

Malls in Crisis = Digital Design Opportunities

Designers may just save the future of mall retail.

WELCOME TO A NEW YEAR AND A FRESH START TO OUR JOURNEY IN exploring the possibilities of applying digital elements in creative ways. In the coming months, I'll have new toys to report on and new examples of brands that are executing digital systems to create truly compelling, engaging experiences.

While the future of innovation in retail is strong, let's not forget – just coming away from the 2016 holiday shopping season – that the scene for retail looks tough in some sectors. None are perhaps as bleak as the shopping mall and its loss of tenants in recent years. There are many exceptions, of course, like Westfield World Trade Center in New York (which I covered in my December 2016 column) where

many forms of digital are being utilized. But with department stores like Macy's, JCPenney and Sears closing hundreds of anchor stores, what will become of so many malls dotting suburban landscapes? Green Street Advisors reported in their 2015 Mall Sector Snapshot that hundreds of malls could disappear over the next decade. Factor in the many nameplates that are following suit, and it makes me wonder how our industry can use design to help stave off the feared inevitable.

Like many of you this past holiday season, I visited my fair share of malls and couldn't help but find myself eager to write a creative brief for most of them. Why, in this age of so much great tenant design, are the mall interiors themselves so depressing, and why

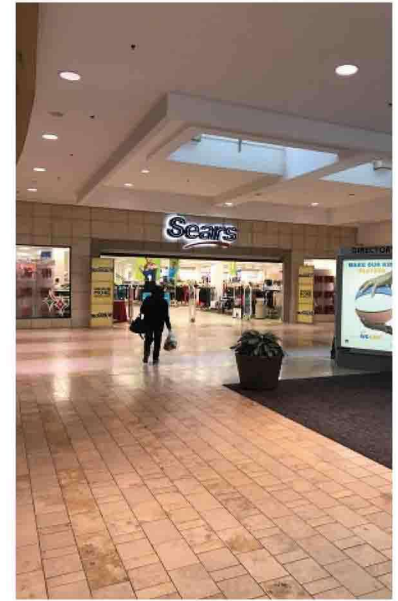
aren't developers reaching out to design professionals for guidance?

Retail designers might just be part of the solution to fix what, if let go, could become as big of a disaster as when Main Streets died in the 1970s. Didn't we learn from that unfortunate period? Refreshing interiors could help move malls into 2017.

Here are a few key takeaways to update malls for today's shoppers:

Update visual communications. The retail design industry regularly creates some of the most compelling in-store signage and wayfinding graphics. Touchscreen kiosks are increasingly being used to replace old, static wayfinding signs which, quite frankly, make it impossible to find anything. (Does anyone really look at a directory legend that is 2 feet off the floor?) A digital kiosk not only helps condense information into a meaningful, dynamic user-experience (UX) format but could also allow the customer to walk away with that information transferred to their mobile device.

Younger people (whom malls very much need to attract) do not relate to static maps, which make shopping centers feel even more dated. Paper signs on columns look temporary and, when placed next to a national tenant who strives for visual excellence in their windows



and stores, it minimizes their efforts. We have so many affordable signage frame systems available today that can elevate the message and accomplish the job in ways that also lift your property's brand.

Eliminate shuttered storefronts and unused kiosks and vending machines. Visual merchandisers are masters at taking lemons and turning them into lemonade, but unfortunately, storefront-hoarding and draped kiosks are blights that cannot be remedied and are flat out unacceptable in 2017. Instead, use digital screens (integrated, please) to turn them into inspiring brand stories, not only about the mall, but that also capture the season and inject energy into the environment. How do you think you'll ever take the younger generations' eyes off their mobile devices with grey plywood and black drape? The mall "street" is no different from Fifth Avenue in this regard.

Enhance common areas. I love seating oases in malls and think they can be very relevant. Make use of props and decoratives to take those carpet plots with sometimes haphazard, out-of-scale planters and bring them to life. These areas are a major part of the customer journey and experience. From a digital standpoint, lighting systems can enhance these areas with color-coded LEDs that deliver another layer of experience. High-definition digital screens can be utilized here to run content from your tenant mix and entice shoppers into stores that they otherwise may not visit.

In conclusion, could the "next store" literally be the next mall project for your firm? There won't be many new ones built (at least here in North America), so let's take on this overlooked retail landscape and bring it into 2017 with the same vigor we deliver consistently to our brand clients. ▾



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