

Chapter 11

The Urban Forest and Shopping Environments

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ABSTRACT

Many cities and communities are working toward urban sustainability goals, and the urban forest is one strategy to achieve environmental and social co-benefits. Yet retailers and merchants may not find environmental benefits to be compelling when compared to the direct costs of landscape and trees. Nonetheless, a quality outdoor environment can extend store appeal to the curb and boost positive experiences of visitors while in a shopping district. This chapter presents information about the atmospherics of green retail environments. A multi-study program of research shows that having a quality urban forest canopy within business districts and commercial areas can promote positive shopper perceptions and behavior. Positive responses have included store image, patronage behavior, and willingness to pay more for goods and services. This chapter provides a summary of the research, connects results to various psychological marketing theories, provides evidence-based design recommendations, and suggests future research activity.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing researchers have explored the influence of store environments on shopper activity. Many retailers and merchants use evidence-based strategies to enhance shoppers' experiences. Interior design, product integration and placement, the appearance and behavior of sales associates, and even the choice of background music are implemented and tweaked to influence consumer behavior. Retail establishments from small independent shops to chain department stores work to make the shopping environment alluring, comfortable, and profitable.

Meanwhile, gardeners and philosophers have celebrated the delights of trees and nature for centuries, noting the role of plants in aesthetics, cultural symbolism, and therapy. Recent research confirms the benefits that people gain from nature experiences. Research that spans the globe now reveals that nearby nature experiences can prevent and be therapy for disease, improve mental health, and boost social cohe-

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sion in communities. However, the two research pursuits – investigations of human experiences of retail place and studies of nature settings – have rarely intersected.

City trees provide many environmental benefits such as clean air and water, reduced heat island effects, and reduced energy usage. Yet merchants often do not find such benefits compelling, when compared to the direct costs of streetscape trees. A series of studies explored both business people's attitudes about trees and shopper response to urban forest canopy, thus addressing the more direct interests of retailers (Wolf, 2014). The research results make the case for the importance of business investment in a tree program in order to promote urban sustainability, but more importantly, to enhance the appeal and success of business centers in cities and towns.

This chapter builds the case for the importance of having trees and quality landscapes in retail settings. The first sections address the broader issues of urban sustainability, retail settings, and recent research about urban forest benefits. Psychological theory about people's response to place, retail settings, and nature is provided in a background section. A research program has explored how business district visitors respond to city trees; key findings are summarized. A discussion section is followed by guidelines for urban forest planning in contemporary shopping environments. This presentation of theory and research presents several research opportunities, the focus of the last section in the chapter.

Challenges and Opportunities

Many local governments and communities pursue urban sustainability goals. They seek opportunities to improve air and water quality, and introduce energy efficiency across all land use sectors. Science, technology, and professional best practices have evolved to integrate natural systems and features into the everyday functions of cities and towns. Yet not all property owners are necessarily committed to ecology and landscape development for the sake of sustainability. For instance, shop owners within the retail and commercial districts of cities often lament the dis-services of street trees and vegetation, calling out the costs and annoyances of blocked signs, increased debris, and sidewalk damage. These practical concerns often lead to plans and actions that preclude plantings, in the belief that open, clear streets provide optimal shopping environments.

The basis of consumer behavior has changed in recent decades. While the retailer-consumer relationship still involves rational economic transactions, it also includes a variety of non-economic interactions. Shopping is much more than an activity of necessity, and now has leisure and entertainment components. Yet, the elements of the retail environment that attract customers and encourage them to purchase goods and services are not fully understood. Behavioral economics and neuromarketing are emerging fields of study that pursue better understanding of economic and retail behavior.

Facing competition from online and big box competitors, many merchants in local and neighborhood shopping districts give greater attention to customer service and the quality of experience in their shop. Curiously, in many instances the attention to retail experience and place does not extend beyond the front door. On approach a customer encounters blank walls, barren sidewalks, and large paved areas devoted to parking. The appealing retail experience that is carefully cultivated within the store is often absent at the curb and other outdoor areas of the business district or site.

Central business districts are often the retail and civic centers of urban neighborhoods and smaller cities. As business associations implement district improvements and strategies to attract and retain shoppers, some retailers may overlook the importance of a quality streetscape on visitors' encounters with a business district. The direct costs of an urban forest improvement program can be readily tallied;

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