas, Valentine’s Day, back-to-school and other seasonal events.

Retailers have calendars filled with the arrival of seasonal merchandise and visual display programs. Holidays and other times of celebration are opportunities for retailers to sell merchandise that is in sync with secular religious rituals. So, try as we might not to consider shopping as a religious experience and to see it as a ritual practice independent from liturgy – it isn’t so easy. For as long as animals have been sold to sacrifice at a shrine or temple, it seems that religious celebrations have always been intertwined with shopping.

Other seasonal shopping events such as Black Friday (the day after Thanksgiving in the U.S.) and now Cyber Monday (falling on the Monday after Black Friday) are pure fabrications (referencing each other). They establish crucial ritual times that serve their commercial enterprises under the guise of a cause for celebration. If it is repeated seasonally, then this pattern of behavior establishes a new ritual for customers to follow.

So, while kids generally don’t celebrate going back to the rigors of school in late summer, retailers have turned it into a crucial ritual time that has become a rite of passage and an indicator we rely on to forecast the health of the economy.

These two views of ritual time frame it as an event occurring at predetermined moments or as a sequence/tempo in the unfolding of the enactment.

A significant question to ask at this point is, what happens to ritual time when the world of e-commerce essentially does away with boundaries imposed by the ticking of the clock or the changing of the seasons?

Events such as online retailers’ ‘flash sales’ can be considered in the context of this cyclical retail ritual timing. It is interesting to note, that even though these types of ritual events become expected from online retailers, the frequency and time that they will happen are often a mystery. In this way they play on the brain’s love for the unexpected and novelty, at the same time as keeping customers hooked on the expectation that something is about to happen that they don’t want to miss.
When we are increasingly using the Internet as a method for shopping, where everything is available all the time, does the idea of ritual shopping time disappear?

It used to be that the hours were posted on the door and a little card was flipped saying “closed” when retailers were done for the day. Now, the shop is never closed. 24/7, 365 days a year, most brands are open for business. The Internet never sleeps.

The emerging ‘always on’ generation of young, digitally enabled shoppers will change the game with regard to the idea of rituals being carried out at particular times. It can’t always be Christmas, despite the basic message that we should be carrying the joy of the season in our hearts all year round. We know it comes but once a year, and like most significant holidays, we have developed particular shopping rituals around these crucial times. So, despite the fact that we do not always have the seasonal overlay of a Christmas celebration to influence the look and feel of the store or online website, significant shopping events now can happen anytime.

If ritual time is a crucial point to understanding what the event means and how people place themselves within the context of a larger cultural structure, what happens when the time you go shopping is no longer an issue because you can go online and buy anything at any time?

We might also ask whether or not the sacred nature of the retail ritual experience is diminished if we can do it whenever and wherever we want.

Do we become any less aware of the brand ideologies or become any less connected to the community of brand adopters by shopping more frequently from a smartphone or desktop computer?

The time that people set aside for their participation in or observance of rituals makes them more important. This time ‘off the grid’ is important because it allows people to focus on the nature of the ritual experience. These concentrated moments in time become like otherworldly experiences that have a transcendent quality and take people beyond themselves and connect them to a larger whole.

When we think of the influence of digital technologies and shopping from a mobile device, laptop computer or tablet while sitting in an airport, the back of a taxi or one’s back yard, there are distractions to those shopping moments, which make it inherently more difficult for the customer to focus and be fully present and invested in the world of the brand.

It is likely that when we are not setting aside time to focus on ritual we risk having the sacred conflict with the ordinary or instrumental. It is also likely that in ‘multitasking’ we are in a state of partial attention and simply less engaged in the process and, as a consequence, less affected by the enactment.

A significant challenge for retailers and brands in a digitally driven world is finding a way to connect customers to ritual time that is apart from their daily activities. With ritual time extended to ‘any time’ and ritual objects and ritual place
being disconnected from embodied experience through the digital interfaces, retailers have a significant challenge to maintain profound body memories as part of the customer experience.

In our high-tech, social-networked world, the ritualizing of shopping experiences is not confined to specific places or times of the day. Ritual nature of shopping may still have a predetermined seasonality when in conjunction with established religious and secular holidays. Key components to ritual experience such as participation – the place, ritual objects and crucial time set apart from the rush daily life – cannot be found through a handheld device or other digital interface. Not until we are able to inhabit virtual environments that call into action all of our perceptual senses, will the store be replaced as a profound place for building community and participation in the embodied experience of the brand.

Even in the face of increased, anytime access to products and services through the Internet, the in-store experience is inherently more valuable as a place of ritual enactment. In a digitally driven shopping future, creators of retail places will have their work cut out for them as they compete for customer interaction with online experiences and digital environments that may be considered ‘better than real.’ A component to great shopping experiences has been, and will continue to be, the relationship customers build with sales associates in the store.

Cast Members – Animators – Mirroring Receptivity

I have already suggested that shopping is far more than simply the stuff we get, the tangible things we wrap up and take home. As a social paradigm, shopping builds relationships between people and brands. As a ritual, shopping relies on the people who are involved in its enactment.

To be involved in ritual requires that participants, and observers, give themselves over to the process and allow for the flow of the ritual to take place. Information, knowledge, emotions and understanding, all move between participants. Being receptive is a two-way street. Both participants and those charged with the responsibility of leading the rites need to share a willingness to lay themselves open to being seen.

The more profoundly people get involved in the process, the more they become connected as a congregation, a culture, a social network, or customer. Products and services we buy can come and go, but the memories of our experience built on the relationships we have with people in the store make customers for life.

Humans thrive in relationships and have, over years, evolved to incorporate the remarkable ability to understand each other simply by looking at each other’s faces and body language. First impressions can say a lot. A sales associate’s body language
and facial gestures serve to prime customers with expectations about how the rest of the shopping experience will unfold.

Subtle gestures in our faces project to others whether we are receptive to relationships and to what degree. It doesn’t take much for us to sense if people are open or closed just by looking at them. Most of us have walked into stores where we feel welcome and in others where we are looked at as outsiders who don’t fit the customer profile. This of course instills great importance to the facial expressions of sales associates when they are greeting those crossing the threshold. The degree to which the sales associates project receptivity is a large part of the customer journey ‘starting on the rite foot.’

The second section of the book will look at the roles of ‘mirror neurons’ and ‘facial action coding systems’ in projecting the right emotional tones to customers since, “for most of us, our face is the exterior area by which presence is mediated to others. It is the tangible surface by which vulnerability is exposed or withheld.”

The more skillfully retailers manage the unfolding of ritual in their stores the better the experience will be. Enhancing the experience will reinforce the meaning and value of the ritual. In turn, it will enhance connection, loyalty and commitment and in the end, enhance return visits. Simply put, to make shopping trips more enjoyable and relevant in the face of a digitally driven shopping culture, we need to understand the ritual nature of shopping and how, for the customer, the experience is a profound demonstration of who they are or want to become.

Shopping rituals establish meaning beyond the product and give a transcendent quality to being a customer who connects to any particular brand. When customers immerse themselves in the ritualized space of the retailer, engaging in co-created experience, they move from simply the routine behavior of commodity shopping to something they deem more sacred.