

DESIGNING STORES

International design consultancies have set up shop in India, catering to the fast growing retailing sector. A report by **Annamma Oommen.**

THE massive growth of organised retailing in India – expanding at 35 per cent per annum – has seen the emergence of a niche segment: retail designing.

Shopping malls and retail outlets are placing a lot of emphasis on the designing of stores, display units and the overall ambience. Many prominent malls are hiring international consultants and designers, to spruce up their outlets and build a brand image.

Retail design entails a combination of functional but efficient utilisation of retail space along with softer concepts like emotional bonding with the brand through the use of colours, overall ambience, convenience and service.

For example, a store might have thousands of products on display, but if the customer gets the feeling of being at

a garage sale, she will probably not buy anything. A unique combination of science and art, retail design has unwritten rules that are based on consumer insights gleaned from market research and incorporated into design execution.

Cash counters, for instance, are best situated centrally and near fitting rooms, and colour tones must match the merchandise.

Globally, there are several leading designing firms that cater to the retailing business; many of them have set up shop in India, or plan to do so. These include Landor Associates, Brand Union of WPP Group, Fitch (part of Brand Union), Portland Design, Din Associates, Jestico + Whiles, Blocher Blocher Partners, M2B, JHP and WATG. Prominent Indian players include Magnum Retail Design, Idiom, Leaf and Elephant Design.

American international brand consulting

firm, Landor, has been retained by Café Coffee Day, India's largest chain of coffee shops, to execute an image makeover. The other brands that the company has advised, or been involved in drawing brand strategies, in India, include McDonalds, Jet Airways and the Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group (ADAG).

Din Associates of the UK has designed the French Connection store in the Delhi mall Select Citywalk, while Jestico + Whiles has completed multiplex complexes in Mumbai (Juhu and Mulund) and Hyderabad. M2B of Sweden designed the Ecco Shoes International store in Square One, another mall in Delhi, while Blocher Blocher Partners of Germany was roped in by Raymond's to design its flagship store in Mumbai.

UK-based retail design specialist, Portland Design, made its mark in India by designing the duty-free outlet and retail





outlets of the joint venture between the Nuance Group, a leading international airport retailer, and Shoppers Stop at the domestic and international terminals of the Bangalore International Airport.

Another global major, WPP Group's Fitch, has successfully worked on retail projects for Reliance Retail, Asian Paints, Aditya Birla Group and Godrej, among others.

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managing director, Ray+Keshavan, a premier branding consultancy and now part of Brand Union, "Most foreign design firms initially enter the country to fulfil an India-specific order for what could be a current global customer, and then end up setting up base for more work received through local word of mouth and

references."

Less than five years ago, spends on retail design were negligible, with only a few – such as Titan Industries – investing in designing showrooms. Today, even smaller stores have started realising the importance of retail design.

Marketing budgets, which would traditionally be allocated to the electronic, print and outdoor media, are being reworked to incorporate at least a 20 per cent spend on in-store design and ambience. "Part of this has to do with the surge of global brands in India, which want to retain their



RISING BUDGETS: Spending on in-store design and ambience is on the increase

TAILORING A NEW CAREER

RETAIL designing is a new speciality in India, and many retailers are finding it difficult to source experts locally. But stepping in to fill the breach are educational institutions, now offering special courses.

The prestigious, Ahmedabad-based National Institute of Design (NID), has introduced a course in Design for Retail Experiences - the first specialised course tailored exclusively for retail design. Mumbai's Wellingkar Institute of Management offers a programme for students planning a career in retail design.

Other courses include a Masters in Fashion Technology in Design Space at Delhi's National Institute of Fashion Technology and a post-graduate programme in Visual Communication from Bangalore's National Institute for Creative Communication.

"Retail experience integrates various fields like architecture to visual merchandising and lighting to new-

age technology," says Darlie O. Koshy, director, NID.

Demand for these courses is growing rapidly. "Five years ago, there weren't even 10 queries about this subject. Today, I have at least 200 students inquiring about growth opportunities in retail design," says career counsellor Ali Khwaja. "Students who take up this field today are those who would have earlier either opted for fashion design and started a boutique or taken up an MBA and pursued fine arts in their spare time."

For human resource hungry design firms, this interest indeed augurs well. "We hire anyone who has an interest in the subject with backgrounds varying from visual arts to design to even fashion. But there's only so much you can pull through without any specialised training," adds Jacob Mathew, one of the co-founders of retail design firm Idiomatic.



THE RIGHT AMBIENCE : The overall look and feel of retail outlets are being tailored to the needs of the target customer

international feel," says Rahul Kalhan, director, Magnum Retail Design. "This has pushed Indian retailers to act fast in the design arena."

Marketers know that point of sale merchandising goes a long way in roping in prospective customers. As India's retail industry evolves to global standards, design takes this a step forward with not just merchandising, but the overall look and feel of the store being tailored to the needs of the target customer.

Consequently, sports brands like Nike have a sporty feel, with the use of accessories like life-size posters of renowned sportspeople, or a rock-climbing wall, as compared to a Reid & Taylor store that might create a more formal ambience. "We just don't sell items. We tell inspirational stories of successful sportsmen to our customers, who very often are looking to be these achievers," says

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Sanjay Mehra, general manager of Nike India. In fact, a Nike store redesign in the High Street Phoenix mall in Mumbai saw the average customer bill size jump from \$52.60 to over \$64, post redesign.

Another brand that stresses the importance of retail design and ambience is Dockers San Francisco. Its 'terminal' store at Indiranagar in Bangalore has an aviation history motif with airline collage walls, while a marine theme pervades its Brigade road store with sailor knots and nautical miles standing out in the décor.

"While it's not possible to have a unique theme for each store, design is a very important element," explains Himanshu Bhardwaj, head of Dockers (India). "Shopping today is about creating an experience and these themes are aimed at making our stores destination points for customers." Retail design, however, requires a fine balancing act.

"Many companies are going overboard with the premium look and at times end up being intimidating," points out Shantanu Saha, managing director, Idiom, the design house for Future Group, Puma and Titan. "While brand personality may be premium, the retail personality cannot be condescending to a customer." Saha says experience has taught him that 'Indianness' needs to be retained and Indians relate better to local celebrities, rather than international ones. "While a foreigner would be comfortable in an unassisted environment, warm service is of importance in the Indian retail space," he adds.

With organised retail projected to grow at an exponential rate for the next five years, retailers are expected to continue pouring money in sprucing up

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their malls and outlets, hoping to attract maximum footfall, in an industry that is seeing scores of new players vying for a greater share in the mind of the new-age Indian consumer. 🌈



CREATING THE SMART STORE

THE retail boom in India has given rise to concepts like store design and visual merchandising. Most of the new shopping malls and retail outlets invest large sums in creating smart stores that lure consumers.

Unorganised players have traditionally dominated the Indian retail sector. Many of them did not lay much emphasis on concepts like visual merchandising, store design and customer convenience.

According to Somesh Singh, faculty member at the National Institution of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, retail design covers not only interiors, but aspects such as the location of the store as well. Singh and a group of students from the apparel design and merchandising department at the NID conducted a survey recently of the Indian retail sector to find out changing trends in the business.

They found that retailers could convince consumers to spend more time – and money – in giving them a complete retail experience by paying attention to store design and visual merchandising. Even little things, like providing seats for men who accom-

pany women while shopping, helps in attracting more customers.

The survey covered a wide gamut of subjects including window display, ambience and interiors, decoration and props, packaging, façade, location and



accessibility of the store. The findings are expected to help retailers increase footfalls in their stores, by paying attention to apparently minor details that go a long way in making customers spend money, and not just indulge in window shopping.

Rodney Fitch, founder and chairman of leading international design consultancy, Fitch, describes the Indian retailing sector as "wonderful, exciting and challenging." Fitch, which has designed stores for top retailers including Wal-Mart, Marks & Spencer and Tesco in several countries, has top Indian clients like Aditya Birla Retail, Reliance Retail and the Tatas.

Fitch is bullish about the prospects for the retailing – and retail design – sector in the country. The rapid expansion in the retail sector has seen a phenomenal increase in demand for retail designers, attracting all the top global designers, he points out.

Indeed, the next phase of consolidation in the retailing sector will see stores trying to excel in terms of delighting – and pampering – the consumer, by offering not just quality products and competitive prices, but also a visual shopping experience.