

# LD+A

LIGHTING DESIGN and APPLICATION

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Can  
Retail  
Keep The  
Lights On?

# RETAIL RESET

Five lighting designers reflect on the next act for brick-and-mortar retail

By Michele Zimmerman



Even before COVID-19 had “curb-side-pickup” on everyone’s lips, the future of traditional American retail was coming into question.

E-commerce was changing the way people shopped for goods ranging from apparel and consumer technology to household items and pet-care supplies.

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, online shopping accounted for roughly 5% of total sales in the first quarter of 2012; this trend increased steadily over the years as technology expanded and the convenience of home delivery caught on. Unsurprisingly, the earliest stage of the pandemic pushed first-quarter e-commerce sales in 2020 up to a whopping 16%—a 5% increase from the previous year’s first quarter—while thousands of brick-and-mortar stores across the country closed their doors. In the summer of 2020, anchor department store chains such as J.C. Penny and Neiman Marcus experienced closures or filed for bankruptcy protection. Meanwhile, changing times were reflected in changing numbers; the Department of Commerce reported that the U.S. registered \$214.6 billion in online shopping in 2021’s third quarter.

Obstacles like lingering safety concerns, supply chain delays and inflation are only some of the factors retail is battling against, begging the question: *what can retail do to keep the lights on?* Which sellers can survive a retail reset, and how do deviations from standard shopping centers influence the lighting community? Five industry experts talk shop on retail lighting design in 2022 and beyond.



**Shawn Good** is director at Windward Lighting Studio and a practitioner instructor in the Architectural Engineering Department at Pennsylvania State University.



**James Highgate** is chairperson of the IES Retail Lighting Committee, a lighting designer, and creator of “The LED Show” conference and trade show.



**Archit Jain** is a founding partner at Oculus Light Studio and a recipient of multiple lighting design awards.



**Amy Laughead-Riese** is president and principal at 37 Volts Light Studio. She has directed the lighting design for Macy’s Inc. and has served as the chairperson for the IES Retail Lighting Committee.



**Sean O’Connor** is principal at Sean O’Connor Lighting and has been a featured speaker at the Philips Retail Lighting Leadership Forum.

**How would you describe the current state of the retail lighting design market?**

**LAUGHEAD-RIESE:** There is a rebound under way. Clients who had paused their new prototype strategies in 2020 and 2021 with the unknowns of the pandemic, now in 2022 are dusting off those designs and moving forward. We’re assisting clients with more bespoke solutions—tailoring lighting design and luminaire specifications to specific brand strategies and a more curated customer journey.

**GOOD:** Humans are social, emotional, visual, tactile creatures; online shopping cannot completely replace the in-person retail experience. The in-person experience is adapting rapidly to accommodate a wide variety of shopping styles, and the lighting systems must change to create enhanced brand experiences.

**JAIN:** New retail stores are being designed and retailers are expecting shoppers to return in-store in substantial numbers, especially for non-commodity goods and experiential services.

We are designing large and small stores including prototypes and roll-out stores for electric-car companies, jewelers, pet-care companies, salons, grocers, outdoor-gear companies, apparel and footwear. The focus is in creating lighting that not only is functional, but speaks to the overall identity of the space.

**O’CONNOR:** Retail is such a huge category that it is hard to provide a simple answer. Generally speaking there are fewer retail projects happening since the beginning of the pandemic. It will be interesting to see if shoppers will continue to embrace convenience, or if the emotional experience of well-designed environments will get people out of their homes.

**Do you envision a different type of in-person retail experience in the coming years? If so, how will lighting design help enhance this experience for employees and consumers?**

**GOOD:** We are seeing regional shopping centers adapting toward mixed-use destinations, where people are drawn in by restaurants, fitness

centers, theaters, hotels, open-exterior spaces and other amenities intermixed with retail. Lighting becomes integral to creating an atmosphere—drawing visitors in and encouraging them to explore. Lighting for the individual retailers must be coordinated to be part of a larger experience within the context of the mixed-use development.

**JAIN:** Many stores are using a hybrid model with online shopping and in-store pickup. Special areas are being designed within the stores for this service with the [goal] to entice customers to look at other items while they are [inside]. In an apparel store we worked on, only one piece of each type of clothing is on the floor—if guests like it, they can request their size and color preferences on a mobile device and it will be made available for them in the fitting room. Retailers are exploring alternate shopping models because people are comfortable interacting with technology. Also, all stores are catering to “Instagrammable” moments.



## The large scale indoor mall that I grew up with—and was the great aggregator of stuff—is gone and hard to reinvent

-O'Connor

The architectural design includes areas that look great on camera, so the lighting needs to be soft for camera use, too.

**LAUGHEAD-RIESE:** The in-person experience will continue to evolve post-pandemic. We're working with clients to personalize lighting experiences for the customer. Two examples include incorporating more tunable-white light: a luxury department store retailer is designing larger, ultra-private fitting rooms using tunable-white and dimming controls to personalize the try-on experience; and a jewelry retailer will be incorporating tunable-white light into perimeter fixture displays to dial-in the best color of white to enhance various gemstone displays. We're seeing retail clients embrace lighting controls technology where as before, these strategies may have been dismissed due to cost or complications.

## Does the traditional mall still have a future?

**HIGHGATE:** Probably—it is still a people-place, and when things return to some sense of normalcy, the town centers will rebound [to some degree].

**O'CONNOR:** There are some really successful malls out there, but they have become the exception to the rule. The large scale, identity-free indoor mall that I grew up with—and was the great aggregator of stuff—is gone and very hard to reinvent. Street stores, lifestyle centers and outdoor shopping destinations will lead the charge into the future. Today's clientele wants to believe in something real and authentic—with a voice that relates to their own values.

**LAUGHEAD-RIESE:** Some traditional malls are still doing quite well. However, we're currently seeing shuttered malls or economically depressed strip centers being completely redeveloped. Developers

are converting old sites into mixed-use properties: combining co-work spaces with retail and hospitality, as well as on-site condo and apartment living. The customer base is being built directly into the properties. Good design is at the forefront to attract the customer who wants to live, work and play.

## Is there a particular subset within the retail niche (i.e. big-box stores, high-end/specialty boutiques, pop-up retail, etc.) that represents a growth opportunity for the lighting industry?

**O'CONNOR:** I would define growth in this context as “new” vs. “more.” For “new” growth I would be looking at the high-end/specialty retailers and for “more” I would be looking at grocery and other everyday basics for refreshed expansions.



**Stores are catering to ‘Instagrammable’ moments. The architectural design includes areas that look great on camera, so the lighting needs to be soft for camera use, too**  
-Jain

**HIGHGATE:** High-end/specialty and clothing stores have a tactile element to the shopping experience. Some things just can’t be replicated online (i.e. perfume, shoe comfort, pet stores, etc.).

**LAUGHEAD-RIESE:** There are department stores and big-box stores who were early adopters of LED lighting between 2008 and 2013. The products installed in the so-called “early years” of wide-spread LED lamps and luminaire-use may be getting close to end-of-life. In the last six months we’ve seen one client ask why their “new LED lighting” installed in 2013 isn’t as bright as it used to be—we’re currently working with them on new replacements or retrofit solutions.

**JAIN:** All stores need lighting; with image and identity becoming more important, we see lighting opportunities in all areas. It helps us when the manufacturers come out with products that are geared towards retail. This might include track that can be suspended without a secondary support system; trackheads where the beams offer wide-field angles; aisle lights; multi-heads and recessed fixtures, that are attractive, well-priced and available within a few weeks.

**Germicidal lighting has received a lot of attention in the healthcare and office sectors. Do you see a role for it in retail applications?**

**GOOD:** That’s a great question. I do think there is an opportunity to safely use germicidal lighting in HVAC and upper-air systems in retail applications. With that said, the current cost of install, operation and maintenance is still relatively high, and con-

sumers are not actively asking for it. At this time, I see it for a specialty shop or retail application.

**HIGHGATE:** Yes and no, as 405 nm proliferates in the “disinfectant” market, we will see an uptick in lighting combinations. There needs to be better studies that prove out the 405 nm story. Time “in use” is a key element when discussing [germicidal lighting] effectiveness. The 254 nm has log “kill” rate data to back it up, but it is more cumbersome [than 405 nm] and is sold as a service.

**LAUGHEAD-RIESE:** It may. We’ve not had any traditional retailers specifically ask for it as part of our scope of work, but as more innovative and safer germicidal luminaires begin to come to market, this may be something that can be incorporated in a more seamless approach to overall designs. Specifically, it could be implemented in fitting rooms and restrooms—areas with high-touch surfaces.

**JAIN:** We see germicidal lighting being utilized as part of the HVAC systems. We don’t think that standard light fixtures with germicidal lighting will be standard in retail.

**O’CONNOR:** If it is the right solution, then I am sure there is a place for it. However, our role on a project is visual, functional and financial. Therefore, we are not experts on disinfection techniques or methods. ©