



## Consumers Just Want to Have Fun

'Recreational retail' transforms staid shopping experiences into memory-makers

by FIONA SOLTES

**S**ean Selby doesn't look at rock climbing as simply exercise — but then, he doesn't look at retail buildings as spaces to just buy and sell, either.

Climbing — a self-professed “addiction” that stemmed from research for a particular project — is more about creativity and exploration. As it turns out, so is designing for bricks-and-mortar retail.

“Here's the thing,” says Selby, principal at Boston-based architecture and design firm Arrowstreet. “If I tell people I like rock climbing and I ask them if they want to come... they might say, ‘Well, no, because I don't have the arm strength’ or ‘My fingers can't grip.’ Yes, that's part of it. But what's really interesting to me is that it's a problem-solving exercise.

“When you're staring at a wall, whether you're outside or in a rock climbing gym, yes, you do need some strength,” he says. “But you can build that up. The thing you need more, at the very beginning at least, is problem-solving ability. You look at that wall

and say, ‘Well, how am I going to get from here to there? Maybe I can move one hand here, or a foot over there.’ You figure it out, and then that builds confidence and you can keep on going. That's endlessly fascinating to me.”

As an architect whose extensive career has spanned malls, movie theaters, clothing and toy stores, multi-family housing — and the much-lauded, lodge-themed L.L.Bean Hunting and Fishing Store, the first LEED-certified retail building in Maine — Selby views new projects with the same fascination.

Because retail has “always been about change and evolution,” he says, there's much room for exploration, creativity, problem-solving and, in the case of Arrowstreet, aiming for the top. The firm has been involved with retail projects for about four decades, he says. “It's our lifeblood, part of who we are as architects and designers.”

### BUILDING CONNECTIONS

As the industry has navigated the rise of e-commerce, omnichannel,

mobile, increased choices and personalization, Selby and Arrowstreet have sought new hand- and footholds right along with it. There's an emphasis on creating value and personal connections, fostering rich experiences and maintaining consistency and integrity with brand mission.

But there's also a desire for fun.

Consider Arrowstreet's pedestrian-oriented retail development in Framingham, Mass., about 20 miles from Boston; the plans include a retro-inspired 21,000-square-foot Kings bowling alley and restaurant. Also on the list: iFLY indoor sky diving.

“Food has always played a part in mall and shopping design,” Selby says. “If you want people to stay in a shopping center, you need to give them a breather, let them have coffee or a meal. That not only gives them a reason to stay longer, but it also creates a place where friends can get together, where people can have a first date or a family can go, and you're making memories. It becomes, ‘Remember the time we enjoyed that fabulous dinner at the corner table overlooking the

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water?” Memories build connections to the center.”

Experiences beyond food, he says, build connections and community in different ways.

Never before had that been as evident as it was while working on Brooklyn Boulders Somerville, where Selby’s rock climbing habit began. Rather than simply a rock climbing gym, facility includes co-working spaces, concerts, conferences, TEDx events and more, all housed in an awe-inspiring, colorful atmosphere with soaring 50-foot ceilings.

Brooklyn Boulders now has facilities in Chicago, Queensbridge, N.Y., and, naturally, Brooklyn. The partnership with Arrowstreet began with one gym in place.

“In these gyms, people are there just to hang out,” he says. “Wouldn’t any shopping center want that, people coming just to hang out and meet friends? And of course, to potentially buy things. But a place where you go and create memories? That’s what we’re trying to build.”

A natural progression from the lifestyle centers of 10-20 years ago, which included the addition of food and movie theaters, the folks at Ar-

rowstreet consider this “recreational retail.”

“It’s a less passive use,” Selby says. “You’re interacting in different ways.”

#### FITTING INTO PLACE

Selby also has been involved with Target’s new small-format urban stores in the Northeast. TargetExpress began in Minneapolis (2014) and San Francisco (2015), and Arrowstreet has come on board for a location at Packard’s Corner near Boston University, as well as another in the eclectic Central Square in Cambridge, Mass.

TargetExpress stores “are still Target, but they’re on street corners in urban locations,” Selby says. “They’re always in a mix of other retail. Sometimes there’s an office or residential area above them, so they’re true neighborhood projects. Now, the stores are bigger than your general

mom-and-pop stores. But they’re fitting into the fabric of the neighborhoods.”

Smaller footprints mean that the stores can’t keep everything onsite — merchandise is chosen to meet the particular needs of the area — but the ease of e-commerce means the store’s full line is still readily available.

That’s an important point for Selby: He doesn’t think omnichannel should be about creating sameness through all channels, but rather using each channel to tell the story of the retailer and/or brand in a unique way.

Bricks-and-mortar spaces that both reflect and enhance the immediate environment, then, can offer something an online experience can’t. Selby finds pure-play e-retailers creating physical spaces a curious phenomenon. “It will be interesting to see how that all plays out,” he says, noting brands such as Bonobos and Warby Parker.

“When Amazon builds a store, something must be up. There must be a reason.”

As for those TargetExpress stores, the Packard’s Corner location is a narrow, long and tall space with concrete floors and ornate columns; as its name suggests, it originally housed a

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Packard automobile showroom. The Central Square space, conversely, is a two-level building (ground floor and basement) defined more by what's outside than inside.

"It's right in the thick of things," Selby says. "There's a Middle Eastern restaurant next to an art supply store, and there's a Korean grocery across the street. It's just a different mix of tenants up and down Massachusetts Avenue. And it's fitting into that just fine."

Both stores are clearly identifiable by the red band above the doors, though the Packard Corner location has limited signage due to neighborhood restrictions. They look like completely different stores, Selby says, "and they're only three miles apart."

## ROOM FOR IDEAS

Finding the right mix for both the community and the client requires a lot of questions — and a lot of listening. It makes no difference whether it's a new client or one that Arrowstreet has worked with for decades.

"I know it sounds cliché," Selby says. "But without listening, you're missing a lot of opportunities ... We really take that to heart, and even at the office, we practice it every day with our coworkers, our colleagues and our consultants."

Today's natural impulse — for brands and people, it seems — is to talk over others in an attempt to be heard. "But listening gets you so much further," he says. "We practice letting there be enough air in the room for the client to say what they think, or provide a vision or offer ideas."

Sometimes, that "air" affects not only the current project, but future ones as well.

Selby points to the Brooklyn Boulders team, and the level of contagious energy they brought to the project.

"They have a lot of ambition," he says. "I thought I already had energy about designing fun spaces, having worked with L.L.Bean, which was a total blast. But when I met with them, and I was hearing all the things



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they wanted to do, it was, 'Let's tear the roof off, and instead of a 30-foot ceiling, let's do 50.' ... We had a lot of brainstorming sessions, and it led to an excitement that was off the charts."

That exhilaration has played out in the final result, helping the physical space be a true extension of the brand ideals. That's just one of the reasons the project has been so successful.

"The thing that never changes, the number one rule of retail, is that it's always about the customer experience," Selby says. "But the customer's expectation of retail has changed. The customer is now wanting more. They want more value, they want more service, they want more connection to the brand."

## RENEWED REFRESHES

It's clear that retail has changed. And since consumers can now find what they want through so many more channels, the fresh, new, authentic, unique experience will be the one that wins. Given today's pace of change, Selby is seeing five- to 10-year turnarounds on store updates and refreshes.

"Conjure up in your mind a shirt from the 1970s or the 1980s," he says. "You can watch a movie or TV,

and pick out what decade the clothing is from. Retail architecture is similar.

"What's interesting to me is that even though a company's mission statement or values might not ever change — they could always be about integrity, quality or service — the way they tell their story will change. That follows through with the architecture. You're interacting, you're transacting. But you're telling a story."

When it's time to revive the way that story is told, Selby will once again be standing before that figurative wall, creatively considering the best path to help his clients get from "here" to "there."

"When you sit with a problem, that's like the strength part of rock climbing," he says. "You end up applying all kinds of different strengths you build up over time."

Selby admits he was "really bad" at rock climbing when he first tried it. "I'm still not good at it," he says. "But I keep on trying." And he keeps on inviting others to share in the experience — enjoying that moment they first walk into a space and look up in awe. **STORES**

Fiona Soltes, a freelancer based near Nashville, Tenn., loves a good bargain almost as much as she loves a good story.