

'Retail design is the most complicated genre of design.'

The architect and designer Joanna Laajisto conceived 'The Village' as the joint fair stand of Ansorg, Vitra and Vizona at EuroShop 2017. In this interview, she talks about the concept and offers insights into her work as an interior architect in the retail sector.



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What do you regard as the major challenges in the area of retail design? What are the distinguishing features of a good store concept?

In my view as an interior architect, retail design is the most complicated genre of design. A beautiful, well proportioned space with a perfect ambience is important – but not enough. The challenge is how to make the brick-and-mortar store successful. There are many examples of beautiful, well conceived retail spaces that have not been financially successful.

A retail store needs to have it all – the right location, the right products, the right interior and the right service. If one of these elements is missing or weak, there is a big chance the project will fail.

Nowadays, everyone in retail is about shopping as an experience. What role does this play in your work?

When designing any space (retail, hospitality, workplace), I always strive to focus on the human experience: how people feel and interact in that space.

To me, a successful design is a 360 degree multi-sensory experience. In addition to function and aesthetics, I like to pay attention to touch, smell and sound as well. With all the new digital technology, you can create a fully immersive experience in a store.

But the experience can also be the opposite, a place for digital detoxification that focusses purely on human interaction. Something you can't achieve online.

In my opinion human interaction is an important

part of brick-and-mortar retailing, and we like to create spaces where that happens naturally.

Is it possible to anticipate the behaviour of consumers and create store concepts that fulfil these demands?

To understand how people interact while shopping, we like to create behaviour profiles, which explain human behaviour and preferences in specific situations.

For example, some people like to be self-guided, while others respond positively to personal assistance when shopping. Some might have a clear mission, others could simply be wandering around with an open mind. In real life a person can be a mixture of different profiles.

So I believe that even the same people will interact differently, both on the

shopping street and while shopping in general, depending on the specific day, their mindset and mission.

That makes it sound like there is great uncertainty in regard to the individual customer's desires and behaviour. Do you observe fewer specific trends?

The strongest game changer for human shopping interaction is the on-demand economy, where everything can be done through your mobile device. The challenge will be how to get people to the shopping street in the first place. Some trend forecasters say there will be lots of empty retail space in cities of the future. But look at Pokemon – all of a sudden one game has made people come out to the streets in masses. You can really see this influence on the streets in Helsinki, for example. So it is very hard to predict what will happen next. I guess the key is to be flexible and have an open mind.

When developing a new concept, what is the biggest challenge for you as an interior architect?

Retail clients demand a high degree of individuality. The brands want to stand out from their competition. So we need to constantly create

something new. On the other hand, the retail industry also stands at a major crossroads at the moment. It is full of unknowns. For that reason, all of us – brands, shopfitters and architects – need to understand the end consumer extremely well. I do that by using methods of service design, like co-design sessions with potential end consumers, for example. Without having a clear vision, one can easily become intimidated with all the different options out there.

Which cities do you currently regard as models for innovative retail concepts?

Los Angeles is a very interesting city for retail. Because of the ability to change building facades with much greater freedom than in Europe, the shopping experience really starts from the street.

I would like to travel next to Seoul, Korea, because I have seen some very interesting concepts from there.

I also follow the hospitality industry closely, since we do a lot of restaurant design. And I think the aspects of hospitality are getting more and more important in retail as well. Great cities for restaurant design are New York, London and Stockholm, to name just a few that are especially inspiring.

You worked with Ansorg, Vitra and Vizona on the presentation of their brands at the EuroShop retail trade show. How did you approach this task?

I created five fictitious brands for the fair stand. They are arranged around a small plaza. The title of the concept is 'The Village'. Each of these five imaginary brands has its own USP, represents a particular sector, targets a specific customer group and meets their needs with a customised retail concept. I found inspiration for this idea in the vast open-air shopping centres of California. At this fair stand, just like in the city or in a shopping mall, people come together to meet and to shop. I designed the plaza as a special area for conversation and relaxation, a starting point for a day of shopping, but also as a place where the customer can enjoy some peace and quiet. People should experience a sense of well-being while they shop.