



# (IR) REGULAR FIXTURES

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN STAFFING CHANGES AS TECHNOLOGY, FLEXIBILITY,  
AND COST DRIVE FIXTURE AND DISPLAY DESIGN By Robert Nieminen



It's a brave new world out there for store fixture design. These ever-present elements in brick-and-mortar retail spaces are doing more than just displaying product—they are helping to shape a more engaging customer experience. From seamlessly integrating new technology to providing flexible solutions for merchandising and point-of-purchase, fixtures are taking a leading role in the design of retail environments.

The trend has led to higher fixture spending, as noted in the Shop! study outlined on page 22. A similar trend was found among store fixture resellers by IBISWorld. “During the past five years, higher disposable income levels and

rising consumer confidence have contributed to more retail spending. Less belt tightening at retail stores has, in turn, compelled this industry's downstream consumers to boost their spending on new fixtures,” the research firm notes in a November 2015 report, *Retail Store Fixture Dealers in the U.S.: Market Research Report*.

With retailers expecting more out of fixtures, future demand will be for fixtures that meet these higher levels of expectation, according to both reports. “As businesses increasingly demand customizable fixtures and increased portability, operators must be able to respond quickly to

Demand for spaces that can transform has popularized castered fixtures such as these by Rocky Creek in a Detroit Carhartt designed by RGLA Solutions.



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these market trends,” notes IBISWorld. The Shop! report suggests fixtures must also meet interactive and experiential demands, among other needs.

These drivers have shifted how fixtures are being designed today, as well as who is designing them.

## RISE OF THE FREELANCER

Both the availability of new industrial designer positions and layoffs within design firms or in-house with retailers appear to be flat. But it’s clear that the industry is increasingly outsourcing the design of fixtures to free agents. Several factors contribute to this trend.

“A lot of younger people especially prefer to work on a contract basis as opposed to [working as] an in-house designer,” explains Paul Hanusiak, industrial designer for DMD Retail Design. “That gives them flexibility. They can potentially make more money. They can jump from job to job and have more variation in what they’re doing.”

This scenario also can benefit a fixture vendor or even a design firm, Hanusiak says. If a company does not want to hire in-house, it can outsource work as needed. He notes that many retailers today hire a firm to handle the creative elements, then pass off a design-intent brief or renderings to a preferred vendor that continues the development process.



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“They end up basically with a lot of freelance designers, whether it’s interior designers or industrial designers, on an on-call basis. That’s probably the biggest shift,” he says.

Some fixture providers also have changed their staffing practices, ramping up and scaling back the number of designers on hand depending upon current need, says an industrial designer at a fixture company who asked to remain anonymous. He believes the reliance on freelance designers is a result of a general business trend across several industries in response to economic conditions.

“I’ve seen a big push for companies, at least since the downturn in 2009, to use freelance help,” he says. “There’s a long list of freelancers that companies use because they don’t have to pay benefits and overhead for employees. They try to funnel work through freelancers, even though they’re a higher hourly rate. In America, companies are trying to run lean and mean.”

He adds that fixture houses continue to handle the bulk of fixture design, particularly for big-box discount retailers prioritizing low price points for large rollouts. In those cases,

**Top:** The need for integrated tech spans many functions. For this Moto Care in Bangalore, India, Outform designed customer interaction with live Motorola products, digital displays for customization, and online ordering portals.

**Above:** Shop! research notes high demand for fixtures with lighting integrated at shelf level. At this Shinola in Washington, D.C., Great Lakes Woodworking Co. uses LEDs to showcase product within millwork.

**Left:** As the line between P-O-P and fixtures blurs, branded fixtures are incorporating increasing amounts of technology to engage in-store shoppers, like this display for Mattel at Toys “R” Us stores.

**Below:** Gensler designed this gift shop in The Broad museum in Los Angeles for flexibility in merchandising. Three sizes of mirror-polished and brushed stainless-steel modular fixtures can be combined or isolated to form different display zones. *Photo: Gensler*  
**Bottom right:** Lighting at shelf level is integral to the presentation of Luxottica products at this CallisonRTKL-designed Sunglass Hut in Hong Kong. *Photo: Marco Beck Peccoz*



imported products are likely being shipped in from China because labor costs are so low. Still, other North American fixture houses are bringing manufacturing back to America, he notes.

“It just depends on the client and the price point. The lead times drive if you do it on- or off-shore,” he explains.

Ultimately, competition drives these design choices, according to Nikki Francisco, LEED AP, RDI, director of design for Sargenti Architects. She notes that nowadays, interior designers are becoming savvy and branching out into other areas of practice, such as industrial design, to meet their clients’ needs.

“It’s like a dog-eat-dog world out there. You need to stay competitive, so you need to broaden your horizons,” she says. “I had to expand my services, even tapping into branding, as opposed to just doing prototypes for retail, and the bits and pieces that go into that. We’ll do anything that the client needs.”



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—FACCINTO

While Francisco doesn't believe fixture companies are reducing staff positions by any stretch, she does believe there's more collaboration happening. “There's greater coordination between the merchandisers, store designers, and fabricators.”

## DESIGNED TO BE FLEXIBLE

“Designing fixtures while keeping flexibility in mind is every retail designer's and visual merchandiser's essential,” writes Nicole Faccinto, senior designer of visual strategy

for Chute Gerdeman design firm, in a recent blog post. She credits big brands like Target and Crate and Barrel for setting the bar for the industry, from which there's no turning back.

“Consumers expect to see fresh, new displays upon each return. Having a blank slate to always turn back to in order to quickly change out your display is key to creating successful and inspiring visual displays,” she says.

Francisco agrees, citing huge demand for modular and mobile fixtures.

This WithMe popup that first debuted in Chicago integrates technology so seamlessly that it's no longer clear where the fixture ends and the programming begins. *Photo: Benny Chan/Fotoworks*



“THERE IS A LOT OF DEMAND FOR DISPLAYS THAT ARE ABLE TO BE RETROFITTED AFTER A WHILE—THAT MEANS CHANGEABLE GRAPHICS, CHANGEABLE PLANOGRAMS.”

—STRZELECKA

She notes that even the ubiquitous fixed cashwrap is disappearing, calling it “a fixture that nobody wants to exist anymore.” As a result, Francisco says, more designers are creating multifunctional cashwraps or doing away with them altogether, thanks in large part to Apple’s iconic store design.

“Everybody wants to be like the Apple store now,” she says. “For designers, it’s hard to completely step away from that tangible fixture—the cashwrap in the back of the store. But the cashwrap is definitely disappearing design-wise, because if it can be moved about the store, it doesn’t make sense anymore.”

Even the concept of permanence is transitory when it comes to branded displays. According to Magda Strzelecka, an industrial designer at Artisan Complete, the definition of “permanent” in retail is often just six months, so the need to refresh is nearly constant. She says fixture and display design is being driven by modularity so that a permanent fixture can be changed out easily for promotions.

“There is a lot of demand for displays that are able to be retrofitted after a while—that means changeable graphics, changeable planograms, that kind of thing,” she says.

Strzelecka adds that retailers are increasingly cost-conscious, so fixture and display designers have to be adept at quality engineering on a relatively low budget.

“Most of the time, it would be a collapsible display, which that means we are saving on shipping,” she explains. “And [it should be] as flexible as possible [so that] later on these can be changed to something else, like new dress-up graphics and a new planogram.”

## **INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY**

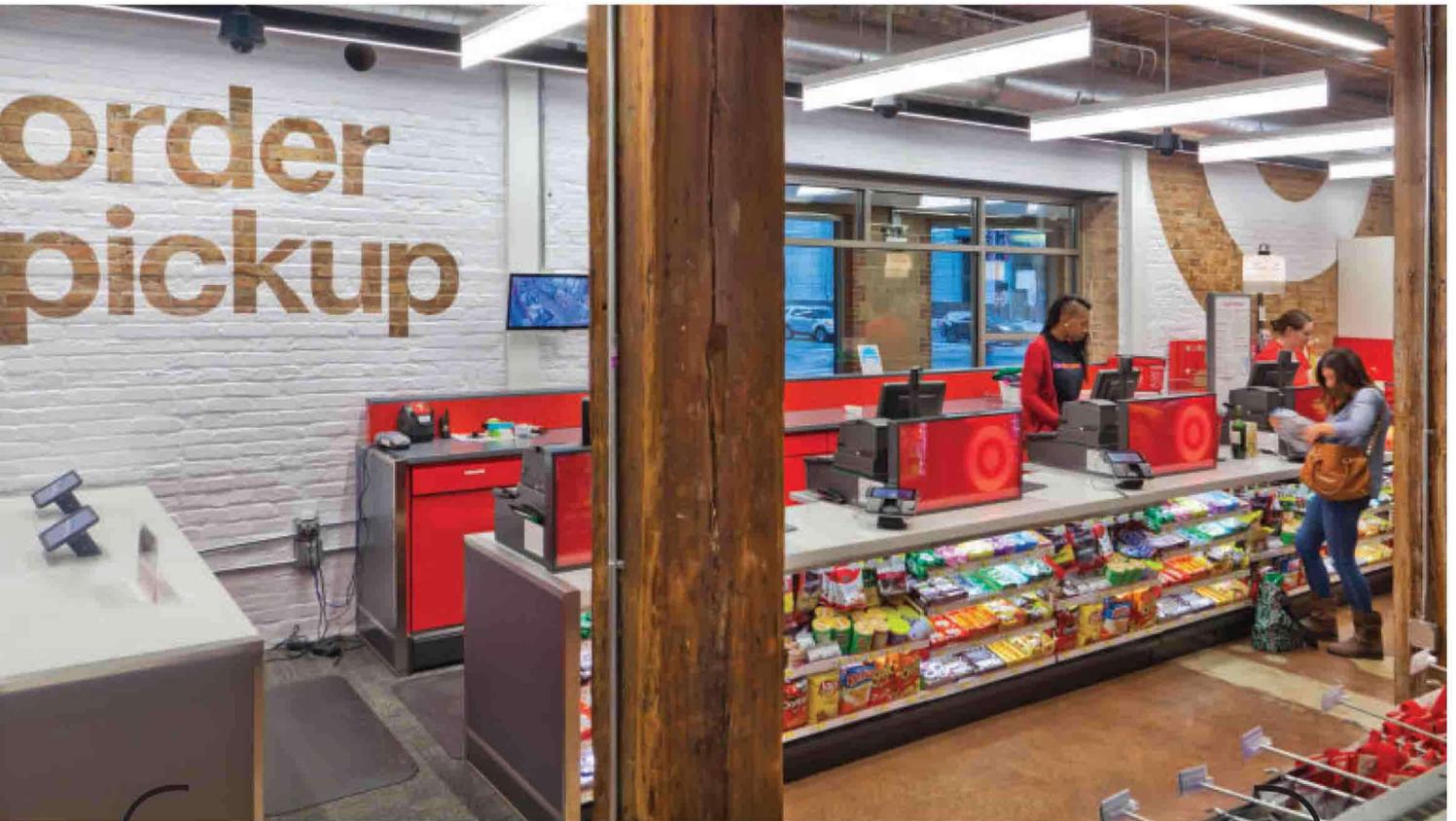
It should come as no surprise that technology is another major influencer of fixture design, given the digital era in which we live. However, what shouldn’t be assumed is successful application without thoughtful planning.

No longer a trend, the integration of technology is now the norm, Francisco says. She notes that technology can be used within retail environments in innumerable ways, be it large scale, small scale, or through various touchpoints throughout the space.

“It’s not even a consideration: ‘Should we do it, or should we not?’ Across the board, it’s ‘How do you seamlessly integrate

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As online and offline retail merge, fixture providers are increasingly asked to build pickup desks for online orders like this one at a Target in Chicago. Photo: Gilbertson Photography



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that?” she explains. “It’s not like your customer is walking into the store and hit in the face with technology. It’s integrating it into the touchpoints.”

DMD’s Hanusiak echoes those observations and says, “Technology is definitely showing up more in retail fixtures.” However, he notes that technology isn’t always used to its fullest potential because, although retailers like the idea, it’s expensive to run. Whether it’s high-level, creative content available on monitors or touchscreens or staff using tablets for wireless customer checkouts, few retailers end up implementing it because it always comes down to cost, Hanusiak adds.

Additionally, content must be updated and pushed through it regularly. “You don’t want that content to go out of date,” he says.

Strzelecka says technology must constantly be integrated into fixture design to create interactivity and to especially appeal to

a younger audience. A prominent, athletic retail chain, for example, incorporated touchscreens and smart shelves to more clearly communicate and connect with its younger, target demographic, she notes.

“Their intention was that sports are connected with young people, and the young people are technology-driven,” she says. “Everything they can see on the screen is really what they are looking for directly. They want to read labels or printed material, but when it pops on the screen, it’s more likely to be communicated to the client.”

What the future holds for fixture design is uncertain, but it’s clear that today’s drivers will be tomorrow’s reality.

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