

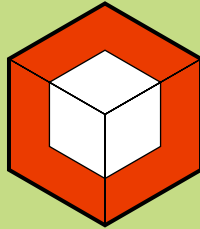


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INNOVATIVE DESIGN FOR THE

“Public Experience”



# The White Box is so 2001

A CRITIQUE ON THE STATE OF RETAIL ENVIRONMENTS TODAY

The “Branded Environment” is the most overstated, underused retail concept of this day and age. The vision of a vanilla envelope filled with monolithic structures has become self-fulfilling, almost four decades after Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke’s prophecy.

If the branded environment is a white box, what does that say about the state of retail now? And what does that say about the brand? In a market where companies are desperately trying to differentiate themselves from their competitors, one could strip away the logos and overscaled graphic ads and most stores are the same well lit white container. We don’t live this way at home. Why would we want to shop this way? We cannot effectively separate the way we shop from the way we live.

Do designers really know what the public wants? Designers are so often driven by the pretty picture, but that pretty picture seems to propagate itself when one designer paints it successfully and other designers rush to copy it. Retail has always been about superseding the competitor. But how can you supersede if you are primarily the same? Repetition is not good. Repetition is not good. Designers forget that they are consumers too. Designers will argue that the neutral environment helps to isolate the product while providing a sense of calm within the store. How many designers have a degree in psychology – how would they know what calms?

Retailers these days proclaim their product is a “lifestyle brand” yet nobody seems to actually live the lifestyles they represent. Retail means selling goods to consumers – it is all about making money, and proper product density for the price point is the only way to have a successful store. However, there seems to be only two approaches to a merchandising strategy – a store with 10,000 affordable sku’s or 5 completely unaffordable sku’s and both are equally as intimidating. For most retailers, it is usually about packing as many possible sku’s into the store. But why must every single inch have that same density? The product becomes lost in a sea of the same texture, spacing, and scale.

The stores present their merchandise in such an untouchable way that it feels like a museum. Security guards constantly watch your every move to make sure you don’t put smudges on the product, but there is nobody around to ensure that after you buy it. Dings and scuffs are part of every lifestyle.

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Is technology the answer and can it be used appropriately within stores? “I’m sorry Dave, I’m afraid I can’t do that.” Retailers so often rely on 50” plasma displays to provide changeable content within the stores, yet this content tends to be their advertising campaigns reiterated. You can watch commercials at home, but would probably rather Tivo right past them. Technology could be used to provide a more interactive experience to shopping, yet HAL-9000’s malfunction led to the death of most of the spaceship’s crew, just as most of the advanced technology in an unnamed \$40M New York retail project has now failed or is never actually used. You don’t need a computer to tell you if your \$150 jeans fit correctly, just a mirror.

Designers, Brand Managers and Purveyors of quality design: now is the time to abandon everything you think you know about retail. Let go of your nesting tables, your Garcy studs, your matte nickel finish, your stacks upon stacks of perfectly folded jeans all lined up in a perfect untouchable grid on the wall. Enough already with your pristine white environments, your cloned sales staff, your notions that clothing must be shown in an outfit. Consumers are more savvy than that now. We are tired of the rubber stamp environments. We want texture and depth. We want original products. We want an original environment that represents how we actually live, not how you want us to. Think outside of the (white) box.

Dual Office creates simple and elegant solutions for exhibitions, retail and restaurant environments, and other public experience projects. We fill the niche between graphic design and architecture, where information and branding combine with the built environment.