IT'S A GUY THING

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Designing the Digital Store

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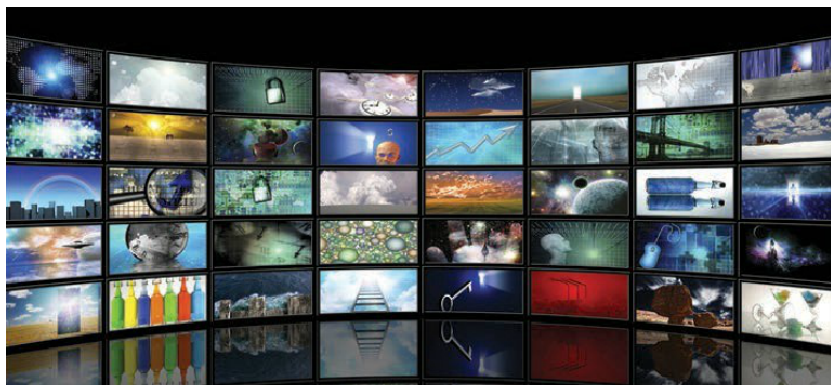VISUAL MERCHANDISING SPECIALIST
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RETAIL ALWAYS has been a showcase for the latest developments in architecture, engineering and technology. Bustling ancient city markets were set amid majestic marble temples, forums and libraries that one simply had to see. Elaborate late-19th-century department stores of Europe and America featured magical display windows staged behind shockingly large expanses of plate glass, all ablaze with electrical lighting and the thrill of escalators inside. And the cool high-tech wonders of the local Apple or Hointer store continue to amaze today. Throughout retail's history, we continue to expect that a day of shopping includes an element of entertainment and interaction with the latest advances in architecture and technology.

Looking ahead, retail design does not appear to be slowing down one bit regarding the experimentation of integrating new technology into the customer experience. And with the growing buzz and demands of omnichannel retailing, having an oversized flat video wall endlessly playing the season's runway show is no longer impressive enough.

Much of today's visual digital technology industry came out of the traditional in-store visual merchandising, signage and graphics worlds. As the developments in large-format color printing expanded in the late-20th century, along with a more minimalist and less labor intensive approach to visual displays, the use of large, graphic marketing images became more common as the costs became more affordable to retailers. Large plasma TV monitors with moving video content soon followed, giving way to high-definition monitors and LED screens. Large brand-name retailers with big budgets were able to test the market with the rapidly evolving hardware and help push the demand even further toward more exciting ways of incorporating moving images (think curved screens and touchscreen technology).

The buzz surrounding the opportunities and challenges that an omnichannel retail world is having on traditional bricks-and-mortar store design is growing louder every day. Customers are demanding a seamless experience between online shopping, social media interests and their local store. Whether you have been working for decades in retail design or are just starting out in your career, we are all doing our best to keep pace with technology and know how best to apply it to our respective projects. When, where, what and how to integrate the newest technology can feel a little overwhelming—but it is actually as basic as any well-thought-out plan. It's as simple as asking yourself what is right for your customer and for the project. In researching this topic, it became apparent that it is not all that different than what you need to know when specifying any other material or finish.

As with any traditional bricks-and-mortar material or finish, the value of adding digital technology into the architectural space needs to be thoughtfully considered. Incorporating technology into a store design or visual display must be holistically integrated into the planning process for it to be of real value and not just an added afterthought or gimmick. And while the costs of digital hardware are dropping, it is still an expensive item to incorporate and cannot be taken lightly.

According to Dick Lockard, founder and director of New York–based consumer experience design firm The Big Space, the key to the successful use of technology is to identify what your goal is before adding the digital technology layer into the physical customer experience. As with other traditional building materials, you consider various factors, including the look, durability and cost—and if you don't know all the facts and details, you ask the experts. Smart retail designers and visual merchandisers consider digital technology as another important tool in the design toolbox.

The point is to not be intimidated by the technology, but rather to work toward incorporating a holistic approach with your design process to move beyond the confines of old school bricks-and-mortar thinking.

BASED IN NEW YORK, **PETER-TOLIN BAKER** IS ACTIVELY INVOLVED WITH RETAIL DESIGN AND VISUAL MERCHANDISING VIA P-T B DESIGN SERVICES (OWNER), THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (ADJUNCT PROFESSOR), RETAIL DESIGN INSTITUTE NY CHAPTER (BOARD PRESIDENT), AND AS A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO *DESIGN:RETAIL*.