

# Retail

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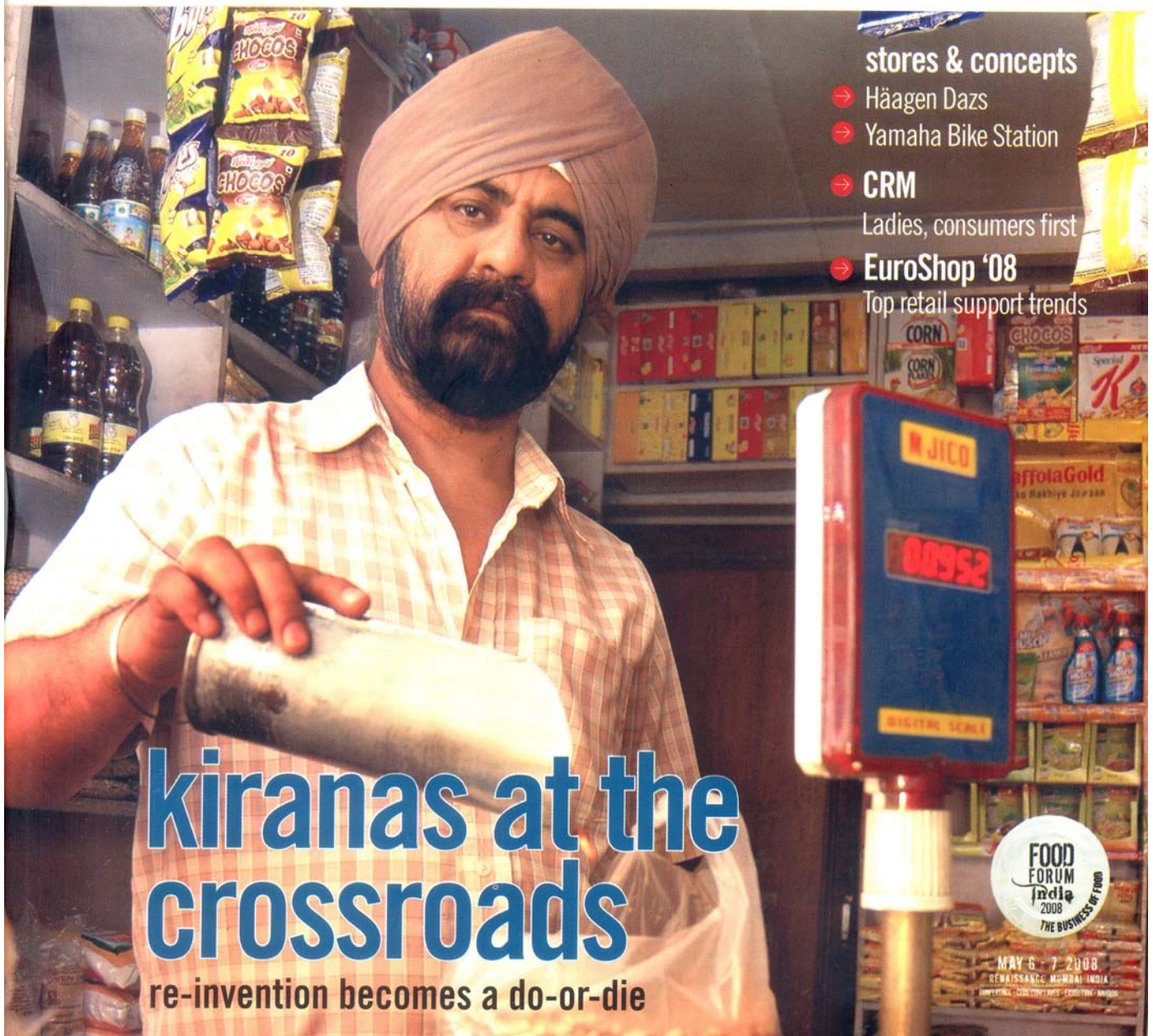
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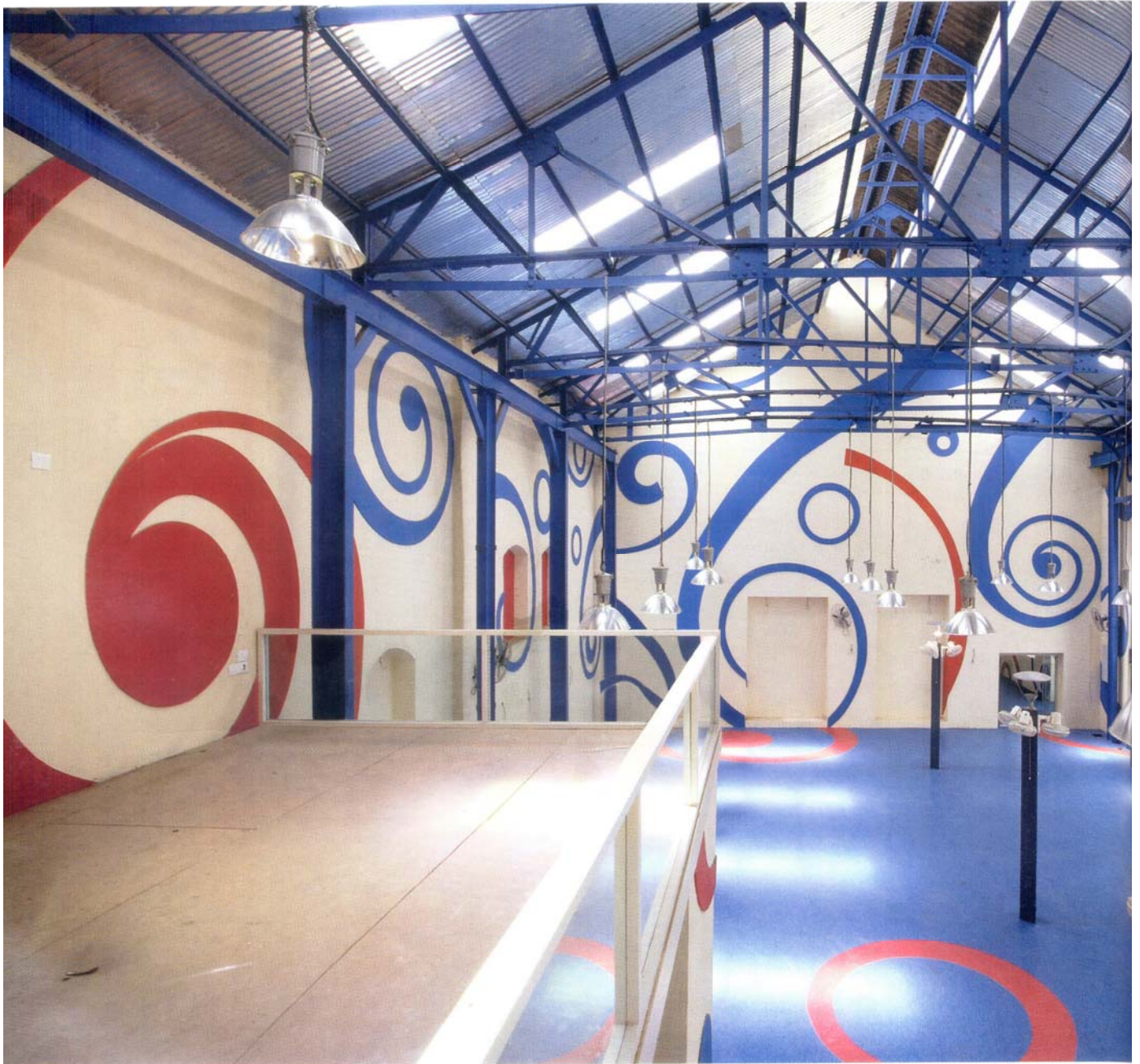
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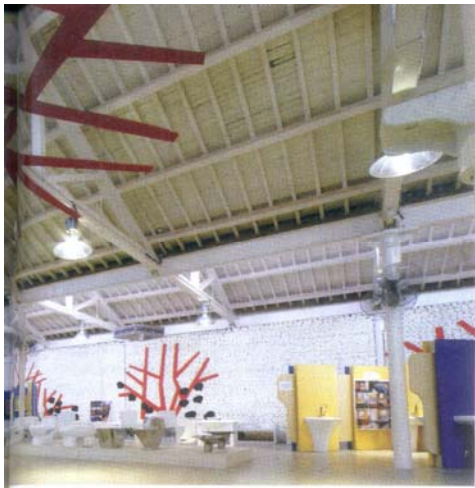
design

# Design backs the **'Upward Spiral'** in Retail

By Kalhan Mattoo and Santha Gour Mattoo







# design

AS RETAILERS PROGRESSIVELY BECOME IMAGE CONSCIOUS AND CONSUMER-ORIENTED, THE STORE DESIGN ENVELOPE IS CONTINUOUSLY PUSHED IN NEW DIRECTIONS. STORE PLANNERS, RETAILERS, MARKETING STRATEGISTS AND ARCHITECTS ARE POOLING THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE TOGETHER TO ENSURE RETAIL EXCELLENCE. BACKED BY CHANGING ATTITUDES AND THE UNPARALLELED BOOM IN THE RETAIL SECTOR, THE 'PIPE AND HANGER' DAYS OF RETAIL ARE FINALLY OVER.

Consumers today, expect and demand more than just the product itself, and their wants have appetites larger than their needs. Retail design thus moves beyond developing physical spaces where goods are sold to creating an environment that makes the retail experience unique.

The growing desire to provide service that will please even the most exacting customer by attempting to meet impossible standards of high quality coupled with continuous innovation in store designing to improve the business is truly transforming the face of modern retail.

#### Begin with basics

While the bare essentials of retail architecture such as lighting, air-conditioning, quality of fit and finish, display sizes, density, ergonomics and semiotics are indispensable elements of 'store layout', actual design-realization is possible only after 'Mining the data'. Talking to all stakeholders including customers, store managers, sales people helps bring fresh and interesting perspectives.

Studying the competition by sending squatters everywhere to look, listen and document is useful in gaining an advantage. It is imperative to know how retailing works bottom upwards from unbiased outsiders since more often than not the best nuggets of insight emerge out of casual interactions and active observation.

An in-depth understanding of the key buying determinant whether it is the brand, price, or size, goes a long way in deciding on a distinct and specialised model. Another must-do is to ask the right questions regarding the product, the customers, the demographic, the brand, the budget and timelines, delivery and after-sales service. It is important to keep asking.

#### DESIGN AN EXPERIENCE

Retail has dramatically evolved from plain, low-end pipe-rack operations of the past to becoming snazzy upscale shopping hubs. The first step to mapping the retail fantasy is choosing the right designer dictated by project needs, given that the right design can do more for the store than slick advertising and aggressive marketing. For generic, repetitive formats where focus is on store planning basics, retail specialist firms are sufficiently competent but where the need is iconic design and differentiation, it is vital to engage the services of talented designers who look at the project with a beginner's mind.

The 'If it isn't broke, why fix it?' approach does terribly little for an ambitious retailer. In an increasingly homogenised world, differentiating a product or offering to make it stand out and leave a mark on a customer's mind is crucial. The improved standard of living, exposure to international trends through



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travel and media, entry of multiple branded players, etc. has made Indian consumers more conscious of what they want so it is no surprise that standardised retail formats are fast giving way to meticulously planned and premeditated 'structural' responses to specific customer needs.

All informed retail players voice their dissatisfaction about cookie-cutter designs that neglect individual market needs. As a result, 'All good designs tell a story' is the dictum for all contemporary architects and retail experts. The retail outlet should connect with the customer by building a narrative through all the individual elements of the design. With the aim of preventing cognitive dissonance, all elements of design – the storefront façade and signage, the window displays, the merchandise displays, lighting, wall-colour, inside signage, artwork, and flooring should necessarily stay consistent with the message.

Focus of all design should be to evoke the WOW! effect keeping in mind that irrespective of the nature of goods sold, the feel of the space and displays have to draw in potential customers by connecting with them immediately. Excite, Captivate, Satisfy... in that order, is the mantra of present-day retail.

Surprising degree of customer perception is formed instantaneously, in a pre-intellectual moment at the subconscious level. The design has to get it right – there and then! However the architect must tread with caution as excessive outlet design could negate shoppers' perception of value.

A retail outlet is exceptionally inviting when elegantly designed thus ensuring a relaxed, harmonious and enjoyable shopping experience for all customers.

#### **AURA OF BRANDS**

Brand building is a three-dimensional function of creating customer awareness, communicating

the brand's philosophy and actualising consumer loyalty.

Defining the key brand attributes and reiterating that through the built form is a must especially because branding goes beyond signages and artwork, the entire space has to offer cues that speak of the brand. Store owners should take care to avoid the common mistake of making the message too literal. The idea is not to bug or overpower the customers but to take care of them and discreetly guide them. They ought to respect the intelligence of the customer and hint, only hint.

Store planners need to concentrate on wooing the customers by design, regardless of product category. The further customers walk into a store, more time they will spend there and consequentially increase the chance of making a purchase. Product positioning plays an important role in supporting sales, thus, any merchandise placed at a distance greater than four feet from the customer is cold. The objective should be to offer high visibility for high-end products and maximising hot areas while strategically placing the best selling goods at farther ends consciously avoiding sharp turns

without forgetting the sight lines.

Customer values, tastes and preferences change so for any market sector to grow, specialised and niche market expansions and categories are a natural progression. The store has to respond by reinventing, reorienting, reshaping constantly to stay ahead. This flexibility has to be designed into the basic format since afterthought is a recipe for disaster.

Visual Merchandising sets the context of the merchandise in an aesthetically pleasing fashion, presenting them in a way that would convert window shoppers into prospects and ultimately buyers of the product. Lots of eye candy and a fascinating theme is the nerve centre of window dressing. An ingenious retailer with help from his store designer, can use this installation art to breathe in new life into his store products by making it a part of the total design strategy at the concept design stage thus reinforcing brand and store integrity.

Absolute allegiance to inventive design, quality products, exemplary retail standards and wonderful service collectively guarantee that retailing will continue to be a huge success story. ❧

The authors are founder-directors of Planet 3 Studios, a design studio and a constructor firm of architects and interior designers.

