



Fashion Seminar Series

FASHION RETAIL FUTURES Paris, November 3rd, 2016

Words Alexandra Onderwater

The Dutch-French seminar, Fashion Retail Futures, shed a light on the future of fashion retail by bringing together a mix of retail experts and researchers of different backgrounds. A short sum up to define the constellation of the subject under discussion seems appropriate. When speaking about the future of retail, it seems as just e-ve-ry-thing is either under construction, being tried and tested, or in movement. Hear this: Digital becomes physical. Physical goes digital. Department stores undertake boutique outings. Global chains make local efforts, and local stores try to gain a global target group. Service, personal attention and storytelling are vital elements for a store to survive, but the informed customer also wants to shop where he wants, when he wants, what he wants – without too much ado. Dazzling, right?

According to Robert Thiemann, editor in chief of leading international design publication *Frame*, the future of retail is 'phygital'. And to survive as a brand, you better do good. 'Retail of the future will embrace all we have lost in the past, and combine the best of everything.' Online or offline? Not a valid question: inclusion is key! 'Our

future shop will be an experiential space with great convenience where one can meet others.' Products will be globally available, yet products and stores will have a local appearance. 'Retail will become independent of time and place,' says Thiemann. 'Brands will become media. And all media will be

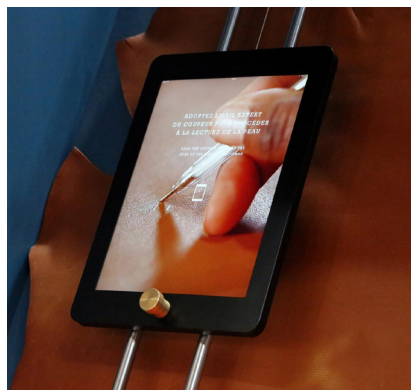
shoppable.’ He articulates a socio-anthropological point of view on the industry, where the human need to survive and experience a sense of belonging is leading.

‘A space is more and more important to connect with a brand, even if you don’t buy much in that space.’ Brand consultant and professor Luca Marchetti proposes an interesting semiotic perspective on fashion’s retail future. His cross-cultural analyses surface outside-of-the-confined-four-walls-of-a-brand’s-store elements such as the context of a store and the way a brand’s storytelling power and the changes of its (assigned) habitat are intertwined. Marchetti, who teaches at Geneva University of Art and Design and is a senior Lecturer at the IFM Institut Français de la Mode in Paris, pointed out how luxury brands can revitalize an entire area. A recent example is the success of art institute Fondazione Prada, which injected life in a formerly neglected outskirts of central Milan. ‘It’s another approach of what a luxury brand is.’ Marchetti is also quick to stress the importance of the sensorial embodiment of a brand in a retail space, with gastronomy - direct perception! – a current frontrunner. ‘Millennials are interested in shared experiences,’ he adds. ‘What we will see is branding through

harmonization, which implies producing harmonizing environments in order to materialize a brand differently.’ Using their unique know-how and heritage, luxury brands around the globe are redefining their functional, emotional and commercial presence in the physical and digital realm. It not only has an effect on the store itself, but also the area the shop inhabits. And empathy is key.

Technology: a storytelling tool

Fact: Consumers are increasingly looking for brand narratives. Narratives that often make use of digital technology in order to convey a more experiential story. One of the protagonists in the field is Dutch Random studio, who creates mesmerizing windows and intriguing performances where brands come alive in



Random Studio's digital frame for Hermès' Festival De Métiers

the digital realm of a physical store. According to Random Studio's Daan Lucas, that often implies stimulating interaction with the consumer's senses, but technology also allows for a deeper understanding of a brand story as shown in their recent work for Hermès where the designers made the House's métiers come alive in a versatile selection of 3D perceived crafts. Milan Compeer of Dutch WTI Interactive keeps retail alive by adding a digital element that enhances the retail experience in a joyful and effective way, whereas Frank Schoonhoven of CityScape designed a dust-proof interactive mirror of which the possibilities and implications for how a store works and what it has in store are progressing as we speak.

The main accelerator? Trust

Technological innovation is not the only instigator for retail to keep its brick-and-mortar outfit. A few



Style coaches, BonneGueule Boutique

speakers highlighted the importance of the in-store experience where it's not merely about what you sell, but also how you sell it. From a personally curated selection of fashion to offering customers extra services that enhance it all seems to chime with a brand's or store's (perceived) credibility. Geoffrey Bruyere co-founded BonneGueule in 2007, initially to make up for the lack of guidance, awareness and available information for customers. Geared towards educating men on style, BonneGueule started off as a blog but quickly gained a loyal clientele who just wanted to buy from them. 'The main accelerator? Trust. We even gave people directions to stores in the area of other brands we feel affiliated with.' The customer of 2016 wants to be taken seriously, that's for sure. And brands that dare to do so get rewarded. Margreeth Olsthoorn of her namesake fashion store excels in the personal, curated approach – she knows her customers personally and is almost daily present in the Rotterdam-based boutique. 'People come to my shop for the selection I made for them,' she says. 'Things I actually like to wear myself, and were lacking so far.'

Transparency & Authenticity

Consumers also demand to be informed about the product they might want to buy: Where is it made? From

what? Is it sustainable? Fair trade? What's the price based on? Paris-based Lucie Mazé based her company strategy on the above by being transparent about all features of her brand's garment. She even designed a name for it: prêtàemporter. Studiomazé only sells online and at pop ups, and uses social media like Face book and Instagram to communicate and inspire. With prêtàcomposer she moreover taps into our desire to carry a customized garment. It's a sign of the times we live in, and the waiting is for larger businesses to address these prevalent needs on a larger scale.



'pretàcomposer' by Studiomazé

Another way of communicating as a brand with your audience is through someone like influencer Sophie Jorissen. Jorissen, who started her Instagram @radishtowear about one year ago, has a mind-boggling number of 65k followers. With a like-rate of 2,5k per post, she makes an



Sophie Jorissen, instagram influencer

interesting retail channel for fashion brands — as shown by the many advertisers with whom she is collaborating. 'I used to do posed photos, but I quickly learned the more spontaneous posts get way more likes,' Jorissen explains. Instagram allows for a brand to communicate a more genuine, authentic story because the messenger is someone else.

City Retail Landscapes

Increasingly, areas are being built as holistic entities that offer a coherent experience where the sum is more than its individual parts. Examples galore, for instance Los Angeles and its successful 'container shopping areas' or New York City, where dingy subway passages have been transformed into a boutique food and retail Valhalla (TurnStyle at Columbus Circle). This interplay of a city's unique habitat and its retail repertory, and the potential beneficial effect it can exude on the urban landscape,

the turnover of the enterprises involved and last but not least the well-being of the locals experiencing the area is also top of mind in the Netherlands. Research is taking place on a meta-level in various of the country's larger cities, for instance through the Smart Retail Initiative, a program coordinated by CLICKNL (the Dutch Creative Industries knowledge and innovation network) where research figures from universities and the creative industry are combined in order to provide suggestions and solutions for the future of shopping spaces. 'We need to research shopping collectives,' says Jann de Waal, board member of CLICKNL. 'Collaboration between retailers (and sharing sensitive data) proves to be the biggest challenge.' The focus of the network's project is unique, combining a holistic design approach, multi-stakeholder field labs, a national knowledge platform and an open digital infrastructure in

order to connect and stimulate retail innovation on a local and meta-level. De Waal stresses the fact retail innovation should be about enhancing the customer experience, and improving quality of life. 'What can a store do for the elderly? If we start to address such questions, we will encounter different functions for retail spaces.'

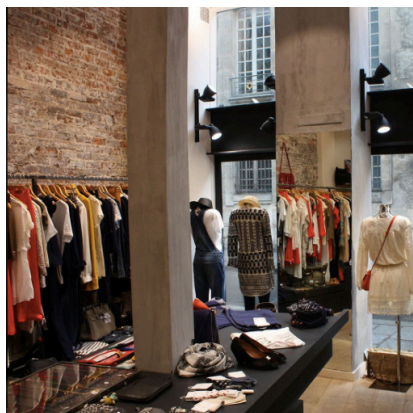
Parisian Solutions

Breathing new life in unoccupied buildings, stimulating young entrepreneurs to give the physical shop a go, and fighting mass commerce go hand in hand at Parisian Semaest. A so-called creative incubator, Semaest offers commercial property at a reasonably low (yet still competitive) rent for a try-out period of in between 2 weeks and 6 months. 'There are a lot of hurdles to take for a starting company to open a store. In Paris, a nine-year rental commitment is not unheard of,' says Pauline Cohadon of Semaest. 'No start up can access so much cash in advance. What we do, is offering new businesses a real-life test case.' She's quick to stress the project doesn't equal a pop-up shop, which per definition has a shorter life span. 'Our aim is to stimulate new retail initiatives and concepts. And give online a chance to make a offline presence.' Semaest furthermore supports starting businesses with PR and communication and even helps



finding a permanent spot when the try out has proven to be successful. The city of Paris is co-funding this rather radical initiative of buying property, 'partially in order to preserve the authentic retail face of certain areas and a matching varied array of independent retail stores'. With over 60,000 stores, Parisians started to complain that streets were becoming interchangeable and universal.

In Paris and other metropolises including Amsterdam, Storefront acts as a mediator between vacant building and brand in-need-for-a-space. Less involved in the curation of the space, the company merely acts as a well-informed market place that connects landlords to entrepreneurs. The stimulus the company creates in the retail landscape is apparent, with low investment costs and a much more confined time schedule than is obliged with opening a regular store.



Shop in le Marais, offered by Storefront



Paul Rutten, Creating 010

Experiments in Rotterdam and Amsterdam

Some Dutch initiatives crossed the table as well. At Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, Paul Rutten is at the helm of Creating 010 Research Centre where he strives to get innovation in small and medium businesses (SME's), while Floor Thomasse of Stad & Co uses innovation as a tool to breath new life at the capital's Beethovenstraat. The latter dealing with a dullsville image and a striking percentage of vacancy, the traditionally 'luxury street' needs an innovation-based incentive in order to appeal to a next generation of customers. The so-called Shopping Street Innovation lab, located in one of the street's vacant buildings needs to come up with solutions to attract more shoppers to the Beethovenstraat. Thomasse emphasizes the importance of the

user experience for medium sized retailers and the high demand for knowledge. 'It's a win-win-win situation where retailers gain traffic, start ups and tech companies get feedback on the innovation they supplied, and students get their real-time data to work with. In this kind of projects it's key to find a common ground for sharing essential data like turnover figures, revenues, number of visitors, etc. The project will be running at least 1.5 years. Rutten underlines the powerful role of social media in SME's. Rethinking retail implies reinventing what can be done.' He advocates to not look back but forward, involving students to design potential solutions for retail challenges being one alternative. Whereas Thiemann suggested a 'designed perspective' that looks at how brands behave within their confined space, Rutten likes to emphasize the value of looking at things from a larger scale.



Le Bon Marché, Paris

So what's in store for retail? A lot, if we may believe the various experts and recent statistics. Retail can heave a sigh of relief now she seems to have turned her faith away from the predicted offline downfall. Complying with the needs and desires of the new, active consumer, retail will be more social, flexible, empathic, educative and adaptive than she has ever been. And magical, that too. Exciting times lay ahead of us.

This retail seminar was organized by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Paris, the Atelier Néerlandais team and CLICKNL INextFashion in collaboration with Frame Publishers and Modelab. Photos Bart Koetsier.