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DEAN OF DESIGN

INTERIOR DESIGNER THOMAS PHEASANT ON HIS LATEST COLLECTION FOR BAKER, WHAT INSPIRES HIM, AND DESIGN LESSONS LEARNT FROM HIS RECENT MAIDEN TRIP TO UAE

REINVENTING RETAIL: THE POWER OF HUMAN CONNECTIONS

Ferdinand Cheung, director, LWK + PARTNERS and Kourosh Salehi, design director at LWK + PARTNERS, MENA, discuss how human connections play a vital role in the success of retail architecture



"The future of retail architecture is about human connections," said Ferdinand Cheung, director at global architectural firm LWK + PARTNERS and a seasoned mixed-use commercial designer. "Retail centres have shifted from being a venue of pure transactions to serving a series of larger community purposes where people socialise and engage in happenings."

The change in consumer patterns is certainly felt throughout the industry. As Kourosh Salehi, LWK + PARTNERS, design director and one of the principal designers at its 2018-opened Dubai

studio, observes: "Commercial developers are investing in commissioning more vibrant and alternative offerings. With transactions moving online, physical presence has decreased, but it doesn't mean people are shopping less. It points to a change in consumer behaviour around how they shop or what kind of services come with their purchases."

VALUE-ADDED EXPERIENCE

"Contemporary retail centres focus on 'what you do and experience there' rather than 'what

you buy there,'" according to Cheung, "They are no longer just places for straightforward transactions to take place. Themes, events, happenings are injected to jazz up the whole process of transaction. The objective is to provide a unique and memorable process."

This rising demand for vibrant, social experiences has led developers to adjust their development and leasing strategies, to include a wider variety of entities in their tenant mix, including cultural and exhibition venues, children's discovery centres and all-inclusive



lifestyle stores. Pop-up stores are also becoming a tendency to provide incubator spaces for foreign ventures or young brands to promote experimental ideas. Even big luxury brands, traditionally seen as anchor tenants at landmark shopping malls, are evaluating their store strategies to utilise more of these temporary spaces, showcasing seasonal themes and boosting their exposure to new audiences.

Brands are also reaching out for a different relationship with their customers that focusses more on the emotional factor. Cheung thinks

design is a way to strengthen that connection, by communicating the nuances of brand identities: "There is a cultural aspect to designing retail spaces. Stores have come to represent the kind of lifestyle which a brand embraces, and they are important sites for forging relationships with customers, who are increasingly looking for a sense of personal connection and belonging."

Part of that belonging comes from the level of personal touch felt at the store, which is increasingly seen as an ingredient for success in customer engagement. "Retailers recognise

that a personalised one-on-one experience can increase sales, customer loyalty and enhance shopper experiences," said Salehi.

IMPLICATIONS FROM THE CHINA STORY

Growing from its roots in Hong Kong, LWK + PARTNERS commands 34 years of built-environment experience in Asia with a diverse oeuvre stretching from mixed-use commercial complexes, luxury residences, schools and institutional facilities to urban planning, landscape and interior design. China is where it



Ferdinand Cheung, director,
LWK + PARTNERS



Zhengding Li Mixed-use Development,
Shijiazhuang, China,
LWK + PARTNERS



Kourosh Salehi, design director
at LWK + PARTNERS, MENA

built its reputation, and recent years have seen it expanding beyond Asia with its Dubai studio opened in 2018, to facilitate its MENA expansion. The latest studio opened in Singapore last year signifying further growth in Southeast Asia.

In the sophisticated, rapid-growing market of China, where retailers and mall operators keep uplifting their standards and operation models to align with changing consumer behaviours, LWK + PARTNERS is working with major developers to craft a series of lifestyle-driven complexes offering tailor-made solutions in the form of immersive environments. This approach is expected to set the tone for future retail environments especially in regional urban cores.

Turning to the MENA market, Salehi thinks there's much to learn from the practice's China experience: "The trend is to embrace innovative,

customer-centric spaces which are engaging and enhance shopper experiences. Businesses must put more effort than ever into integrating with the overall community than being simply a service or product provider."

DIGITAL HORIZONS

"Online commerce is not exactly replacing physical retail as many has been debating for the last five years or so," said Cheung. "Digital transformation has offered new opportunities to rethink and reevaluate what the physical venues meant for us. Ultimately, it is about defining a way of living."

The likes of e-commerce, data analytics and augmented/virtual realities has hit the retail industry with a new ecosystem. But once the online frenzy has passed, it became clear that customers are still shopping in physical

stores, high streets and malls. In the Middle East especially, online retail still accounted for a smaller share of the market, at an estimated 2-3% compared with 10-15% in developed western economies, according to a 2019, report on new retail by PwC.

"In contrary to common belief, people aren't shopping less in physical environments. Even in China where internet shopping penetrates even the most rural communities, brick-and-mortar retail still accounts for most of the total retail sales," said Salehi. "But we definitely see a major change in consumer behaviours. For instance, the social and retail-tainment aspect of shopping has by all accounts increased, which has pushed retailers to respond more innovatively to engage and connect with their customers."

As consumers demand more than pure

products and services, a new set of design criteria has emerged for physical stores. Retail designs are fast becoming multi-sensory and rely on a wealth of activating tools including the overall building and spatial design, lighting, creative signages, wayfinding systems, and more.

Experiential retail is increasingly considered an effective approach to marry online and offline retail, with well-curated user experience at the centre and with the aim to catalyse social activities. For Cheung, the emergence of the omnichannel approach is a feature of maturing markets: "With the practicalities of transactions streamlined digitally, people start to focus more on their surrounding physical environment. They crave for real-life experiences like discovery and human interactions, something unavailable online. The satisfaction gained from physical

experience is irreplaceable."

The implication for future retail design is clear: spaces must be flexible and highly receptive for digital plugins that will only get more advanced as time goes on. As retail brands are moving fast to reinvent the retail experience with eclectic technologies, the best solutions of our time will need to address the need to connect businesses and customers in all dimensions.

THE NEXT TREND IS PEOPLE

Habits change and trends evolve. "Flexibility and changeability are critical," said Cheung. "For a successful retail space, we not only have to look into the visual and the experience, but also need to consider the usage and nature of the spaces provided."

The future of retail is defined by consumers'

desires, wishes and craves. Retail spaces are evolving into lifestyle complexes that offer people the choices to organise their lives in ways that reflect personal values and preferences. Urban space has become a medium of self-expression. In the digital age, architects and retail designers are also getting ultra creative to help businesses capitalise the advantages of technology to build stronger ties with their customers.

"It is long understood that urban spaces have profound cognitive effects on a city's inhabitants," said Salehi, "Yet too often the imperative to design something unique and individual tends to override considerations of how it might shape the behaviours of those who will dwell in it. Places should primarily be about people and their designs should therefore be conceived according to their needs in real life." ■

重塑零售：由人主宰

LWK + PARTNERS 董事张家豪及设计董事 Kourosh Salehi 探讨与人的联系深刻影响零售建筑，甚至决定成败。

“人与人之间的联系将会是未来零售业的关键。”LWK + PARTNERS 董事兼商业及综合设计团队领导张家豪 (Ferdinand) 说。“今天的零售中心不只是交易场所，同时亦具有多元化的社区功能。人们到来聚会、参与各种各样的活动。”

消费者模式的变化必然撼动整个零售行业，正如 LWK + PARTNERS 设计董事及其于 2018 年成立的迪拜工作室主创设计师之一 Kourosh Salehi 观察所得：“发展商正在转为投资于更活力多样的产品。即使交易逐渐线上化，实体店数量下降，但并不代表人们减少购物行为。这反映着消费者行为的转变，对于购物体验和服务的需求已然不同。”

提升购物体验

“现代零售中心着重于消费者在那里做了什么、体验了什么，而不是买了什么。”Ferdinand 指出。“现代零售中心不再是单纯的交易场所，各式各样的主题、活动、元素等等都为整个交易过程升值，为顾客提供独特难忘的消费体验。”

随着人们对富活力的社交体验需求的增加，发展商正不断调节发展模式及策略以吸引不同类型的租户，例如文化及展览场所、儿童探索天地、生活品味小店等。新兴的快闪商铺也为国外投资者或年轻品牌提供了试验空间及推广创新想法的机会。甚至作为大型商场地标的连锁高端品牌，亦正在转变店铺策略，善用临时空间展示季节性主题，以争取最高的曝光率。

不少品牌也开始引发消费情感，借此拉近与消费者的距离。对 Ferdinand 而言，实体店的设计通过细腻传递品牌特色，能有效增强情感联系。“设计零售空间也有文化方面的考虑。店铺体现品牌代表的某种生活风格，也是与消费者建立关系的重要场所，产生共鸣以及对品牌的归属感。”

部分归属感来自人们在店铺内的五官感受，这也逐渐被看作与消费者建立深厚联系的成功元素。Kourosh 表示：“零售商了解到个性化的一对一体验可以提高销售量，增加客户忠诚度，并改善购物体验。”

以中国市场作借镜

扎根香港的 LWK + PARTNERS 于亚洲的建筑经验超过 34 年，其多元化的业务领域包括商业综合体、豪华住宅、学校及机构设施设计，并延伸至城市规划、景观及室内设计。LWK + PARTNERS 在中国已建立很高的知名度，近年积极拓展到亚洲以外地区。其迪拜工作室于 2018 年开幕，以拓展中东及北非地区事业。去年，事务所再开设了新加坡工作室，标志着其业务于东南亚地区的进一步发展。

随着中国市场急速发展，零售商及商场营运商不断提升服务标准及营运模式，以应对消费模式的改变，LWK + PARTNERS 与一众大型发展商携手合作，创建出一系列以时尚生活为导向的综合发展项目，提供定制化的设计方案和沉浸式环境，为未来零售空间，尤其是区域性城市中心，起到模范作用。

Kourosh 表示，对于中东及北非地区市场，事务所在中国的丰富经验非常值得参考。“现时趋势强调创新、以人为本的空间，提供富活力和魅力的购物体验。企业需积极融入社区，不能只着眼于单一服务及产品。”

电子科技趋势

Ferdinand 称，在过往五年一直存在争议：线上购物并不完全取代实体零售。“数字化转型提供新机遇，让我们重新思考及检视实体店的意义。它重新定义我们的生活模式。”

电子商业、数据分析和虚拟实境技术等趋势的确对零售业造成了某程度上的冲击，形成新常态，但当网络热潮冷却后，消费者仍会选择到实体店、购物大道和商场购物。根据 2019 PwC 新零售市场报告，线上零售的市场占有率微小，尤其于中东地区的网购市场占有率只有 2-3%，而西方已发展国家则为 10-15%。

“人们在实体店的消费并没有如预期般减少，即使在网购非常盛行的中国，实体购物仍占主要的销售量。” Kourosh 认为：“消费模式正出现重大改变，例如在社交和零售娱乐方面的消费正不断攀升，促使商界为赶上社会趋势而创新改变，务求与顾客互动和联系。”

随着消费者不再追求纯粹的产品和服务，实体店有了一套新的设计标准，更讲究多元感官设计，灵活运用建筑空间、灯光、创意标识和方向指引系统等。

体验式零售结合网上和实体零售，并越趋行之有效，不但营造多元体验，同时促进社交活动。Ferdinand 指出，结合线上线下的零售模式正是市场成熟化的特征。“随着数字化令交易变得简单，人们开始注意围绕他们的环境，渴望真切的体验，比如探索空间和与人互动，得到实体购物无可代替的生活体验和满足感。”

因此，未来零售店的设计必须具备极高的灵活性，能高度适应数字化以及不断改进的数字产品。零售品牌正快速响应，透过创新科技打造全新的零售购物体验，多方位连结业务和顾客。

未来趋势在于人

人的习惯不断转变；潮流亦不断演化。“灵活性和可变性尤其重要。” Ferdinand 表示：“一个成功的零售环境不仅需要考虑顾客的观感和体验，也要思考空间可提供的功能和用途。”

零售建筑将越来越由消费者的欲望、愿望和渴望主宰。零售中心也正演变成为生活综合体，提供不同选择，让顾客组织他们期望反映个人价值观和喜好的生活方式。城市空间已然成为自我表达的媒介。在这个数字化时代，建筑师及零售设计师也无间断地展现创意，协助品牌善用科技的优势，与客户建立更牢固的联系。

“一直以来我们都明白城市空间对人们有深刻的影响。” Kourosh 说：“但大多时候过于执着独一无二的设计，忽略了该设计对使用者的影响和考虑。人是一个地方的核心，因此地方的设计应该反映人们实际生活中的需求。”