(Don’t) Mind the Gap Between Research and Practice in Retail Design

Katelijn Quartier
Hasselt University, Belgium

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Due to the knowledge validated by scientific research and managerial practice not being fully aligned, there is an already long-existing gap between research and practice within the retail design discipline. They both tend to live in their own world and have their own world view, which makes the connection difficult. To this end, the challenge is taken up to make scholarly research in the discipline of retailing and retail design accessible as a ‘ready to use concept’ for practitioners, designers, marketers and retailers to improve customer store experience. A lack of the latter forms a fundamental problem in Belgium’s small and medium-sized enterprises (SME’s) who no longer are living up to today’s customer expectations.

To reach out and help the practitioners, three different tools have been developed: design guidelines, store design tools, and educative case-studies. Firstly, the task has been to come up with design guidelines that on the one hand help retail designers make more knowledgeable decisions towards experiential stores, and on the other hand help retailers and marketeers in the decision process towards experiential stores. Scholarly databases have thus been searched for literature in retail design related topics. The result is a collection of 330 papers which have been read, summarized, classified and translated into design guidelines per retail design aspect (e.g. scent, touch, routing, etc.) and the overall experience.

The second tool, being store design tools, have been developed in cooperation with practitioners: two work-shops being organized, one with retailers and one with designers, to understand the pains of both groups in the process of developing new experiential stores. This resulted in a bleu-print of a first set of tools: an experience-matrix, a design check-list, and a store audit-tool. Based on the theoretical insights from the literature, and combined with practical experience, we the blue prints were developed into ready-to-use tools.

Thirdly, the educative case studies were also a point of interest during the work-shop discussions. The retailers asked for in-depth case studies which would enable them to learn from best practices. To this end, case-studies have been developed that show two different sides: the story of the retailer with the how and why of the store concept and design, and the story of the expert (academics) with the positive and negative aspects of the store, based on the scientific insights gained from literature. The result is a layered discussion of a store which has both practical and theoretical insights.

To communicate these tools and to make them available for all stakeholders in the retail design process, a user-friendly and interactive website has been developed (launched in February 2017). This paper will elaborate on the methods used (literature, work-shop, development tools) to close the gape between research and practice.