

INTERIOR DESIGNERS: UNACKNOWLEDGED ROLE PLAYERS IN SOUTH AFRICAN RETAIL DESIGN

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Abstract

This paper reflects on research conducted on the role of interior designers in retail design within the South African retail sector. Based on three leading corporate retailers, the paper explores the contribution of interior designers to retail design in the South African clothing and footwear retail context. In 2008 these retail companies collectively held more than 50 per cent of a R96.2 billion retail market share. Their primary turnover is generated through consumer purchases concluded in retail stores. The design of retail stores have become a means of marketing communication and are commonly used as a differentiation strategy by retailers. It is here that interior designers can make a considerable contribution to retailers. This qualitative research study reflects on information obtained through open-ended interviews with the managers and senior managers involved in the design and implementation of retail stores for these leading clothing and footwear retailers. A qualitative content analysis method was employed to identify overlapping themes and categories to compare the role of interior designers in these three corporate retailers. The research reveals that interior designers are currently under utilised due to a poor understanding of the role that interior designers can perform in retail design. Although the paper provides information on the approach and operation of retail design in the clothing and footwear sphere of retailing, wider application can be drawn to the role of interior designers in retail design in South Africa. The paper proposes that stakeholders such as education could make a valuable contribution in promoting interior design in all sectors within the South African economy.

Key Words: *interior design, retail design, interior design education*

Introduction

Retail design is a complex, multi-dimensional activity that involves various role players who contribute to the successful development and implementation of a retailer's identity (Mazarella 2010:[sp]). This paper acknowledges the interior designer as one of these role players that contribute to retailer identity through the application of creative and technical solutions when designing and implementing a retail store. The paper will show how corporate clothing and footwear retailers in South Africa utilise interior designers in retail design.

Retail differentiation and consumer experience

In the current global market, retailing has become a very competitive and dynamic market given that merchandise and associated services are effortlessly imitated and repackaged (Janse van Noordwyk 2008:313; North, De Vos & Kotze 2003:41). In an effort to survive, retailers employ differentiation as a strategic marketing activity to distinguish their products and services from that of their competitors. In doing so, they become more appealing to a particular consumer market (Baker, Grewal & Levy 1992:445; Janse van Noordwyk 2008:27; North *et al* 2003:41; Van der Vyver 2008:4). When consumers are placed among multiple product options, their preferences will always be based on the inherent differences of the products, whether implicit or explicit. These differences will ultimately motivate the consumer to select a specific product or service (Collins-Dodd & Lindley 2003:345). It is common practice for retailers to differentiate themselves by representing their distinctive identity through the design of their retail stores (Baker *et al* 1992:329).

The growing economic significance of experience-based consumption and the use of consumer experience as a differentiation strategy has become a dominant subject in literature in recent years

(Ballantine, Jack & Parsons 2010; Grewal, Levy & Kumar 2009; Puccinelli, Goodstein, Grewal, Price, Raghubir & Stewart 2009; Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros & Schlesinger 2009). Retailers make use of retail design to distinguish, enhance and promote a positive shopping experience. They do this by creating cues to attract the consumer into a retail store that will engage them in a gratifying shopping experience (Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal & Vos 2002:122; Hu & Jasper 2006:25; Verhoef *et al* 2009:31; Grewal *et al* 2009:1). Where retail stores in the past would design the retail store to accommodate the product, the current trend is to lay emphasis on the experience, perceptions and emotions of the consumer (Murialdo 2008:7). Consumers anticipate a total shopping experience that includes both utilitarian and hedonic benefits (Kim, Sullivan & Forney 2007:16). As a result the relationship between retail design and retail management is an essential part of creating this total consumer experience through proper strategic, marketing and operational planning (Davies & Ward 2002:174).

Interior Design and retail design

Retail design is a speciality that is well-established in the interior design discipline (Murialdo 2008:2; Petermans & Van Cleempoel 2010:22). In this multifaceted profession, creative and technical solutions are applied within building shells that are aesthetically pleasing and functional (Mazarella 2010:[sp]). Professional interior designers assist clients by relating interior space to business strategies and objectives (Mazarella 2010[sp]; Moore & Lochhead 1998:121). They furthermore support companies by increasing the benefits of retail design in the course of retail differentiation and strategic leadership (Mazarella 2010:[sp]).

The International Federation of Interior Designers/Architects (IFI) defines an interior designer as a person who is “qualified by education, experience and recognised skills, who identifies, researches and creatively solves problems pertaining to the function and quality of the interior environment; and services relative to interior spaces” (IFI [sa]). They continue to explain that these skills include “programming, design analysis, space planning, aesthetics and inspection of work on site, using specialised knowledge of interior construction, building systems and components, building regulations, equipment, materials and furnishings and prepares drawings and documentation relative to the design of interior space, in order to enhance the quality of life and protect the health, safety and welfare of the public” (IFI [sa]). The knowledge and wide range of skills that interior designers hold, enable them to resolve matters innovatively and resourcefully where it concerns the appearance, function and quality of any interior environment (Mazarella 2010:[sp]). This includes retail store environments.

Due to the limited amount of literature about retail design in interior design, the researcher conducted a short survey to establish the significance and application of retail design in interior design education in South Africa. The survey was directed at nine educational institutions registered with the South African Institute of Interior Design Professions (IID) that offer full time courses in interior design and interior architecture. The results of the survey indicated that all these institutions include retail design in their third year curricula and that some institutions include retail design at even earlier stages in their programmes. Accordingly, it can be construed that retail design is significant to the interior design industry in South Africa.

In addition, it is evident that competitions such as the PG Bison 1.618 student awards recognise the importance of retail design. This international competition that runs annually places a renewed spotlight on retail design for both the industry and education. The competition gives interior design students the opportunity to focus on the requirements of an identified client. In 2010 the competition involved The Foschini Group retail chain @home and in 2011 the competition brief engaged Stoned Cherrie’s Love Movement.

Retail in South Africa

Retailing in South Africa is dominated by several large holding companies that constitute the greater part of the leading retail brands in the country (Euromonitor 2009:[sp]). These holding companies do not only operate in a variety of merchandise categories, but also target the lower-, middle- and upper income consumer markets in South Africa (Datamonitor 2009:[sp]). These companies could face fierce competition as leading international retailers take up new opportunities in this already competitive industry in South Africa (Euromonitor 2009:[sp]).

Store-based retailing dominates the South African retail environment (Euromonitor 2009:[sp]). While internet shopping is on the rise, personal computers are still a luxury that is owned by the middle and upper income consumer markets (Cobweb information 2010:[sp]). Furthermore, distrust in the postal system results in the majority of South Africans still preferring to do transactions at retail stores (Euromonitor 2009:[sp]).

The South African apparel industry

In 2008, the total South African retail trade sales for textiles, clothing, footwear and leather goods were R96.2 billion (Statssa 2009:[sp]). Data from Statistics South Africa (2009:[sp]) indicate clothing and footwear retailers contributed a total of 19,2 percent of the total retail trade sales during 2009, second only to the general dealer retail sector. The clothing and footwear retail market grew at a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10 percent from fiscal 2005 to fiscal 2010, despite the economic downturn. This growth is mainly due to the expansion of the black South African middle class that have “more than doubled in size since 2000” (Cobweb information 2010:[sp]). This rapidly emerging middle class historically spends a higher percentage of its disposable income on clothing and footwear products (Edcon Holdings 2010:15).

Three of the foremost South African clothing and footwear retail companies are Edgars Consolidated Stores, Foschini and Woolworths Holdings (Euromonitor 2009:[sp]). Together these companies make up more than 50 percent of the clothing and footwear retail sales in South Africa (Cobweb information 2010:[sp]). These companies generate their primary turnover through consumer purchases that are concluded in retail stores (Cobweb information 2010:[sp]; Venkat [sa]).

Three leading clothing and footwear retailers

Edgars Consolidated Stores (Edcon), The Foschini Group and Woolworths Holdings jointly hold approximately 50 percent retail market share and is regarded as leading clothing and footwear retailers in South Africa. These corporate retailers trade in over 3114 corporate and 160 franchise stores. These retail stores are located in shopping malls, city centres and high streets of all major locations in Southern Africa. The retail sales and profitability of these corporate retailers depend primarily on retail sales generated from their retail stores (Edcon Holdings 2010:18).

Jointly these clothing and footwear retail companies spent R866 million on retail store developments during the fiscal year 2010 (Edcon Holdings 2010:18; The Foschini Group 2010:35; Woolworths Holdings 2010:30). Each retail company undertakes to grow their retail space even in these difficult economic times. Edcon acknowledges that “one of our key business strategies is to expand our base of retail stores” (Edcon Holdings, 2010:34). Each and every store, whether new or refurbished, needs to be conceptualised, designed, planned and built on site before the retail sales can be generated. This paper will investigate the role of interior designers in the design and implementation of retail stores for these South African clothing and footwear retailers.

Research

This qualitative investigation reflects on data obtained about three corporate retailers through interviews with six senior managers who are involved in the design and implementation of retail stores for Edcon, Foschini and Woolworths. These respondents manage interior designers that design and implement retail stores for these retailers. All respondents have extensive retail backgrounds and at least five years' experience in retail. Their qualifications include marketing, retail management, property management and law. None of the respondents have an interior design or design related qualification.

The selection of these retailers was based on the financial contribution that these retailers make to the clothing and footwear retail market. Clothing and footwear is a dynamic market since “consumer needs are changing at a more frequent pace, creating a higher demand for newness” (Janse van Noordwyk 2009:19). This constant expectation for change results in the frequent modification their retail stores. Because of confidentiality agreements, the names of the companies can not be associated with specific structures within each company. Therefore these companies will be referred to as company A, B and C from this point on.

The interviews were conducted over a period of two months and took place at each respondent's place of work. The interviews focused on the role of interior designers in the design and implementation of the company's retail strategy through retail design. The interviews were semi-structured and the researcher made use of open-ended questions to gather the information. These interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The audio files were analysed using a qualitative content analysis method to identify overlapping themes and make comparisons between the three corporate retailers.

However great the benefits of the study, it must be understood that the purpose of this research is not to present a generalised theory, but to explore the role of interior designers in retail design in South Africa. This results in a corresponding limitation to this research.

Delimitations of the study

The paper recognises that retail design exist in many retail sectors where transactions are concluded in retail stores. This includes banking, entertainment and other sectors. This particular investigation is limited in that it only investigates the role of interior designers employed by corporate clothing and footwear retailers in South Africa to design and implement retail stores. It is therefore important to understand that the results of the study cannot be generalised or applied to all South African retail sectors, nor can it apply to all interior designers who specialise in retail design. In order to determine if the results of this investigation will be applicable to interior designers in other retail sectors, further research is needed.

Findings

The investigation reveals that clothing and footwear retailers differ greatly in the manner in which the manage retail design as a function in their companies. The companies manage retail design under different components of the business structure. One company incorporates store design department into marketing while another places it in the operation management portfolio. One respondent replied "since Operations have to pay for the store, they should be in charge of it". The other remaining company has their retail design function positioned in the Property Development Department. This department is managed independently from any retail chain and operates as a service provider to the different retail chains for the holding company.

The retail strategy

All respondents declare that their executive management drives the retail design strategy. This strategy describes the essence of the retail brand that represents what the retailer stands for and how they want to be regarded by consumers. The respondents also indicated that their retail brand personality is articulated through among other things, the design of their retail stores. Although the retail design strategy is permanent, the manifestation of the retail brand personality will change to align with the latest trends.

The articulation of the retail design strategy is implemented by different people in these companies. Two companies declare that they use subcontract companies, usually from abroad, to develop new store design concepts. Nevertheless, two respondents stated that they believe that these subcontract companies seldom understand their business well enough to make a valuable contribution to the articulation of the design strategy. For this reason these companies revise the store design concept inside the retail companies.

In addition, two of the retail companies subcontract all or part of the production of technical drawings to subcontract companies in South Africa.

Role of the Interior Designer

The term 'interior designer' was often misinterpreted during the interviews. Only one respondent demonstrated an understanding of the term interior designers and the functions that professional interior designers perform. Apart from this respondent the terms 'designer', 'architect' and 'interior designer' were used interchangeably throughout the interviews.

Five respondents did not associate interior designers with retail design instinctively. In fact, two of the respondents commented that it was “difficult to find individuals that specialise in retail design”. Another respondent remarked that not many people know the science behind retail design and yet another maintained that “not many people understand the business of retail design” and that it is “difficult to find people in retail design”.

Although the three corporate retailers employ interior designers to perform functions in their store design departments, it is not a prerequisite to have an interior design qualification to get employed to design retail stores for these companies. Furthermore, the functions that these interior designers are expected to perform differ greatly from one company to another. Some interior designers only develop concepts for retail stores and display fixtures, while others only produce technical drawings. None of the companies expected any of the interior designers to perform both functions. Two respondents maintained that it was not possible in practice to expect one individual to develop new concepts and produce the technical drawings for the same. They give the reason that these are two very different functions that involve two very different ways of thinking. Nevertheless they all believed that these interior designers, regardless of their job function, should have a good knowledge of construction systems, materials and finishes and municipal regulations.

In analyzing the data from these companies regarding the functions that interior designers perform, it becomes clear that substantial discrepancies exist when comparing these functions to those identified in the IFI definition. Interior designers that are employed by these clothing and footwear retailers do not perform all the functions as defined by the IFI.

IFI definition	Company A	Company B	Company C
Identify problems pertaining to the function and quality of the interior environment			√
Research problems pertaining to the function and quality of the interior environment	√		√
Creatively solve problems pertaining to the function and quality of the interior environment	√		√
Do programming			
Perform design analysis	√		√
Solve space planning		√	
Plan aesthetics	√		√
Inspect work on site		√	√
Have specialised knowledge of interior construction		√	√
Have specialised knowledge of building systems and components		√	√
Have specialised knowledge of building regulations		√	√
Have specialised knowledge of equipment,			√
Have specialised knowledge materials and furnishings	√		√
Prepare drawings		√	
Produce documentation			

Table 1: Comparison of functions performed by Interior Designers

The situation raises two vital issues. Firstly, since retail design is a speciality that is well-established in the interior design discipline, the question must be raised why interior designers are not better represented in these clothing and footwear retail companies. Secondly, given that the clothing and footwear retail market spend multimillions on retail store developments each year, can the interior design profession afford not be associated with this very lucrative and publically visible sector of business?

Conclusion

While this paper focuses on the circumstances of three clothing and footwear retailers in South Africa, valuable conclusions can be drawn from it. By adopting a general perspective, the research reveals that interior designers are currently under utilised due to a poor understanding of the functions that interior designers can perform in the retailing. It is imperative for a young and developing profession,

such as interior design, to advocate the value that the profession brings to businesses, such as clothing and footwear retailers. By employing interior designers, these retailers can increase the benefits of retail design in the course of retail differentiation and as a result, their strategic leadership.

This paper proposes that educators and practitioners hold the key to unlock an understanding about the role that interior designers can perform. As stakeholders in this profession, education can make a valuable contribution in promoting interior design in all business sectors within the South African economy. Educators must instill in students the idea that interior designers do not function in isolation, but that they are connected to a larger whole. Interior designers are one of many role players who contribute to the successful development and implementation of a brand identity of any business.

In addition, educators can assist students to understand the context of the decisions they make. This can be achieved when educators facilitate interdisciplinary talks and lectures. In addition, educators should collaborate with practitioners to write up case studies so that information can be shared at conferences and in doing so; contribute to the theoretical knowledge that is so urgently needed to grow the profession.

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Short Biography

Ilse Prinsloo practiced as an interior designer for 12 years before joining the Department of Interior Design at University of Johannesburg as lecturer in 1999. Her passion is retail design and during her career as interior designer she worked on projects that include exhibition stands, supermarkets, hypermarkets, clothing boutiques and clothing chain stores.