



ALL THAT JAZZ

The diversity of Chicago retail

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- + Retail design: the tech generation



[A Window to the Future]

What's ahead for retail design? The next generation of designers holds the key, along with a whole new set of skills.

By Steve Kaufman, Editor

Above For the 2007 PAVE student design competition, sponsored by Sony Electronics, students were told to create a total Sony "entertainment experience." The winning entries show off the students' computer skills with high-concept graphics.

Kimberly Mui is excited about the future. A visual merchandising student at the Laboratory Institute of Merchandising (LIM) in New York, Mui is in the midst of a five-month internship at Bulgari USA's corporate offices. The senior, who will graduate in May, has been learning the retail business – especially how visual merchandising and other design disciplines support the retailers' objectives.

"It has been eye-opening and encouraging," says Mui, (who has also had internships with Bottega Veneta, fashion accessories) and Fishes Eddy (tabletop) in New York and the House of Fraser department store in London, "to see the artistry – how we create the feelings that drive the shoppers' buying decisions."

COURTESY OF THE PLANNING AND VISUAL EDUCATION COMMITTEE (PAVE), HOLLYWOOD, FLA.

THE NEXT GENERATION



Above Visual merchandising will never stop being about props and materials. LIM students Hitomi Yamawaki (left) and Kimberly Mui use coffee beans to dress a bust form. Their efforts will promote the International Retail Design Conference in Seattle.

Right Mui, who's now doing an internship at Bulgari USA, relies on the retail designer's two tools of the future – a good computer graphics program and a strong cup of coffee.

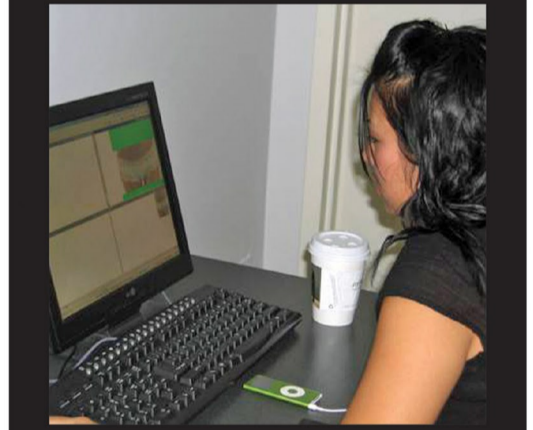
But as much as she admires the artistry, she feels her generation's big contribution to the profession will be technological. "We grew up comfortable with the computer," she says. "At some of my internships, the visual managers were not as familiar with the production programs, like Photoshop, Illustrator and Quark. They turned to me to mock up the ideas they were presenting to vendors, merchandisers and other executives."

Mui is hoping her skills will someday place her among the industry's next rising stars. The current reigning one is Victor Johnson, director of visual merchandising at Ann Taylor Stores and Ann Taylor Loft. He was recently named Rising Star of 2007 by The Planning and Visual Education Partnership (PAVE), an organization devoted to developing design and visual talent. Johnson acknowledges that the increasingly promotional aspect of apparel retailing – particularly the use of graphics – is changing visual merchandising. And he agrees with Mui that the critical new skill is computer graphics and drafting, skills Johnson admits he didn't have when he got into the

profession, after an education in interior design. By contrast, his staff has graphics training in abundance. And that's what he looks for in filling new positions. "I spent six months interning for my assistant designer," he says. "I needed a person who could do the computer work and help with the windows. It was difficult to find a person with both proficiencies." He ended up hiring someone with the computer skills. "I decided it's easier to train someone to do a vinyl rub-down than to teach Adobe Illustrator."

They can be compatible skills, too. One assistant's sole job had been to create "store sets" (the company's term for planograms) on the computer, "until I needed her help with a window installation. She was able to look at the window as a computer screen in three dimensions."

"I think that's the biggest change for young people getting into this field," says Eric Feigenbaum, a founding member of PAVE and vp and chairman of the education committee. "They need computer literacy for styling, drafting, rendering, logo design, typography. When I was at WalkerGroup more than 10 years ago, there were 50 drawing tables scattered around the studio. Today, they're all computer stations."



COURTESY OF THE LABORATORY INSTITUTE OF MERCHANDISING (LIM), NEW YORK



"Students come to us wanting to express their art with their hands. This profession gives them a chance to put their creativity and knowledge to work, to make stores come to life." – LYN TOBMAN, FIDM/THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF DESIGN & MERCHANDISING

THE NEXT GENERATION



Above Students from New York's Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) competed in Branding the Runway at the 2006 StoreXpo, a contest to create the best mannequin design using a brand's packaging, logo and colors.

Right A Wonder Woman in IKEA blue and gold was one of the winning entries at the Javits Center. Other mannequins sported tea bags and hair extension skirts.

Today's best curriculae also have internship programs for students. Mui got her opportunities through LIM. FIDM – with California campuses in Los Angeles, Irvine, San Francisco and San Diego – has helped students find part-time jobs, internships and real jobs with the likes of Nordstrom, Coach, Gucci, Forever 21 and Saks Fifth Ave. "There are paid summer internships and unpaid academic credit internships throughout the year," says Cindy Patino, FIDM's assistant department chair, visual communications, and advisor in the school's career development center. "They learn the business of retail in the store."

They also learn it in the classroom. LIM calls itself "the college for the business of fashion." "At LIM, every student, regardless of major, takes Introduction to Visual Merchandising," Feigenbaum says. "We want them to understand how visual is part of marketing and branding, how it helps a retailer define its message."



"Today's young visual merchandisers need to stay literate in computer technology. But I still encourage them to go to museums, see movies, understand the current culture. That's how they'll communicate with the customer." – ERIC FEIGENBAUM, LABORATORY INSTITUTE OF MERCHANDISING



Edward Sajovic, a recent LIM graduate, first completed the two-year display and exhibition design program at FIT. After studying drafting, computer graphics and space-planning – and doing a six-month internship at Bloomingdale's – he went across town to LIM because it offered business classes. "You can be a great artist," he says, "but you'll never go as far as you want if you don't understand the business side – marketing, consumer behavior, shopping habits, sourcing, budgeting, measuring the return on investment."

Sajovic, who won an international reality TV competition on Canada's "Making it Big" in 2006 by creating the best window display for a hypothetical Holt Renfrew fashion campaign, feels visual merchandising has advanced way beyond "art for art's sake." Budgets are leaner, stakes are higher, expectations are greater and retailers need results. "We need to create stores and presentations that make the customer want to stay in our space and be interested in our merchandise," he says. "We're solving problems for her, not simply propping a set piece." ▴

RICHARD CADAN PHOTOGRAPHY, BROOKLYN, N.Y.