

BLUE SKY THINKING

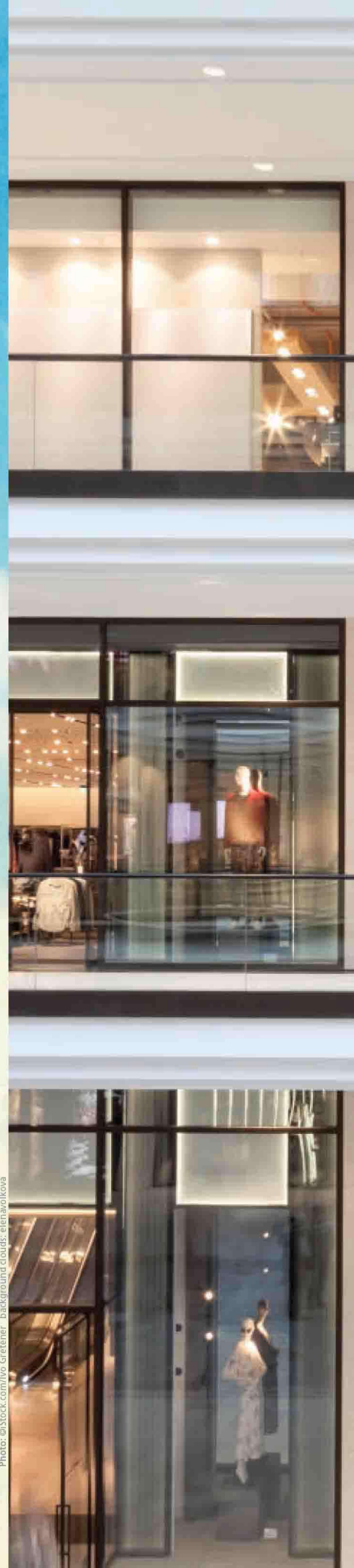
*Our annual mashup of reader ideas
will have you reaching for the sky*

Innovation starts with ideas. And ideas flourish in venues that avoid limitations. So in our annual call for big ideas, *Retail Environments* asks readers to think beyond budgets, resources, timelines, management commitment, team buy-in, and other restrictive parameters of their everyday work. To blue-sky it.

Your contributions this year run the gamut from materials to new store concepts. Running through the ideas are a few common themes: curation, flexibility, authenticity, thoughtful use of assets, and lifestyle consideration.

So put on some Mozart and grab a bowl of dark chocolate pieces, black currants, and almonds. You'll want to stimulate your brainpower as you peruse these blue-sky ideas. Maybe one will inspire you to develop the next big thing in retail environments and branding.

Photo: © iStock.com/Ivo Gretener background clouds: elenavolkova





BLUE-SKY THINKING IN ... DESIGN STRATEGIES

Floor models, hidden inventory

Less is more in-store. When customers see too much product, it can become confusing. Try showing only one of every product sold on the floor in an open interactive display, perhaps with a poster of other colors and price options available. That way, the customer can see, feel, and use the product before purchasing it. When the customer is ready to purchase, the store representative can get the product from a draw beneath the display or from the back room and ring it up using a tablet or smartphone.



Jose Rosales-Campos
Experience Specialist
Verizon Wireless

Co-location of lifestyle solutions

Today's purposeful shopping requires a lifestyle-centric design strategy. No longer does one need a shopping center filled with duplicate product offerings. The consumer is searching for convenience. A center could offer apparel, footwear, food and beverage, financial services, dry cleaners, fitness center, co-working space, and a community hub. A complete lifestyle program would allow for one to take care of personal needs (e.g., medical and/or dentist visits) and the needs of others with them (e.g., a playground for accompanying children). The customer buying cheese may be an apéro enthusiast interested in meat and bread offerings,

so a marketplace could have an array of them within reach for this guest. The environment should allow the customer to easily obtain the services that meet their lifestyle.

Jill Nickels
Studio Director
Gensler



an authentic experience can have a big payoff by building trust and deep brand loyalty.

John Scheffel
Design Services + Studio
Director + Associate
api(+)

Integrated lighting and tech design

Designers often forget that the digital and physical worlds collide when it comes to lighting in stores. The beautiful subtleties of a lighting scheme are instantly overwhelmed by the clashing changing colors of digital signage. On the flip side, the wonderful natural light filling the store becomes a harsh glare reflecting off a kiosk. As lighting and digital technology both rapidly evolve, crafting a unified design of all the light sources is the only path to a balanced, well-lit environment.



Jim Crawford
Director of Strategy and
Experience Design
Gensler

BLUE-SKY THINKING IN ... MATERIALS

Storytelling materials

If retailers want to build loyalty within a community or ethnic group, the shopping experience must be genuine and authentic. The materials and finishes should be interesting and tell a story, like using siding from a tobacco barn for a farm-style grocery store. Go to architectural salvage shops or travel out of the country if you have to. It takes persistence and creativity, but creating

Vinyl clad metal

This decorative, durable material is seldom specified for fixtures and P-O-P displays because it is not well known by retail designers. Made by applying decorative vinyl to light-gauge steel or aluminum, VCM will not delaminate and can be bent, hemmed, punched, slotted, and cut by laser or waterjet. Vinyl films are available in a vast array of woodgrains, leathers, stones, colors, textures, and geometrics. VCM resists scuffs, scratches, dings, dents, water damage, and stains.

Bill Emery
Sales Manager
Cald Rex

BLUE-SKY THINKING IN ... MERCHANDISING

Ugly produce displays

Approximately 40% of produce grown in the U.S. never makes it to grocery stores because it's deemed "ugly." Consumers prefer fruits and vegetables that look perfect, but they also like discounts. Some stores in Europe and a few in the U.S. feature ugly produce at discounted prices. I'd love to see this idea go mainstream to reduce waste and increase accessibility to affordable healthy foods. Wouldn't it be great if grocery stores created an "ugly produce" section? I'd shop there!

John Scheffel
Design Services + Studio Director + Associate
api(+)



Photo: ©iStock.com/urbanecow

BLUE-SKY THINKING IN ... REVITALIZING A BRAND

The art of not trying

For brands, the biggest challenge is maintaining relevance—let alone love and affinity—in a world increasingly crowded with competitors and complicated by self-defining microsegments. If you try to make your brand more accessible, you run the risk of alienating shoppers who already want its exclusivity. Focusing on your existing customer base often makes a brand less appealing to new shoppers. So how should brands break the paradox? Simple: Don't try. Instead of trying to revitalize your brand to meet a complex and continually changing constituency, double down on your brand essence and focus on expressing the brand differently to meet the changing values of your customer base.

Jim Crawford

Director of Strategy and Experience Design
Gensler

BLUE-SKY THINKING IN ... INDUSTRY EDUCATION

Standards of display design

As an expert retail witness to attorneys on retail-related liability cases, I make statements about industry standards of care and am often asked, “Where is this written?” We need a standard of care for the industry created from collaboration between retailers, store planners, and display manufacturers. This would reduce the amount of serious customer injury, save significant time and money in processing litigations, and legitimize the retail industry as caring about customers. This is a major undertaking, but customer and employee safety deserves the attention.

Jerry Birnbach, Assoc. AIA

Partner
Jerry Birnbach & Associates

BLUE-SKY THINKING IN ... SUSTAINABILITY

Social sustainability

Sustainability is a buzzword that evokes fear of green-washing, overly technical processes, compromised lifestyle choices, and more. However, after years of this thinking, customers are warming to the needs and responsibilities inherent in sustainability. But it is not just environmental packaging or water reduction in manufacturing processes of the products they purchase. Today's customers care about authenticity and transparency. Knowing where a certain item was made, who made it, how it got here, and how purchasing it helps someone here or on the other side of the world makes a difference. This social sustainability will connect with a purposeful shopper who is not just collecting things for the sake of it.

Ryan Fettes

Designer
Gensler

Forward thinking

Anticipate the future when designing for the present. The retail industry has made great strides in embracing sustainability in the past few years—from adopting LEDs to using reclaimed materials to providing reusable shopping bags. In fact, sustainability has been so integrated into retail that many players suggest the movement has peaked and disappeared. What they may not realize is that nobody is talking about sustainability because it's become business as usual for retail store designers.

Designers haven't made much progress, however, in getting retailers to be forward-thinking about the space. Retail leases generally run between five and 10 years, and even within that timeframe, the store may be redesigned to keep up with changes in branding and marketing strategies. So how can we ensure that what we're creating now doesn't all get hauled to a landfill when the store is redesigned or the retailer moves?

Think holistically about sustainability. It's not just the energy-efficient LED lighting, the finishes with recycled content, or a LEED plaque on the wall. Consider the future impact of what we're doing today. Look ahead five or even 10 years and make conscious decisions now that will result in a lower spend on energy, materials, and time later.

Design only what is needed. Do enough to hold a brand's story, but if it doesn't serve a purpose other than aesthetics, don't put it in the design. No more materials—be they handles on drawers that don't open or fake brick to add texture to a wall—that don't do anything other than add visual interest to the space.



Photo: © iStock.com/Tommel

Embrace the pure in materials and forms and use more of what the raw space offers. This will make our designs more flexible for future change, which helps streamline the next round of renovations without requiring a full (and expensive) gut rehab. Simplifying our designs creates a win-win. Lower construction costs

mean decreased expenses, which in turn equals increased profit for retailers, and less waste during construction—and a healthier planet for us all.



Mare Weiss, IIDA, LEED AP
Senior Associate
Bergmeyer Associates



BLUE-SKY THINKING IN ... NEW STORE CONCEPTS

The automat revisited

A dining format that encourages communal dining in a public setting provides the sense of community Millennials seek. The first automat started as a model for density in urban areas, but the new automat can be successful beyond the epicenter. With chefs supplying the food anonymously, people would choose what they want to eat and what they like best on the food quality alone. This could provide an opportunity for testing culinary talent for just a day or a week to chefs who could not afford to even open a popup. Their success would be based on the number of their dishes that sold.

**Lisa Pope-Westerman,
Mark Talma, and Jong Kim**
Houston retail studio
Gensler

Permanent temp spaces

Landlords could create the infrastructure for a series of spaces that go beyond popups and traditional brick-and-mortar. Enthusiastic associates with a chronic case of Millennial boredom are ripe for the next retail big idea. The experiential challenge is to allow them to become ambassadors for this next great thing. Stores could open and close around a series

of topics. Some may be funded by third parties; others may be created by retail associates themselves. The changeable stores could be made fresh for consumers who are attracted through social media, word of mouth, and members-only events allowing a first peek at what's new and what's next. Playing off the "maker" society, this would provide continuity that is not available through typical popups, the art fair, or the product launch and infuse the mall with "freshness."



Ken Nisch
Chairman
JGA

Curated showrooms

A series of curated showrooms could showcase the latest and greatest products from favorite brands. Each omnichannel showroom could provide the experience of walking into the cover of a catalog or website in which consumers can touch and test products in real time. A unified app system could enable easy access to customer reviews and product information along with the ability to order online and choose pickup or delivery. Retailers could potentially benefit from lower rent and labor costs, while shoppers could benefit from access to product testing in a convenient setting.

Barry Bourbon
Principal and Studio Director
Gensler

The white store

Through the wonders of digital or nanotechnology, an all-white store could morph to the style and taste of the customer. Whether modern and high-tech or natural and high-touch, the store and merchandise could transform into whatever the customer wants at that moment.

Joan Insel
VP
CallisonRTKL

Goodwill retailing

Overconsumption has consumed us. Vendors, either online or at a popup or booth, are now selling or bartering used items. The black shoe store. The raincoat store. The size 10 store. The web and social media make it easy to buy and sell. Savvy vendors will start a following and become "name" brands. New retail communities will be created. Green Eileen is only the tip of the iceberg.

Joan Insel
VP
CallisonRTKL

Retail theater, literally

A stage would take the place of a store and actors would perform vignettes using clothing and other merchandise for sale. Some of the scenes would be written and choreographed in advance, while improv scenes would round out the performances. Programs could be staged by a retail brand on some days, curated by a style blogger on others. Through an app, the audience could vote for and purchase their favorite items. Performances would likely be



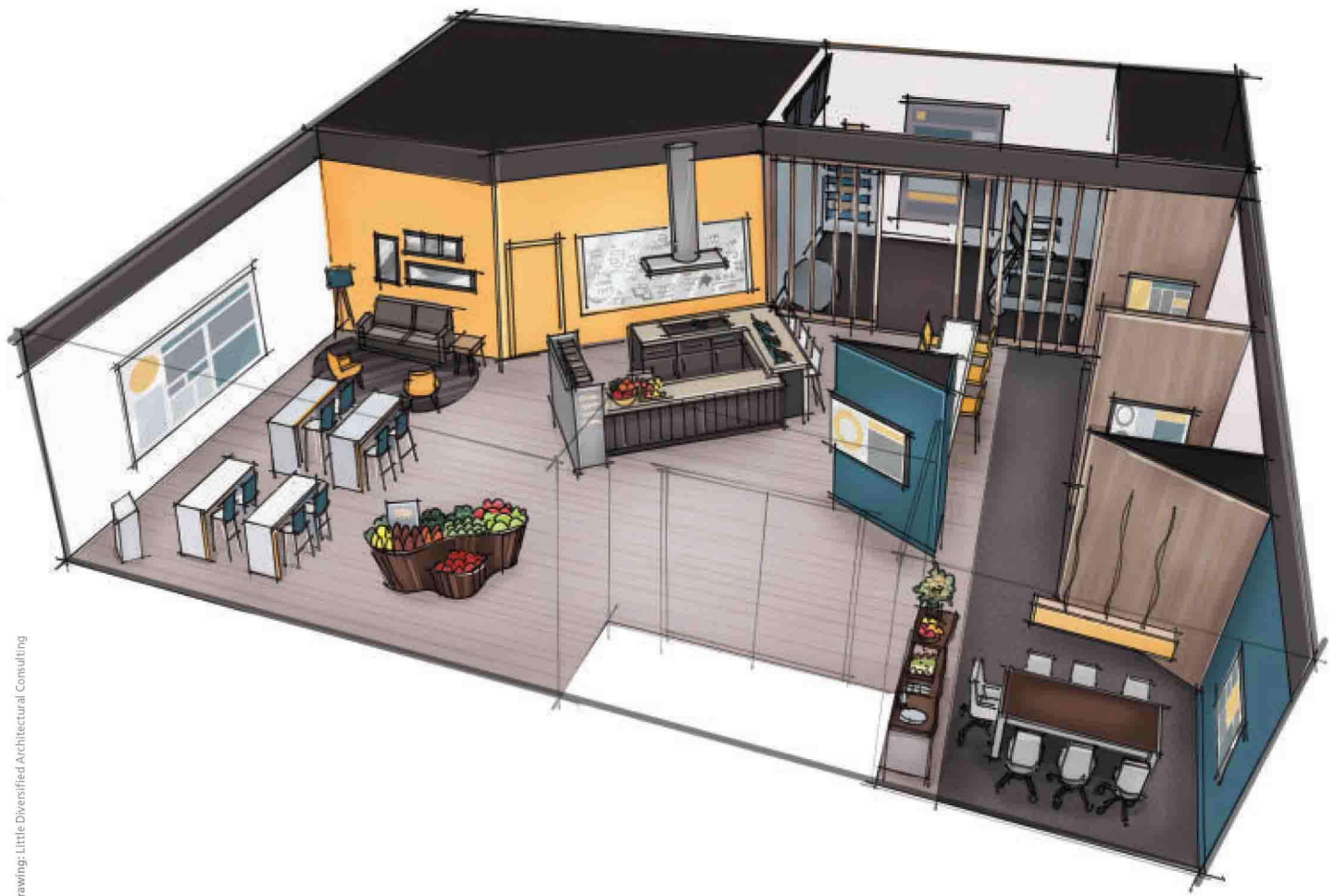
shared by audience members on Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, creating additional buzz.

Joan Insel
VP
CallisonRTKL

BLUE-SKY THINKING IN ... THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

In-between spaces

The most underutilized phase of a customer's journey today is the in-between spaces. Classic examples of a customer journey note multiple touchpoints and channels as avenues to connect with a brand, becoming ever more loyal and engaged along the way. However, the steps between are attracting custom-



What if your bank operated like your favorite health club?

ers interested in living a lifestyle in the moment, not being sold a lifestyle for later. Previously, under-programmed space such as large circulation paths in a mall or an airport that were merely thought of as utilitarian necessities are now being filled with events, food and dining, music, popups, you name it. These places will connect customers to a brand and each other now and in the future.

Ryan Fetters
Designer
Gensler

Tech, coffee, health ... banking!

What if your bank operated like your favorite technology company? Brilliant bankers at every location could help you lay out a path to your financial well-being. If you needed to wait before speaking with your banker, relevant activities would enhance your experience in the store—financial calculators could analyze what you would need for retirement or how much to save before

purchasing a new car. You could download an app to assist you with payment plans, or to test your ability to fit a new purchase into your budget. Then you'd be escorted to a work table where you could roll up your sleeves with your brilliant banker and get to work. Tablets would allow you to take notes and email them to yourself for later reference. Later your banker would text you reminders of next steps in the journey toward financial freedom.

Or what if your bank operated like your favorite coffee house? You would be greeted by name with fresh coffee and baked pastries upon entering. Soft music would float throughout the space. Comfortable leather chairs, surrounded by subtle smells of fresh baked goods, would set the stage for your meeting. Your personal banker would already know your background and financial goals so that the meeting is productive from the start and gets to the point in record time so you can get to the rest of your day.

Or what if your bank operated like your favorite health club? Just like physical fitness, financial well-being can be a chore but remember: no pain, no gain. This branch store would boost financial fitness with tips on how to create great-tasting healthy meals on a grocery budget, reduce your carbon footprint, or save on your in-home energy bills. In the children's area, your kids could play games about savings and lending. Between the information gained from your meeting for your long-term financial well-being to the tips to better your life today while surrounded by a clean space with sustainable and locally sourced materials, you would want to check in with your banker quarterly to measure your financial bench strength. All gain, no pain.



Nancy Everhart, AIA, CDT, LEED AP BD+C
Partner | Studio Principal
Little