

VM-RD

Visual Merchandising & Retail Design

January 2021 | Volume: 16 | Issue: 4 | Rs 100
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**Savouring a 30 year journey:
INSYNC Shop Fitting & Safe Enterprises**

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VM-RD

Visual Merchandising & Retail Design

Volume 16 Issue 4 January 2021

EDITOR & PUBLISHER
SR. ASSOCIATE EDITOR
SR. REPORTER
REPORTER
DESIGNER

Vasant Jante
N. Jayalakshmi
Mohit Manghani
Ankita Ghosh
Vinod Kumar. V

CIRCULATION / EDITORIAL OFFICE

#1019/2, 1st Cross, Geetanjali Layout, New Thippasandra,
Bangalore-560 075. Tel : 91-80-40522777 / 25294933
Email: nimi@vjmediaworks.com
neha@vjmediaworks.com
www.vjmediaworks.com

Mumbai Office

201, 2nd Floor, Krishna Commercial Centre, 6 Udyog
Nagar, Nr. Kamat Club S.V.Road, Goregaon (W),
Mumbai - 400 062. Tel: 022-40234446

Delhi Office

M5 3rd Floor Adani Samsara
Sector 60, Gurugram, Haryana 122102
India

Business Head

Nimisha Shah 99671 11587

Marketing Executive - West & South

Neha Jante 98450 11541

Subscription: subscribe@vjmediaworks.com

VM-RD Visual Merchandising & Retail Design is a monthly Owned, published and edited by Vasant Jante, printed by B S Suresh Pai, published from 1019/2, 1st Main, 1st Cross, Geetanjali Layout, New Thippasandra, Bangalore-560 075 and printed at Sri Sudhindra Offset Process, #97-98, D.T. Street, 8th Cross, Malleswaram, Bangalore - 560 003.

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Vasant Jante
Editor & Publisher

It takes an industry to raise an industry Happy 2021!

Many of us have heard of the famous African saying, 'It takes an entire village to raise a child'. Although rooted in a traditional context, the saying is very apt in today's times when drastic lifestyle changes have meant that we are deprived of the significant values inherent in a traditional system. The above saying implies that for the healthy nurturing of a child it is important for all members, old and young alike, to be involved in the upbringing. In India this was traditionally ensured by the close involvement of grandparents and extended family members. Today as we begin to find values in many of our lost traditions and ways of life, it is perhaps relevant to discover the role that community interactions and collaborations play in the healthy development of individuals. But you must be wondering why I am talking about child development in the context of the retail business! Well, important values can find their worth in anything, irrespective of the context. Replace children with an industry and you can still find the relevance of the above proverb.

A pandemic ridden year turned most things topsy-turvy for most of us, whether in the personal or professional context. And among other things we realized the need to collaborate rather than work in silos. A designer from a leading design house summed it up best when we reached out to them for inputs for our special feature this month on what retail design means in 2021 : It takes a village to build a retail store! So whatever business and other imperatives have emerged in the post Covid world, it is important for the entire retail eco system - from the brand/store to the store designer/architect and store solution providers - to be on the same page and work towards common goals, whether it's business sustenance, environmentally sustainable practice, setting standards for excellence, responsible pricing, use of technology or innovation. It's time to take the cue from one another and ensure collective gains. On that note, let me wish everyone a Very Happy New Year! Don't miss any of the stories we have for you this month.

Vasant Jante
Editor & Publisher

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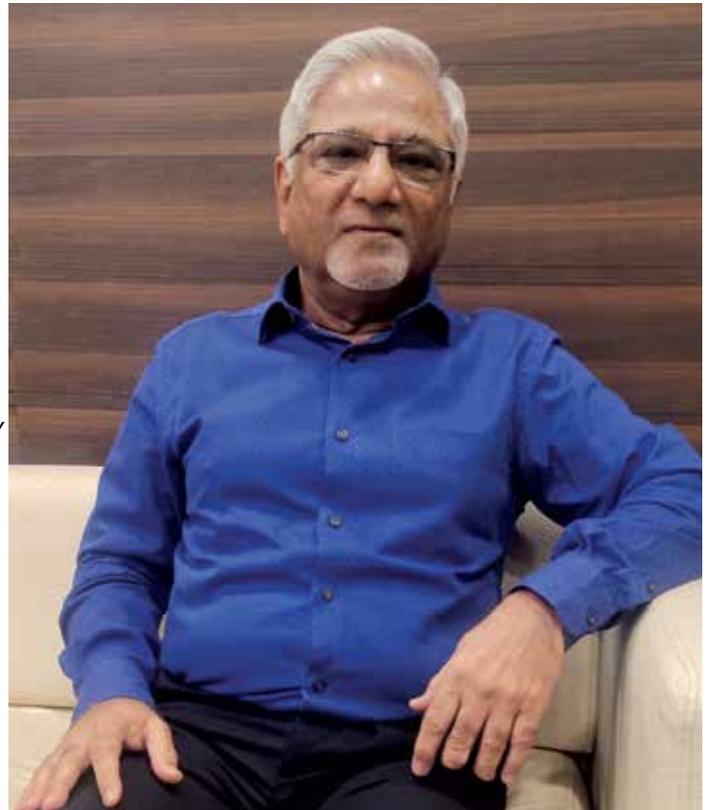
— CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF SERVICES! —

‘R&D and originality: The need of the hour’

Saleem Merchant is a man of few words. He would rather let his business do the talking. Yet, as the founder of a business that has traversed a long journey of 30 years in the shop fitting industry; he has many rich insights to share. What began as a response to a certain market need has today become one of the leading names in the store fit-outs industry. INSYNC Shop Fitting and Safe Enterprises indeed needs no introduction to those familiar with the retail solutions segment.

With Saleem Merchant’s son Huzefa Merchant now at the helm of things, the company has carved a niche for itself as a complete store fixture solution provider with a keen eye on R&D and original design. This has seen them develop solutions that combine cutting edge technologies with user friendly designs. Little wonder that INSYNC today commands a loyal client base comprising leading names in the retail industry.

Safe Enterprises has just completed 30 years in the business and on this occasion, VMRD catches up with the company’s Founder Saleem Merchant, who takes us through their professional journey. Given below are excerpts from an interaction with Saleem Merchant. Read on...



30 years - if you had to describe them in one word, what would it be?

I would say it was an interesting journey.

Can you take us back to the time you started the company and through the journey? What drove you to start the initiative?

Our family was into the business of hardware supply and my father was in partnership with his brothers. But I always had an inclination towards the manufacturing side and was constantly looking for an opportunity. When I finally got it, I just grabbed it. A lady from Australia

who visited my shop wanted a certain kind of shop fitting system to be made. It was flexible and easy to develop and I liked it. So we started developing that.

Initially we operated from a 100 sq. ft. space with just two people. Today we have expanded our facility to 1, 08,000 sq.ft, and operate with a team of around 200 people. Through our expanded network, we work closely with over 250 vendors and operate 10 experience centres across India, Middle East & North America.

If I had to look back, I would attribute the success to the fact that there was no shop fitting solution in the

market then, although it became well known as a lot of people who came from Gulf were searching for these systems in India. So we were the first ones to introduce this system here.

Since we were delivering a great product to meet the market needs, and having no major players in the market, we gained prominence. In one year we shifted from a 100 sq. ft. to a 7000 sq. ft. shop.

Over the years how have you adapted to the changing market and industry trends?

Although we have not changed our line of business, the market has

1991

The 1st Indian Shop Fittings Systems The Grid



2010

INSYNC introduces Syntrack a Slotless Shop Fitting System



INSYNC introduces Engage Fit N Light A Electrified Shop Fitting System at Euroshop 2017

definitely changed, particularly with the growth of e-commerce. But at the same time the retailers' mindset needed to change to keep pace with new global trends. For example we have had to shift from the carpentry system to the standardized system of manufacturing and had to make the retailers to accept that change too. We have always focused on manufacturing as per international standards, visiting international exhibitions to understand the latest developments. As a result, we have fixtures that are not available anywhere else in India and are on par with European counterparts.

What kind of work culture has contributed to your business growth?

We - My sons, Mikdad and Huzefa who manage the business now, and I - consider our employees as part of our family. All the staff



members and workers working in our company have been with us for a very long time; they don't usually leave our company. We believe in encouraging our workers and providing them with a congenial environment to support growth.

Were there transition changes when you handed over the reins to the next generation? How did you manage the differences?

Usually with businesses, the first generation finds it difficult to hand over to the next generation. But in my case, I just want to give them all that I have and am happy with what they do. My children are very talented. While Huzefa looks at the research and product development and handle day-to-day affairs of the business, Mikdad looks at company's financial stability and focuses on continuous process improvement. All the systems that we are operating today are indigenously made by us.

Successful people, especially entrepreneurs, have some distinct habits. Can you share some of yours?

If you observe Nature, it follows a certain routine, a fixed path and there is a lot to learn from it. I follow a similar approach, I don't break my routine. Even if time doesn't permit it, I make sure to maintain it.

How do you unwind and keep yourself charged and fit?

I have a lot of hobbies and I do my exercises regularly. My eating habits are also very moderate and standardized. I balance my routine and work towards a healthy living.

How do you think more entrepreneurs can be nurtured, particularly in this industry?

Entrepreneurship requires complete focus and dedication. The goal should be realistic and clear and it should be pursued with single minded determination. I believe the new generation is fast and focused, and can achieve a lot of things which were not possible for us, back then. Innovation and R&D will definitely help in standing out.

Any advice you would like to give to future entrepreneurs in this industry? And what do you think is the way forward for this industry now?

R&D is the need of the hour in India. If this industry has to grow stronger in India, then there have to be a lot more players. Originality in design is required. Our fixtures are indigenous and we have no imports. This is the only way we can move ahead. Also, exposure to international standards helps in

knowing the latest and adapting that to create a niche.

The industry will definitely change. E-commerce is getting stronger and experience centers with pop-up stores and similar formats are the way forward. All of this will require smart fixture solutions.

Mohit Manghani

Huzefa Merchant Founder Insync Shop Fittings | Partner Strategic Alliances Safe Enterprises

"My dad has been a pillar of strength for me. He always says, "You could either be a part of the crowd, or you can be one of a kind" and it ignites me to do better things in life. Despite being a lone ranger in this business; he was always there beside me, escorting me throughout my accomplishments. His simplicity in character and humility is par excellence. Even today, a worker from our factory can go into his cabin and unhesitatingly put his grievance across. I owe more to him and his strength that stays undeterred even during times of crisis. Contrary to someone of his age who would like to slow down, my dad enjoys his life and has a fantastic work-life balance to date. Once we received an order to deliver 28 stores in 28 days and he managed to deliver the project on time with the help of few men, machines, and few resources. From buying items in the local market to managing everything on the shop floor alone reflects his adaptability and persevering attitude."



Client Testimonials

B.S Nagesh, Retail Industry veteran and Founder - Trust for Retailers and Retail Associates of India

"Integration of technologies in store solutions is inevitable today For example, in the context of store fixtures, when they are integrated with the smart technologies, they can actually help in efficient inventory management. SAFE was an early adopter of technology and they have definitely been ahead of the curve."



Vishal Kapoor, Chief Design Officer - Future Group India Ltd

"Insync has over the years emerged as one of the key players in the retail fitment innovation space. While they have held their values intact they have constantly moved ahead experimenting with new materials, designs and technologies and keeping themselves relevant. Their keenness to spread their presence and being one of the few Indian participants in the global exhibitions clearly reflects their vision to be one of the best not just locally but also globally."



Alisha Malik - Vice President Marketing and E-commerce, Metro Brands Ltd

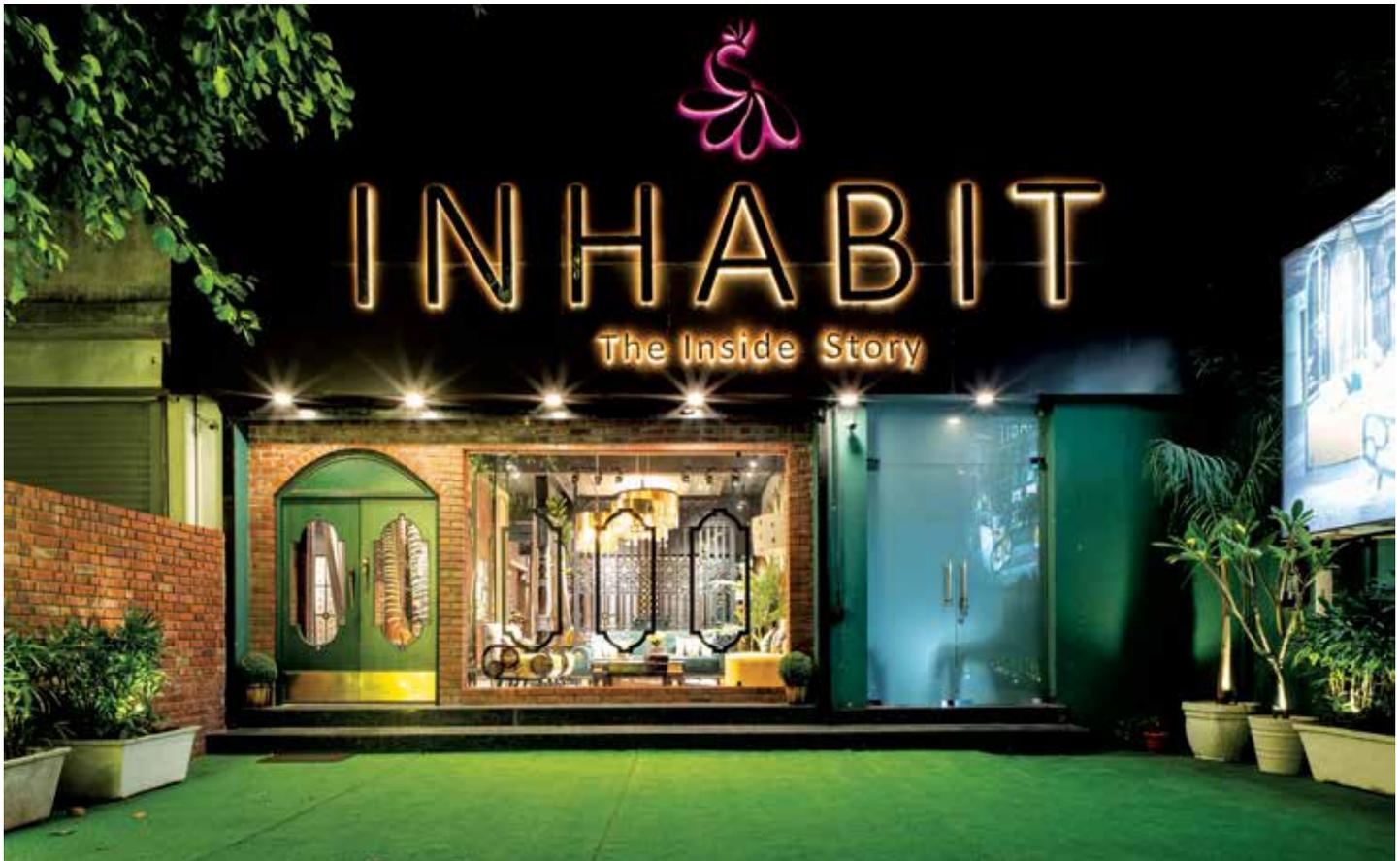
"Metro Brand's relationship with Insync Shop Fittings, has been going strong for almost 5 years now. Their excellence in quality, designs, manufacturing capabilities and execution timelines have ensured that they remain our exclusive partners for all display shop fittings, for our key brands Metro Shoes, Mochi and Walkway. Always enthusiastic, Huzefa brings in new thought and adds value with innovation. He is always looking for new and better ways to integrate technology and hardware and it has been a genuine pleasure to work with him. We congratulate them on their amazing 30 years' journey and wish them all the best for future."



Jalal al Jalal - Operation Manager - Intiaz Al Arabia Co. Ltd

"We were first introduced to safe enterprises through one of our brand INMARK. All the central furniture and panel wall were supported and manufactured by Safe Enterprise. Personally, I was really impressed with the quality, the end product, the prices, and the attention to the smallest detailing in the packing of the shipment. The idea they provided was really smart and really did compete with European standards. Based on our past experience with them, we introduced a different brand and a complete set of panel walls and we've already placed an order, which has been shipped to 5 new stores. Someone would think this is really a gamble, but for us it's a matter of trust in their quality. I have been to their manufacturing unit and seen the samples and all their different models and it's really, really impressive."





Quaint charm meets rugged chic

DELHI

With a sprinkling of design influences from around the world, Inhabit's new store in the capital evokes a quaint charm. Located at the Delhi Design District on Mehrauli-Gurgaon Road, the store follows the signature style of Neeta Kumar, Founder of Inhabit, with its classic values woven into contemporary mores.

Spread across 7,000 sq. ft., Inhabit's new store in Delhi showcases Neeta Kumar's bespoke series and the studio collection in an enchanting environment. The store follows designer Neeta Kumar's signature style of classic values woven into contemporary mores with a sprinkling of design influences from around the world, evoking a quaint vibe in the process.

"The overall design brief was to keep it understated with exposed brick walls and cement flooring to

highlight the furniture designs," says **Neeta Kumar, Founder of Inhabit & Creative Head of Design Studio Inhabit.**

By combining highly embellished walls and exposed brick walls, the designer cleverly juxtaposes a richly crafted look with a sort of Wabi Sabi chic. "The most important factor was to create a contradiction between furniture designs and interiors. The space had to look earthy with red bricks and cement floor, while the elements used in furniture evoke luxury," Neeta explains.



Neeta Kumar, Founder & Creative Head of Design Studio, Inhabit



The store's layout has multiple partitions to define every segment of space. The color scheme in bespoke area is minimal and understated with mostly distress walls, exposed bricks and detailed wall paneling, while the studio space incorporates tropical wall papers in antique mirror and frame works.

"The most thrilling part of designing this bespoke luxury series was to keep it timeless. The quest was to attain minute detailing and uncompromising quality using a vast material palette. It took almost 12-14 months to generate this line of luxury designs," Neeta Kumar says.

The furniture pieces, made of reclaimed teak wood, were effectively used to demonstrate the 'Make in India' vision.

The designer also stresses the various challenges faced during the course of execution.

"The challenge for the design team was to attain the floor layout while keeping the beams exposed. In addition, the other challenges were mostly external factors. The challenge was to execute the work in Delhi with our in-house workers

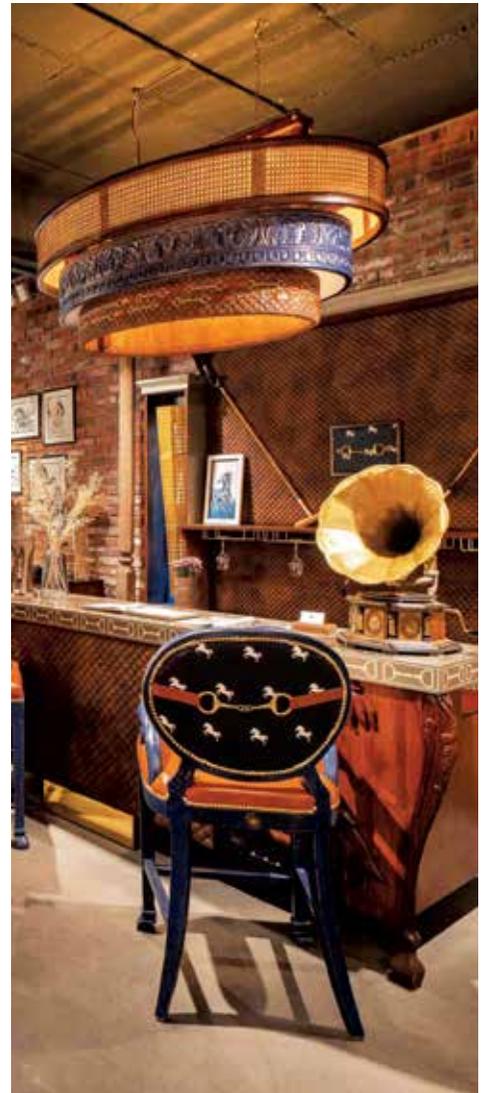


since our design studio and factory are located in Hyderabad, ” Neeta shares.

specialized in turn-key interior projects.

Neeta Kumar founded Inhabit in 2004 to showcase her highly individualistic pieces of furniture. Today, the Hyderabad-based luxury home furniture and lifestyle brand has evolved into a top-notch furniture manufacturer and a savvy retail space catering to discerning homeowners, while also remaining a full-fledged design studio

Mohit Manghani



Credits

Paint: Asian / Nippon, distress finishes by design studio inhabit

Lighting: Bespoke Designs By Neeta Kumar

Accessories

Antique Collectors: Hyderabad

Upholstery: Bespoke Designs by Design Studio Inhabit

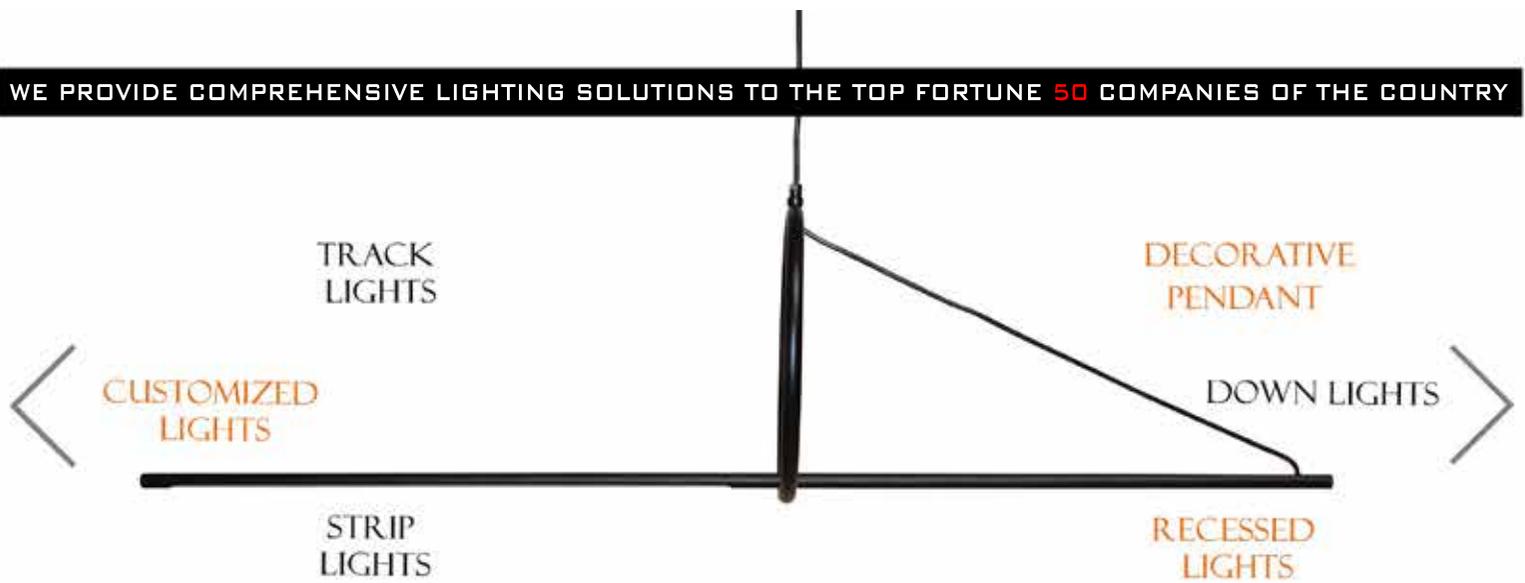
Rugs: Handmade from Turkey

Art: Shristi Art Gallery, Hyderabad

Art by Aziz: Hyderabad

Photography: David Dawson, Dezee films, Hyderabad

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Crafting charming space optics

NEW DELHI

Optics Express in New Delhi, designed by Sync Design Studio, is a space that meets the brand purpose with a careful amalgamation of ethnic, functional and contrasting elements.



Bhavuk Jain
Partner, Sync Design Studio



Brand Optics Express wanted to renovate their existing opticals store in a way that would help in maximizing sales and lend a unique identity to the store, all within a limited budget. Taking cue from this, Sync Design Studio designed the store as a progressive composition of different elements and contrasting materiality.

Bhavuk Jain, Partner, Sync Design Studio, explains, “The design is a

marriage of customized optical objects removed from their original context and then amalgamated with a purposeful concept to result in an art like installation gallery with a bold and minimal ideology. The 250 sq. ft. soft minimalistic, architectural space and the natural materials were the two distinctive features of the interior. The main goal of the project was to create a convenient, ‘clean’ design that does not distract, but, guides

and helps customers navigate the range.”

Shelves convey the experience

The primary display units are the cantilevered solid wood acacia shelves which have been strategically lifted from the floor and hung up on the wall to break away from the mundane bulky floor and wall display units, thereby giving a unique browsing

experience to the customers. The custom designed, locally sourced shelves with a handcrafted live edge add to the textural palette of the design.

Furthermore, to enhance the experience visitors are greeted by a sculptural metal display unit art on the wall creating an interesting shadow effect.

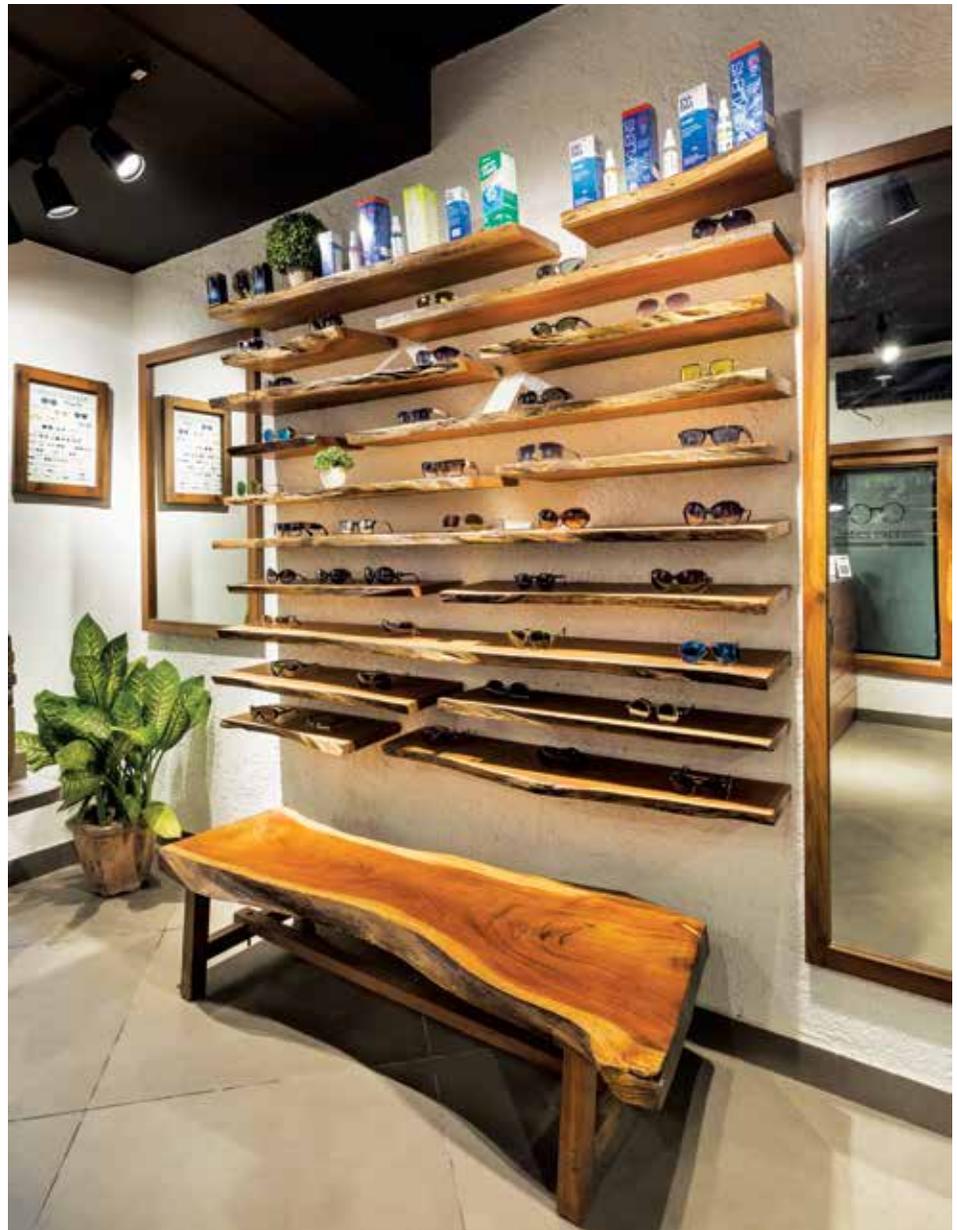
Warm & ethnic feel

The entire space has been imbued with earthy textures and warm color palette. The tilted mirror hanging above the window lintel is uniquely placed to catch the eye of the user while checking the eyewear; this also gives a diverse dimensional perspective to the user. The reclaimed hardwood photo frames comprise informative graphics relating to vision and ethical eyewear.

The 'Snellen Eye Chart' is ideally placed as a signage, overhanging right next to the main entrance door, which gives a strong visual entity to the store and also for people passing by the busy road. The fluted glass on the façade helps to conceal the unwanted elements while allowing natural light and adding character to the space.

The team rose above the challenge of carving out a functional store from a small space within a pocket-friendly budget. They sourced all the materials locally and used reclaimed wood for much of the execution, thereby successfully delivering the project in 45 days with a limited expenditure of Rs. 7.5 lakhs. On finally getting to experience the overall outlook, the client 's feedback was, "The store was an artistically crafted representation of art in the optics world."

Ankita Ghosh





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Food for the senses

HYDERABAD

Conceptualized as a boutique outlet, Almond House, Kondapur was designed to reflect the booming café culture in the city of Hyderabad. Combining the theatrical and the glamorous, the space blurs the lines between contemporary retail and aesthetically designed cafes.

Almond House seeks to offer an indulgent and culinary experience to its customer. The brand's latest outlet in Kondapur, Hyderabad was designed to offer an eclectic mix of cafe and retail experiences.

Designed by I'm D'sign studio, the interiors of the store reflect a medley of modern colors and

textures that blend smoothly with the surface finishing. The architects have planned the store as a theatrical display; with the huge glass façade giving a sneak peek into the alluring décor within, drawing more customers in.

"It was conceptualized as a boutique outlet that is young and vibrant. It combines indulgent forms and

materials to create a unique spatial experience," says, Dhruva Kalra, Principal Architect, I'm D'sign.

Elements that add the right feel

The mood of the space is contemporary and luxurious. Tones like warm grey and white are well balanced with subtle wooden textures, indoor planters and chic lighting. The floor plan gives a quick spatial overview with easy navigation.

As Dhruva explains, "The main entrance opens into a functional and dynamic space, highlighted with a black and white terrazzo floor, warm grey ceiling panels, and a contemporary chandelier. The mirror panels create an immersive environment while geometric chandeliers, small indoor planters, and the white and champagne gold panel details enhance the appeal of the store. The slit lights, along the staircase wall, add more drama to the entire experience."

The high contrast design language of the retail section subtly transforms within the restaurant into an artful and spirited decor. "The wooden flooring in the dining space, coupled with the wooden counter, assorted prints and the metallic screen



Dhruva Kalra
Principal Architect, I'm D'sign



creates a more relaxed, warm and comfortable ambience. The interiors explore the power of the eccentric colour combination of black, white and champagne gold, along with the drama of the changing forms of a line,” Dhruva shares.

The light plays also an important role in the design of the store. “The main idea behind the lighting was to create small pockets of highlights that add an accent and a hint of drama to the space. There are no dedicated focus lights used for the entire space, instead, the interiors are lit by the spillover lighting from the assortment of lighting fixtures used in different zones.”

Crafting a brand centric space

The project, which cost 2 crore INR,

was, according to Dhruva, successful in achieving the goals of the brand to create a new immersive experience for its audience and provide value to customers.

“We learnt early in our journey that we are not entirely in the F&B business but are actually in the Food Experiences business. Partnering with I’m D’sign has helped achieve our goals of creating unique retail experiences by enhancing locational advantages and product superiority through meticulous planning, reiterative design improvements and a thoroughly brand-centric approach,” sums up Chaitanya Muppala, CEO, Almond House.

Mohit Manghani

Credits

Project Head
Dhruva Kalra

Design Team
Faisal Yaseen

Execution Team
Ramesh Jha

Refrigeration and Display Counters
Climaire Inc



Ethnic fizz in a trendy space ...

BENGALURU

Fizzy Goblet's first physical store in Bengaluru, designed by The Office of Cognitive Design, began from deliberations on how the vibrant essence of the brand and its ambitious goals could be captured and expressed in a charming space.

Young and dynamic brand Fizzy Goblet, which makes traditional yet fashionable juttis, aspired for a store space that is both conventional and contemporary, resonating with the vibe of the merchandise it sells.

Playing on the large theme of a store that instills a sense of wonder and discovery, Fizzy Goblet's first physical store in Bengaluru is planned in a manner that allows consumers to meander around a galaxy of shoes, arranged either on central carousels or suspended

delicately from reflective surfaces. This ensures an organic movement pattern, making every customer journey unique.

The space for stock keeping and back end functions is at the back and the separation between the selling space and the backend space is in the form of a translucent ribbed glass. This lends the perception of a larger space, while also animating the movement of people behind the ribbed glass screen and thus adding another visual layer to the store.

The entrance being the first touch point of the store is enhanced using the actual fabric of the brand's merchandise and embroidery pattern. The entrance is adorned with a silk fabric arch topped with a copper and acrylic brand signage. To highlight the story of the brand and its products, there is the creative addition of a 'Karigar' section at the store front to facilitate consumer engagement. The design challenged the norms of a static display by making it more interactive, and assisting the brand to build deeper connection with the patrons in a new city.



**Raja Arjun, Founder
The Office of Cognitive Design**



Speaking about the store materials, **Raja Arjun, Founder, The Office of Cognitive Design**, explains, “Following the brand’s ethos, we choose to use vinyl cement floor tiles whose imperfections juxtapose the minimal light pallet walls finished with a white texture. The predominantly white walls are broken at strategic points by cement finish texture wall treatments. Arched mirrors fixed with a rose gold metal frames add a third layer to the wall treatment. The mirrors play a multi-faceted role in the store, they make the store seem larger, they act as shoe display and most importantly they help customers in the trial process of the shoes.”

“The store seating is made by the fabric used for the production of the brand’s juttis, which ties in to the brand ethos and also the entrance arch. The store is sprinkled with mood uplifting quotes on the floor and walls surfaces just to make a difference in the day of the customer,” Raja added.

Despite the Covid-19 related challenges with the need for stringent safety precautions and logistics issues, the design team successfully completed the project within the 35 days’ timeline with a design timeline of 30 days through remote coordination and with an approximate budget of Rs 4750 per sq. ft.

Ankita Ghosh

Retail Design 2021

Time to redefine?

As we head into a new year full of hope and with expectations of leaving behind the uncertainties of 2020, where does store design fit into a new scheme of retail experience? A pandemic ridden year has ensured that many aspects of our lives will never be the same again, at least for sometime to come. One of them is the business of physical retail experience. Of course, no one doubts the resilience of brick and mortar retail or the need for people to absorb the touch and feel human factor offered by a physical retail space. But the emergence of factors such as safety, physical hygiene, social distancing, smaller spaces, cost savings, touchless shopping, surge of ecommerce, integration of omnichannel, etc., have meant that the design of physical retail space is becoming more challenging than ever. This month VMRD reaches out to store designer/architects to get their take on the biggest takeaways from 2020, what retail design means now in 2021 and more...read on.





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Physical stores: From transactional spaces to brand billboards

Pankhuri Goel, Principal, Studio Lotus

Biggest take-aways from 2020

Today, consumers are more educated than ever; with growing awareness, they are shopping with more in-depth insight and understanding of the world they inhabit. This phenomenon has caused brands to rise to the challenge and highlight their values and, more importantly, their social and environmental responsibility across all channels – digital and physical. Thus, for a physical store, to drive better engagement with its target audience, its design should take explicitly into account the brand narrative and its expression within the space. It is crucial to determine the shopping experience the brand wants to create for the customer. It is also essential to identify and improve customer touchpoints that offer an authentic taste of the brand identity and ethos; this helps to build recall and garner customer loyalty.

Focus areas in 2021

At Studio Lotus, we approach the design of retail spaces through the lens of storytelling. As we learn to deal with the repercussions of COVID 19, predicting the future of retail is challenging, and it will be based on inquiry and assumptions. We can only hope this crisis has a lasting impact on our consciousness, whether it be social or environmental – starting from how brands position themselves to determining how we as designers contribute to their brand equity.

What retail design means in 2021

Physical stores are transitioning from being mere transactional spaces to becoming the ‘billboards’ for a brand to attract customers. With the rise in AR and VR technology, customers now seek more engaging, immersive experiences – which tell a story – and help cement the relationship between the customer and the brand.

A gamut of technological interventions has redefined the shopping experience for consumers over the last decade. While Artificial Intelligence (AI) has witnessed an upsurge in large-scale retail for back-end operations such as inventory management, manufacturing, logistics, and delivery, it is also a means to evaluate consumer behavior and to assist brands in providing customized solutions. Going forward, brands will have extensive data to understand and respond to customers’ changing needs and expectations. With the emphasis on visual and experiential retail, the in-store experience in the imminent future will decidedly be dictated by the power of technology.

Expectations from clients in 2021

A saying you may not have heard before – it takes a village to build a retail store – from the vision of the client to the designer’s prodding. We can only hope this crisis has a lasting impact on our consciousness, whether it be social or environmental – starting from how brands position themselves to determining how we as designers contribute to their brand equity. We need immense ingenuity and lateral thinking, as well as solidarity and collaboration, to figure out ways towards building a sustainable and resilient future for the retail industry. We can only hope this crisis has a lasting impact on our consciousness, whether it be social or environmental – starting from how brands position themselves to determining how we as designers contribute to their brand equity. We need immense ingenuity and lateral thinking, as well as solidarity and collaboration, to figure out ways towards building a sustainable and resilient future for the retail industry.



Innovative hybrid formats for design competencies

Nagaraja R, Founder & Director - Design, Four Dimensions Retail Design & Shyam Sunder K, Founder, Principal Architect & MD - Four Dimensions Retail Design

Biggest retail design/business takeaways from 2020

Nagaraja Founder & Director - Design, Four Dimensions Retail Design: The pandemic has compelled designers to rethink design objectives to be human centric, efficient and viable for the consumer, the client and the service provider. Technology has played a significant role in being an enabler in the shopping process during the pandemic and it has now become an integral part of the store design effort.

What retail design means in 2021

Nagaraja: Stores design will not only have to deliver humanized experiences that online cannot provide, but also help leverage online channels in the store environment for retail brands. Design competencies will need to be built in innovative hybrid retail formats, that many brands have successfully tested during the pandemic, and which take the store to the customer. Health and environment responsibility will be a mandatory necessity in the design process.

Focus areas of investments in 2021

Shyam Sunder K, Founder, Principal Architect & MD - Four Dimensions Retail Design: In a future that is showing signs of recovery amidst a lot of unpredictability, we believe that the best way to stay viable and relevant is to motivate, upskill and repurpose resources in step with the changing new normal needs of stake holders. Focus on technology will be to deliver efficiency and frugal engineering in processes and design solutions that we believe is a value that will be sought after by Clients.

Expectations from clients in 2021

Shyam: Having done our homework in frugal business and design practices we are adequately equipped to empathize and partner with clients in achieving their new normal business and investment objectives. Our expectation is for clients to continue to trust, partner and support with timely compensation so the whole ecosystem can tide the pandemic and its aftereffects together.



2021 will see the birth of monochannel

Harsh Manrao, Founder - figments EXPERIENCE LAB

Biggest retail/business takeaways from 2020

Retail had to move away from grunge, distressed and weathered materials. Perforations and intricate lattice work and materials that needed higher level of maintenance also became a no-go for retail in general

In addition to maintaining highest levels of hygiene protocols, it became imperative that stores communicated a feel of hygiene. The communication was pivotal in creating a much needed sense of psychological safety.

This has paved the way for design with clean lines, well-finished materials and light pastels. The above have been employed in a variety of categories to create comforting retail environments during the pandemic.

There has also been a tremendous “reactive” design effort during the pandemic. Fixtures have had to be retrofitted to accommodate physical barriers. Layouts have been modified to provide for social distancing. Interventions were made for overnight provisioning of sanitisation equipment.

There have been insights from remote working in 2020. In the coming year, we want to implement these learnings in order to deliver metric driven design(s).

Trends expected in 2021

Minimalism embodies timelessness. It also reinforces hygiene and safety.

We see ‘nature inspired minimalism’ making a re-emergence for both young and mature brands.

However, ‘Less is More’ soon becomes ‘Less is Bore’ in retail. Brands will overcome this by either gravitating towards resilient attribute of nature or projecting hope for a better tomorrow.

Mature brands may break the minimalistic-monotony by adding a touch of nature. So we may see nature inspired elements and leitmotifs finding place in the visual vocabulary and materials employed by these brands.

Younger brands may negate the boredom induced by minimalism with addition of elements like splash of cheerful color(s). Colors that evoke memories of being in the sun, the ocean or rolling meadows.

One can see a glimpse of this trend in ‘Ultimate Gray’ & ‘Illuminating’ in the Pantone color(s) for the year 2021.

Focus areas of investments in 2021

At figments EXPERIENCE LAB, we have identified two focus area for 2021. These are research on up-cycled material and greater push on digitisation.

In a way, 2020 has been a good year for us. It has given us the time and bandwidth to establish a Maker-User-Designer (MUD) Lab. We have created our first batch of seed-paper and are working with non-woven fabric. In the coming year, we hope to come up with at least three objects that shall bear the ‘handcrafted@figments’ tag. This is a paradigm shift for us.

A few years back, we had created two digital portals for improving the process management. There have been a lot of learnings from remote working in 2020. In the coming year, we want to implement these learnings to add more features for a robust and metric driven product.



Collaborations 2021

We are in the process of completing an experience centre for a 75 year young conglomerate. The experience centre became an occasion to collaborate with 30+ artists from around the world. I think going forward the collaborations with these artists will continue. We will be involving some of these in our other projects as well.

Expectations from clients

I feel the clients have been truly vision-driven through the upheaval caused by the pandemic. We'd like them to keep focusing on the larger vision and scale their enterprise in line with the emerging consumer concerns and aspirations.

What retail design means in 2021

2021 will see the birth of 'Monochannel'.

Digital and Physical have been two distinct channels for retail. The pandemic has made 'more' people use the digital channel for buying 'more' things. Contrary to what people may think, this may be very good for the physical channel, which is burdened with operational inefficiencies.

Physical retail has inherent qualities like stickiness and customer intimacy. Even a truly digital brand like Amazon values the above association. The digital data, if processed by the brands can reduce inefficiencies and redundancies in the physical retail.

More importantly, it will enable the retailers to create hyper-personal retail experiences for their consumers. Brands like Decathlon have already taken the first stab in this direction.

The mono-channel can potentially be the birth of new-age retail, something that will define the next decade and beyond.

Need design engagement across channels

Lisa Mukhedkar, Director - Restore Design

Biggest takeaways from 2020

Everything needs to be approached the "Goldilocks Way". Not too much, not too little, but just right.

Focus areas of investments in 2021

Investment in growth strategies: Needs have changed across retail segments. As a design firm we need to address those needs. The solutions need to be 'affordable', which means our solutions need to be scalable.

Expectations from clients

There are no broad expectations across clients. They are individual; and expectation setting between clients and design firms is always one on one.

What retail design means in 2021

Retail design from here on is going to be all about harmonized retail design. We cannot afford to think of two channels - online and offline. It's all one shopper journey. And as retail designers we need to design engagement across the journey.



It's time for designers/architects to insist on sustainable materials

Sanjay Agarwal, MD & Co-Founder, FRDC

Chanda P Kumar, Head - Mkt, Communications & Strategy, FRDC

Biggest takeaways from 2020

History has shown that pandemics & epidemics have not stopped the evolution of man, but have in fact transformed the way of life. What we see now is a pause & retail will evolve beyond the normal. The advent & recent popularity of online shopping has definitely made its impact in terms of people shopping for daily needs & staples, and it only goes to prove that brick-n-mortar has a bigger role today. After all, we all missed the human factor inherent in the physical stores - the friendly shop owners & conversations with them.

Going ahead, we need to see stores as important aspects of the social fabric that has a sense of community and celebrates the local. And no more is shopping at stores a 'dash n go' affair, so physical stores may need to think of 'slowing down' & allowing people to savour the experience. They've got to go strong on storytelling & narrative, while engaging and co-creating. Store personnel with strong & passionate brand voices will be vital. To put it simply, to win the game you must become a 'loved' store / brand.

Trends/ designs/ ideas that will shape 2021

Stores must evoke a sense of calm, safety and follow the 'less is more' approach in the store interiors. But it's important to heighten the sense of service, digital touchpoints, small & smart formats, new configurations for spatial conditions, flexibility, etc. Convenience-led technology at stores and all solutions that aid in operational aspects will gain importance.

Retail can take the lead and become an eco-conscious industry. The phenomenon of buying less, buying better or longer lasting and buying local will increase among customers. This could mimic in-store builds and interiors too, where brands can effectively reduce the use and discard of non-recyclable material with every new store or renovation. It's time for designers and architects to insist on the use of sustainable materials.

Focus areas of investments in 2021

This unplanned period of disruption has also given us the opportunity to innovate, change & reshape. We are looking at newer areas of engagement where design intervention is crucial. We will be focusing on building our true strength - the talent-pool within FRDC and our network of associates. We believe in the 'power of collaboration' to extend our work and reach.

What retail design means in 2021

Last year, we saw that nothing can be certain. Retail design will take on a new role from now, its meaning will evolve to be much more than what it's been in a conventional sense. And could go through a series of transformations for a while. But we must tread carefully to avoid risks associated with short-lived measures. As online became an accepted mode for transacting, physical touchpoint must become destinations for experience.

Think less density and more character, heightened experiences & service at store with seamless transition to the online for convenience & accomplishing purchase. Observing customer behaviour & coordinating touchpoint accordingly will be crucial. Diversifying footprint, mix-store formats and deepening connect with patrons will be the winning factor. In India, we will definitely see more number of stores & formats reaching wider geographies to cater to the rising population in the long term.



What clients need: Maximum impact minimalistically

Anuraag Singhal, Author, Creativist & VM, Pencilbox

Biggest takeaways from 2020

a. **Back to Essentials:** Grocery retail is experiencing a major spike in demand while the current operating model is evolving to address this surge in demand. On the other hand, non-essential retail such as fashion is facing a tough time as a result of the pandemic effects.

b. **Walk-ins is the Key:** Retailers have realised that irrespective of the offerings, location, staff standards, planograms, safety measures, etc, walk-ins is the key to the success for any retail brand. Also, despite the exponential growth of e-commerce and the challenges it poses to traditional brick-and-mortar outlets, the latter category is globally still rather dominant with 86% of total retail sales while e-commerce is at 14% in 2019 (eMarketer, May 2019) But due to pandemic, this equation would have changed drastically by now.

c. **Safety First:** Proactive retailers are using the lockdown period to address the crisis by redesigning their store planograms and layouts to become Covid-19 compliant. But malls are disappointing as it becomes very difficult for customers if they are stopped repeatedly for checks at every shop inside the mall. It may further affect walk-ins.

d. **Increase in Digital Channels:** Grocery retailers' online sales have increased from 200% to 400% along with the downloads. Online shopping is curving upwards and customer online acquisition is growing for many retailers.

Focus areas of investments in 2021

Key investments will be on innovations, exploring new materials and new ways to showcase work with optimum cost possible. We are looking for good tech-based company for possible collaboration for our technological based products, human centred designs and innovations.

What clients need

I guess the only expectations they have is how minimalistically we can create maximum impact along with penetrating the social media presence and online marketing.



Wanted: Collaborations for interesting mannequins & props

Dhurgha Niranjankumar, Founder/Visual Merchandiser and Design Consultant - DESIGN PALETTE

Biggest takeaways from 2020

Less is more : Since clients were very skeptical about investing in value-added services, we stepped up to create window displays with minimalist / recycled old props.

Our major takeaway was creating displays with minimal or no props and giving value for money. Also we worked on some interesting educational signages related to safety in the retail industry during the pandemic.



Focus areas of investments in 2021

Since retail is slowly coming back to normalcy, clients will be more budget conscious than before. We are more focused on designing props using sustainable and upcycled old products, that way we can keep a tab on the budgets and offer more interesting window displays. We are also looking at collaborating with new vendors to bring in mannequins & other interesting props for our retail clients.

Expectations from clients

Clients should be open-minded and willing to give us more freedom in creating sustainable & interesting displays. They should also encourage more VM / Display training to their employees on the importance of clean and well maintained stores.

Specific experience areas : Way forward for 2021

Karun Muthanna, Principal Architect - ARCLAIN Design Studio

Biggest takeaways from 2020

One of the biggest takeaways of working with various clients in 2020 was budgets. Due to the increase in online portals, especially in retail and hospitality industries, the main concern for clients has been the budget to invest in physical spaces with customized architecture. Our challenge, this year, has been to conduct extensive research and development to be able to procure a wide range of affordable yet luxury materials. We saw requirements such as simple, quick, and easily executable fit-outs increase remarkably. We saw brands wishing to reduce floor spaces, which led us to use the available space innovatively.

Focus areas of investments in 2021

We believe that the way forward is constant innovation and research for products or materials that suit the requirements of our clients and the needs of the hour. Through extensive research and sampling, we at ARCLAIN, have discovered that the key to progress is to talk with various manufacturers and make constant innovative changes in the materials we use. We also believe that creating specific experience areas is the correct move for the architectural industry in 2021.

Expectations from clients

The next year will bring the requirement of building spaces that provide more one-on-one interaction and experience. Also, we believe that more and more brands would want to include Nature in the spaces that we design for them. Going green along with clean, hygienic and sanitized spaces will become the prime architectural requirement this year.



Focus to be on Vocal for Local

Ashateet Saran, Founder - Saran Associates Studio

Biggest takeaways from 2020

The year 2020 was surprisingly a great one for us. It taught us the value of unity and brought the team together in a positive way. So 2020 has been an optimistic year and we look forward to ignite the same positivity ahead with the lessons learned.

One thing that we focused on was bringing in cost-efficiency to projects and we tried to reuse and remodel existing furniture for the clients. This was a big learning for us as we never thought in that direction before. Pandemic has brought lot of things to the forefront. Clients are now looking at safety measures, on the kind of material used, the air of the retail environment, etc, which never held relevance **before**.

Focus areas of investments in 2021

We have started looking at how we can develop 'Vocal for Local'. We are trying to create a model where we can utilize the skills of local artisans and karigars for our projects. I think there is lot of awareness now and people prefer cost-effective, home-made designs.

What retail design means in 2021

Integration of technology into retail design will have better return in the coming times. Clients need more backend infrastructure for implementation of a latent design. There are a lot of digital initiatives that many clients have been working on so we can see more of those in the coming years.



Safety first approach will go a long way

Sumit Kumar, Managing Partner - Catalyst Design Retail & OBS LLP

Biggest takeaways from 2020

With reduced business and budget cuts, I think 'less is more' sums up perfectly the concepts and executions that happened in 2020. We have learned how to ideate and execute with limited means and this learning goes a long way to create a sustainable world. Also the 'safety first' approach is going to go a long way.

What retail design means in 2021

We were anyway stepping into the experience age and the COVID scenario has created the need to ramp that up in the coming year. While online retail offers convenience, offline must focus on creating experiences to engage customers and generate more footprints and this is where the efforts around retail design must also be. Also, creating a safe environment for shoppers through effective communication and strategies will become key attributes while designing retail spaces. Sustainability will also find its strong footprints as far as retail design is concerned in the coming year

Also I believe most of the brands will go with omni channel strategies in a bigger way to bridge the gap between online and offline platforms and AR is going to be an important tool to achieve this.



Focus areas in 2021

As indicated before, we would be focusing more on creating remarkable consumer experience. To strengthen this move we are going to launch our 'Go to market' VM services - offering doorstep services to our clients. We believe that consumer experience is not just about creating moments but also interacting with those spaces on a day-to-day basis to in factor evolution and upkeep of the space.

We are most likely to integrate dynamic and interactive systems into our offering for next year. That is where major collaboration will be .

Expectations from clients for 2021

In the year 2020, we experienced a greater push for end-to-end service requirement from most of our clients. The push is mostly on a holistic approach at both service and execution levels.

Another very important ask will be to upgrade safety standards and maintain high standards of safety protocols and measures.

Leverage data to create well designed experiences

Bhavin Khatri, Director, Shilpi Designers

What retail design means in 2021

The future of retail design in the post-pandemic era will see the next big shift toward e-commerce prompting the reinvention of the brick-and-mortar store design. Once taken for granted, the physical retail design will be more deliberate and thoughtful.

Design in the future must also take into consideration behavior analysis to improve spaces, adapt sanitization technology to quickly improve hygiene in high traffic areas, improve building systems such as air purification and ventilation, integrate artificial intelligence to customize the commercial experience, automate the supply chain as much as possible.

Experience is the keyword and the key challenge is to transform today's retail network into a digital, profitable and modern sales channel that combines the opportunities of the online world with the strengths of the traditional retail channel. Data is all around us, and retailers can easily leverage this wealth of data and create knowledgeable and well-designed experiences that not only revive the industry, but also revolutionize it.

Biggest take-aways from 2020

1. Your team is your most valuable asset
2. Rest/rejuvenation is resource
3. Communication is crucial
4. Be firm but flexible

Focus areas in 2021

1. **Safety:** Enhanced protocols will include the expected things, like masks and hand sanitizer, as well as things specific to construction. The passing around of tools, sharing of gloves and hard hats will be curtailed. We'll all likely be writing our names on things and using only our own protective equipment.



2. **Delegating** : One of the ways to promote your business growth is to learn how to identify the tasks which can be delegated and to find the right personnel for it.

3. **Potential Business** : It may come as a surprise that you shouldn't pursue all the customers possible. After all, what's the harm in increased revenue? The answer is very simple – you can't benefit from all the customers in the same way. One should only focus on a business that has the potential to bring in the money over long periods of time.

Expectations from clients in 2021

1. **Setting reasonable expectation:** Even if your business has the resources to continue to perform at the highest level, it doesn't mean that your vendors and suppliers can do the same. Therefore, it's important to be realistic about what's possible and set customer expectations accordingly.

2. **Being transparent about changes, challenges & delays:** Competition and growing complexities in the marketplace have made it more difficult for companies to get a handle on their ever-expanding vendor networks. Clients need to be more open and transparent with vendors with respect to changes or challenges which are going to come during on going projects. Transparency between clients and vendors can avoid projects being delayed, due to lag in communication. It can help vendors to maintain the balance between demand and supply of resources, so that they can optimize their profit by properly allocating the resources.

3. **Being more proactive rather than reactive:** Instead of letting the conditions and circumstances be the driving force of their decisions, proactive strategy can allow their values to determine the choices being made and help find the solution rather than being acted upon.

Need spaces that reflect collective shifts

Deepak Kalra, Partner, RMDK

Biggest takeaways from 2020

2020 has been a major time for self-reflection; to rethink design and to adapt. It has brought a major shift in thoughts, not only in the terms of design as a concept, but also in its execution. The way we interact with each other, and hence how we interact with our spaces has changed. This has inherently changed what a person might desire from their built and unbuilt experiences, while also ensuring their personal/interpersonal hygiene. Designs that reflect this very desire, along with a strong sense of whimsy and individualism has been on the rise. There is also an increased demand for sustainable elements that accommodate the new measures for self-distancing and sanitizing. It was perhaps a time where we all slowed down to really go back to the core of design as a spatial experience and as aesthetics, to be able to move forward in 2021 with a new vigor.

What retail design means in 2021

The major trends for 2021 are going to revolve around individualism, essentialism, sustainability and hygiene. We need designs and spaces that can reflect the collective shift in thoughts and expressions, giving us more experimental designs than ever before. It's also absolutely essential to take away all the unnecessary clutter and "white noise" until we are left with the bare shell of the essentials. Designs that make optimum use of their natural surroundings and available resources, while stripping the elements down to the minimum without losing its personal touch and poetry are going to shape the year 2021. We might also see more reduction in wastage



by bringing the nature in, using easy to recycle materials and creating accessible healing spaces which facilitate easy disinfection. Furthermore, minimal exposed surfaces with sanitary surface treatments like antimicrobial and photocatalytic coatings, along with more automation and touch-less technology shall maximize the hygiene and safety of everyone alike.

Focus areas in 2021

2020 showed us very clearly how we are all highly connected and inter-dependent in this world, and thus I feel the initiatives henceforth should be interdisciplinary. We all need to encourage more collaborations between diverse fields to facilitate more design and technological innovations, producing unique assorted spaces and services.

Best to focus on strengths rather than expansion

Danesh Rustom, Managing Director, Melfra

Biggest takeaways from 2020

Our design practice majorly comprises using mid century design elements with a modern edge to them. Hence, greys and muted tones of colours have made their way into people's minds. People have also been open to experiment with darker colours .

What retail design means in 2021

Multi functional spaces with multipurpose format stores would be seen as increasing in demand as consumer trends are unsure. Hence, a broader base of product lines with lesser inventory is the trend currently being followed for varied types of stores.

Focus areas for 2021

Our team's core focus is going to be on perfection. 2021 isn't a year for expansion due to unsure market trends so it's best to focus on our strengths, as also on increasing the traffic to towards brick and mortar spaces.

Expectations from clients in 2021

Clients are more oriented on time spent in stores and are open to trying experimental designs and brands for the coming year. We see a rise in kiosk demand as stores would be more expensive to set up and kiosks would be more practical and quicker for expansion with lesser overheads for fabrication.



New style values - Thoughtful, clean & practical

Udaai Batra, Principal Designer, Bora Da` Designs

Biggest takeaways from 2020

As designers we have come to learn about the interaction of inhabitants with their space once they are forcibly enclosed in it. The clients also came in with a clear brief of how to use each inch of the space.

Also, we all started to make the spaces work more efficiently and smoothly. So yes, style somewhere became more thoughtful, clean and practical.

What retail design means in 2021

2021 will see change in terms of functionality and practicality of the space, though the style of the ornamental aspect of design will remain the same - personal.

The idea of spaces will see a shift towards incorporating certain requirements. We have already seen how the smallest of spaces felt the need to have recreational areas, some kind of green areas too as we have all realised the importance of such spaces in our dwellings.

Focus areas of investments in 2021

The lockdown gave us ample time to think about things that we wanted to do. We will be launching Bora Da Home in the coming year. Bora Da Home is a branch of Bora Da mainly for Soft furnishings. It's a collaboration with clothing label - Mahima Batra. The idea behind it is bringing together various Indian art and craft of Hand embroideries into home. It's still under construction and we are hoping that 2021 will be kinder to us.

Expectations from clients in 2021

We feel 2021 will be bringing in clearer minds to the table. The briefs are going to be very crisp and personalised. Everyone now has learned and experienced their way around their spaces. This is something very important to us personally because we always aim at creating meaningful, practically functional spaces.



Clean lines, chick design will be the way forward

Amit Jadav, Founding Principal & Spatial Designer, Jad Studio

Biggest takeaways from 2020

Most brands have upgraded their brand guidelines in terms of look and feel. Talking of design sense, style and color pattern, Grey has been the most powerful color being adopted by fraternity. Also bold patterns and parametric approach have been widely seen in retail.

What retail design means in 2021

European colors, clean lines, chick designs will be the way forward in Metro cities. Sustainability will be adopted highest in all segments after the pandemic. Use of earthy, local material and biophilia has been seen and adopted by most of the designers.

Focus areas in 2021

Our focus will be majorly on automobile and bigger furniture and kitchen brands. MSM players are getting in to bigger showrooms due to major drop in leasing rates. Also, single product companies are expanding into multiple brands.

Many foreign brands are entering Indian markets with local manufacturing and expanding. Collaborating with companies in Asian countries is the way forward with Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia being high in demand.

Expectations from clients in 2021

Lot more movement will be seen in adopting local manufacturing and context. Designers have started recommending local Indian art, Rajasthani and jodhpur stone jail works, ash bricks, terrazzo and cement floorings, weaving Fabric and rugs, locally manufactured cane and wood furniture's, recycled carpets, etc.



‘2021 will be all about business sustenance’

B.S Nagesh, a retail industry veteran and Founder of the Trust for Retailers and Retail Associates of India (TRRAIN), who has over the years, championed the cause of the lesser privileged workforce in retail and is a leading voice on retail empowerment, shares his views with VMRD on what 2021 looks like for this industry.



“ End of the day, the fight is for the customer, which means people are going to use a lot of technology to reach the customer...Maximum investments will happen on the front-end that connects to the customer, because customer behaviour has changed and it is necessary to keep pace with that change. ”

A difficult year has ended and as we begin the new year on a positive note, what are your thoughts with respect to the retail industry? And key takeaways from 2020 for the retail business as a whole?

To me 2021 will be a watershed year for retail. The main factor at play will be consolidation, Now, consolidation need not be mergers, acquisitions or buying. Consolidation will mean that the smaller payers will be wiped out and the bigger ones will automatically

prosper. Across industries we are seeing that the big are getting bigger and the small are getting smaller and this will happen in the retail industry too. So in a sense, we can expect to see a lot of polarisation in retail.

Also, we can expect a lot of pent up demand rising due to multiple factors and the economic indicators will be positive; we will in fact forget the negative growth rate of 2020. Things are already looking up in anticipation, so overall 2021 is going to be a positive year.

What do you think should be the immediate priority areas in 2021 for those engaged in the retail business - both retailers and retail solution providers?

At this point of time they should just focus on having enough capital to run through 2021 and be able to come back to the 2019 levels of business or grow on it. So this year is going to be a year for sustenance for the smaller brands or even the middle brands. And if in 2021 you are able to sustain, then 2022 will be a fantastic growth

year . So I'd say only one word for 2021 - sustenance.

Do you see lot of investments happening in front end retail technologies moving forward?

End of the day, the fight is for the customer, which means people are going to use a lot of technology to reach the customer. Essentially, I see two kinds of technology integration happening. One will be the use of technology to make back-end more productive and agile, since companies will need to do more with less number of people, and the second will be technology to get connected with the customer, whether it's through online, omnichannel, e-comm or CRM etc. The back-end solutions will come from more mature players and the front end will come from startups. But maximum investments will happen on the front-end that connects to the customer, because customer behaviour has changed and it is necessary to keep pace with that change.

So do you think the role of store designers will change in a big way now and they will have to look at retail design in a different way?

Actually store designers will face different challenges and their biggest challenge will be that most brands are likely to shrink the size of their stores and they may have to work with smaller stores. Because of the online play, more brands will look at serving a particular pin code through a combination of online and offline stores. So designers will need to see how to bring productivity and aesthetics to a smaller store and still be able to convey the brand values. The second factor they have to consider is the integration of design and digitisation to omnichannel play; that is in fact going to become very critical. So lot of technologies like QR Codes, shelf talkers, RFID, IOT, etc., will have to be integrated with the design itself. This means, designers will have to learn the technologies to integrate them. At the same time they will have to do it at a lower cost because people will become very wary of investing highly in stores.

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Designers will need to see how to bring productivity and aesthetics to a smaller store and still be able to convey the brand values. Lot of technologies like QR Codes, shelf talkers, RFID, IOT, etc., will have to be integrated with the design itself. This means, designers will have to learn the technologies to integrate them. At the same time they will have to do it at a lower cost because people will become very wary of investing highly in stores.

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So by extension, retail solution providers too will have to follow the cue and integrate a lot of technologies in their offerings, right?

Absolutely. For example, in the case of store fixtures, with the use of right technologies, a fitout can actually help in better inventory management by giving alerts on when stocks need to be replenished or when there is excess.

Coming back to 2021, what do you think will be the key game changers for the Indian retail industry this year?

From a customer point of view, the key game changer will be capturing the customer through the online channel, and from the product point of view, it will be smarter management of inventories. From the retail point of view, it will be space optimisation and employee productivity.

As far as TRRAIN is concerned, what's the agenda for 2021?

From a TRRAIN point of view, our agenda will continue to be serving the retail industry through various inclusion programmes, including working with the disabled and underprivileged women. We are also working on unique new technology driven initiatives to help companies engage with retail employees. So in that sense, 2021 will be a very important year for us, more like a make or break year.

The new initiatives are essentially an extension of the work that TRRAIN does and scale up the number of people we can impact in a positive manner.

Do you see new kinds of professional opportunities or jobs coming up in the retail sector in the post Covid era? What would these be?

There is huge scope for part-time work for women. On one side, people will be looking at productivity and on the other, work from home has become a trend. So I see a lot of women getting opportunities, which they were otherwise missing out on due to various reasons. So to me 2021 should be the year of women's empowerment in retail.

Will staff/retail employee training become even more critical in this industry moving forward? What exactly should retailers focus on in this aspect?

Yes, absolutely. So that is why through our TRRAIN Circle App, we are doing a lot of skilling programmes. We are also facilitating retailers with their skilling programmes.

N. Jayalakshmi

Why virtue is the new cool!

Among other things, the pandemic of 2020 has necessitated the need to align businesses with values such as transparency and social responsibility. Brands that genuinely champion causes are likely to resonate better with the socially aware millennial consumers of today.

Ian Johnston, Founder and Creative Director at Quinine, a world-leading retail experience consultancy known for its research-driven user-centric design approach, explains why virtuous brands have an edge today, and how retail space and experience can best reflect a brand's values and virtues.



Ian Johnston, Founder & Creative Director, Quinine

Priorities of the modern consumer have shifted to make kindness and empathy the key to sustained market growth and consumer trust and loyalty. The Millennial generation is the largest in

history and has unprecedented buying power. This younger consumer group has a different set of values than the generations before them; they want a job that they are passionate about and they view their consumer

choices as a mechanism to support movements and make change. Their concept of identity is intertwined with consumerism, where buying products and supporting brands is a form of self-affirmation.

As brands try to capture the attention of consumers, there has been a shift from brands seeking engagement, to having to earn public approval. Making quality products or supplying quality services is no longer enough, brands need to benefit society. Successful brands of the future must be virtuous. And the most successful retail brands will have virtuous store experiences.

What do we mean by virtuous?

Virtuous is conforming to moral and ethical principles. Virtuous brands do good things because it is an extension of their brand DNA. There is no playbook for what is considered virtuous. Truly virtuous brands act because they feel it is the right thing to do, irrespective of judgements or profits.

Why do we need virtuous brands?

We need brands to be virtuous because brands have power and wield influence. Today, brands are replacing politics and religion as moral pillars

that we trust and seek guidance from. Global brands can wield their power to make large scale change. Brands have the ability to take a stance, but they also tell stories and engage us in the process.

Example: British supermarket chain Morrisons started an initiative to provide a shopping environment for neurodivergent customers that has since been followed by other retailers such as B&Q. Once a week Morrisons 'Quieter Hour' provides an altered store experience that is more comfortable for autistic shoppers. Environmental stimulants that would otherwise be off-putting for autistic customers are removed; lights are dimmed, check-out sounds are turned off and store speaker announcements do not take place, providing an altered store experience that is more considerate of this consumer group. This was an initiative that Morrisons had no legal obligation to make, yet they chose to make a positive contribution to people disadvantaged in their community.

Virtuous brands establish a connection with the community

What's good for the community is good for the individual, and equally what is good for the individual is often good for the greater society. This is what makes the public lend their trust to virtuous brands. They follow them and believe in them.

Example: Starbucks Community Stores aim to open in underprivileged neighbourhoods to play a positive role in the community. The stores support local economic development and provide employment and training for local youth, they hire local contractors, and provide unique in-store training events and programmes. With 17 Community Stores opening since 2015, Starbucks is committed to opening a total of 100 'community stores' by 2025.

Virtuous brands take a stand, despite the risk

Being virtuous allows a brand to stay present and evolve with society throughout time. Virtuous brands evolve with public movements and remain contemporary.

Example: Nike has a history of supporting social issues ahead of other brands. Their support of American



Burberry Shenzhen demonstrates the exciting potential for 'gamification' in retail, where technology is both functional and playful. Images courtesy of Burberry



Starbucks Community Stores are an initiative to provide employment, education and social programmes to underprivileged neighbourhoods

civil rights activist, Colin Kaepernick was consistent with the brand DNA rather than a reactive moment. In 1988 the 'Just Do It' campaign fought against ageism. In 1995 the 'If you let me play' ad supported gender equality in sport, the same year their 'Just Do It' ad featured openly HIV-positive runner Ric Munoz. In 2007 they featured a disabled athlete Matt Scott in a 'No excuses' ad campaign to support disabled sport. In 2017 they celebrated Arab women in sport with their 'What will they say about you' campaign, and in the last couple of years we have seen 'plus size' female mannequins and mannequins with prosthetic limbs included in their stores.

Virtuous brands take accountability

This often means engaging with consumers and taking ownership, admitting faults and striving to improve. This is an inevitable part of growth and evolution.

Example: Starbucks showed internal accountability in their response to an incidence of racial prejudice in a Philadelphia store. After they admitted fault, all stores closed early while 180,000 staff were admitted into racial bias training. What started off as a negative brand association became a brand that takes its responsibility to serve the community very seriously.

Standards for responsibility & commitment

It is particularly promising to see businesses turn to external sources that hold them to independent standards and value their commitment to others. B Lab is a non-profit organisation that provides 'B Corporation' certification to for-profit businesses. Any certified 'B Corp', as they are known, is valued by their positive social and environmental impact, receiving a score across multiple dimensions that assess the business governance, the impact and treatment of workers, and the impact on the community and environment.

B Corps, such as retail businesses Allbirds, Patagonia, Ecoalf, Veja and Toms (to name but a few), voluntarily submit to a transparent impact assessment that can be viewed on the B Corporation website. These businesses accept the responsibility they have as global businesses and hold themselves accountable for their own performances and practices.

Why does it matter? What are the results?

There are many ways to gain the trust of consumers. Some brands offer quality or consistency, yet virtuous brands offer an authentic desire to do good. This can be a precarious strategy to win trust, however the rewards for philanthropic brands are becoming obvious as more brands engage in socially conscious behaviours. Brands with a clear sense of purpose have increased their brand valuation by 175% over a 12 year period. Nike has seen sales and market share grow after each socially conscious campaign. Their endorsement of Colin Kaepernick saw online sales rise 31% in the 2 days following, while company shares rose 33% that year. Starbucks have continued to grow globally as they prioritise local communities and social causes. The company opened over 30,000 new stores in 2019 and finished the year with an all-time high figure of net sales. The biggest benefit to being a virtuous brand is the deep level of connection with consumers. This turns periodic sales into loyal customers. A 5% increase in customer retention can lead to a 25-95% increase in profit.

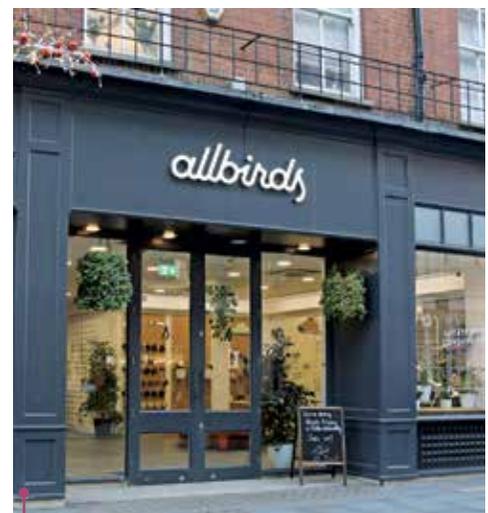
Is your retail environment the best place to show your virtues?



Nike's endorsement of Colin Kaepernick after his refusal to stand during the national anthem was another moment in the brands consistent support of movements for social change



After a public incident where customers were subjected to racial prejudice by Starbucks store staff, the company closed all stores to send staff members to racial bias training.



Several B Corp certified retail businesses hold themselves accountable to external standards, making a commitment to positively impact the community and environment

The growing number of virtuous brands is certainly encouraging to see, but we can't help but think there is a missed opportunity within retail design.

Virtuous brands are primarily communicating to customers via ad campaigns, but social causes are not being communicated inside retail stores effectively. This means that brands aren't using their most effective and engaging communication tool; their most effective medium to translate an idea and make an impactful impression. The multi-sensory nature of store experiences creates the ability evoke more emotion, but also create a lasting memory.

With the famous proverb in mind "Tell me and I'll forget, show me and I'll remember, involve me and I'll understand" retailers need to use

interaction and active participation in their stores, as they are the most powerful ways to understand something.

If brands use social causes to connect to customers and communities, and retail stores are the ultimate point of customer connection, it makes sense for social causes to feature heavily in physical retail, the domain of communal places for social experiences. This is the new challenge for virtuous brands and the next logical step for experiential retail in a socially conscious society.



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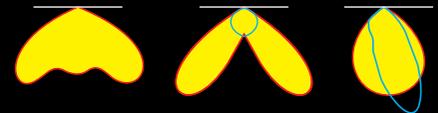
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