

An aerial photograph of a vast green field, possibly a park or a large lawn. The field is filled with numerous small figures of people engaged in various activities: some are sitting on a bench, others are walking, some are playing with a dog, and one person is riding a bicycle. The field is divided into sections by subtle ridges and grooves, giving it a textured appearance. The overall color is a vibrant green.

IA

RETAIL FUTURES

2026 Outlook

HumanX by IA Retail

FOREWORD

Even in a world long defined by change, the past few years have felt dizzying in their intensity. Global shifts—from policy to climate to rising costs—have reshaped not just economies but also how people see themselves and their place in the world.

In 2026, the focus moves from merely adapting to actively reassessing how we work, play, consume, connect, and show up. This offers brands and retailers the opportunity to meet consumers where they are headed.

Our research identifies three defining consumer lenses and their retail design implications for 2026:

01

THE HUMANITY PREMIUM



02

THE CONVENIENCE PARADOX



03

THE RISE OF THE FOURTH SPACE



THE HUMANITY PREMIUM



AI is advancing at a pace that is pulling into question the worth of human output and creation, forcing a new value system to emerge that is rooted in the human.

In 2026, emotion, meaning, relationships and presence will emerge as the currency technology cannot replicate.

SECTION 01

CONSUMER SIGNALS

Surrounded by relentless digital feeds, constant notifications, and AI-mediated experiences, 2026 will see consumers seeking rituals that re-anchor presence and reaffirm their humanity.

This recalibration isn't (only) nostalgic, it's a deliberate revaluing of what feels deeply, authentically human.



72%

of consumers seek analogue rituals that anchor them to the present moment, and are looking for brands to help *(TrendWatching, 2025).*



47%

of 16-21 year olds say they want to go back to a time pre-internet *(BSI, 2025).*

CONSUMER SIGNAL EVOLUTION

This shift in consumer mindset marks a break from the aura of optimism that once surrounded technological innovation. What was once celebrated for its promise to improve daily life is now associated with fatigue, overexposure, and disconnection, the mood that has defined the “burnout era” of the past three years.

QUANTIFIED SELF



2010 - 2016

Productivity apps, trackers, and life-hacking become mainstream.

DIGITAL EVERYTHING



2017 - 2021

Rapid digital adoption and integration of hybrid working spikes during COVID.

BURNOUT ERA



2022 - 2025

Digital fatigue spikes, unplugging and focus on personal wellness start taking hold.

THE HUMANITY PREMIUM



2026 +

Consumers crave return to human values and differentiators in age of AI evolution.

LIVING EXAMPLE

TECOVAS SOHO

Retailers are re-centering design around the human experience. IA's design for Tecovas' SoHo flagship embodies this shift, creating a space grounded in human presence as a place of resonance and sanctuary. Authentic touchpoints and live cultural activations add depth and meaning, redefining value through genuine human connection.

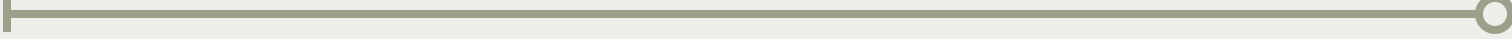
Retail Design & Experience Signals

- Sensory Depth
- Tactile Interfaces
- Immersive Experiences



OUR TAKE: 2026 RETAIL DESIGN DRIVERS

Texture  Tactility and imperfection as markers of humanity.

Resonance  Spaces that stir emotion and linger.

Community  Retail as a catalyst for belonging.

Vitality  Energy that feels alive, messy, human.

Sanctuary  Refuge from digital fatigue, spaces to restore.

OUR TAKE: 2026 RETAIL DESIGN EXPLORATION



Texture

- tactile walls
- flooring
- tangible displays
- unfinished wood
- woven screens
- handwoven textiles
- hammered metals
- imperfect handmade finishes



Resonance

- centrality
- “anchor” space
- ceremonial moments
- round atrium
- storytelling corners
- quiet chambers



Community

- communal tables
- tiered seating
- long slab tables



Vitality

- asymmetrical layouts
- spontaneous furniture seating clusters
- overgrown greenery
- bright ceramics
- colorful textiles
- lush plants
- kinetic installations
- air movement



Sanctuary

- skylights
- light wells
- layered warmth
- glare reduction
- acoustic control
- natural scent

THE CONVENIENCE PARADOX



Convenience culture has conditioned us to crave ease and efficiency, yet paradoxically, it leaves us stuck and unsatisfied. Routes are mapped, reviews pre-read, and desires predicted before they even surface. With agentic AI, autopilot will only deepen, research already shows declining neural activity as creativity is outsourced.

SECTION 02

CONSUMER SIGNALS

Shedding the confines of passivity, consumers are showing a growing appetite for novelty and thrill, fueling the boom in “controlled risk” consumption.

From blind-box sales like Labubu figurines to resale markets built on drops and scarcity, the allure lies in unpredictability. Consumers may no longer trust themselves to create surprise, but in 2026, they’ll look to brands to break their routines.



62%

say playful discovery is their biggest reason to visit retail spaces (HumanX, 2025).



32%

increase in the re-sale market predicted to grow to \$116 billion by 2035 (Future Market Insights, 2025).

CONSUMER SIGNAL EVOLUTION

This shift in mindset reflects a decade-long build-up of fatigue from convenience culture, leaving many consumers feeling passive and stuck on autopilot.

As 2026 unfolds, a growing appetite for surprise, challenge, and productive friction will take hold, offering moments that disrupt routine and reignite inspiration.

EFFICIENCY ERA



2015 - 2020

Tech and retail innovations promise speed, ease, and comfort, optimizing daily life at every turn.

SEAMLESS ECOSYSTEMS



2021 - 2024

Mobile, delivery, and subscription ecosystems eliminate friction, with convenience becoming the default expectation.

AUTOPILOT TRAP



2025

Challenging the idea of being only a passive consumer, people begin to feel numb and disconnected.

THE CONVENIENCE PARADOX



2026 +

Surprise, challenge, and intentional slowness emerge as premium. Brands that break routines offer consumers awakening and vitality.

LIVING EXAMPLE

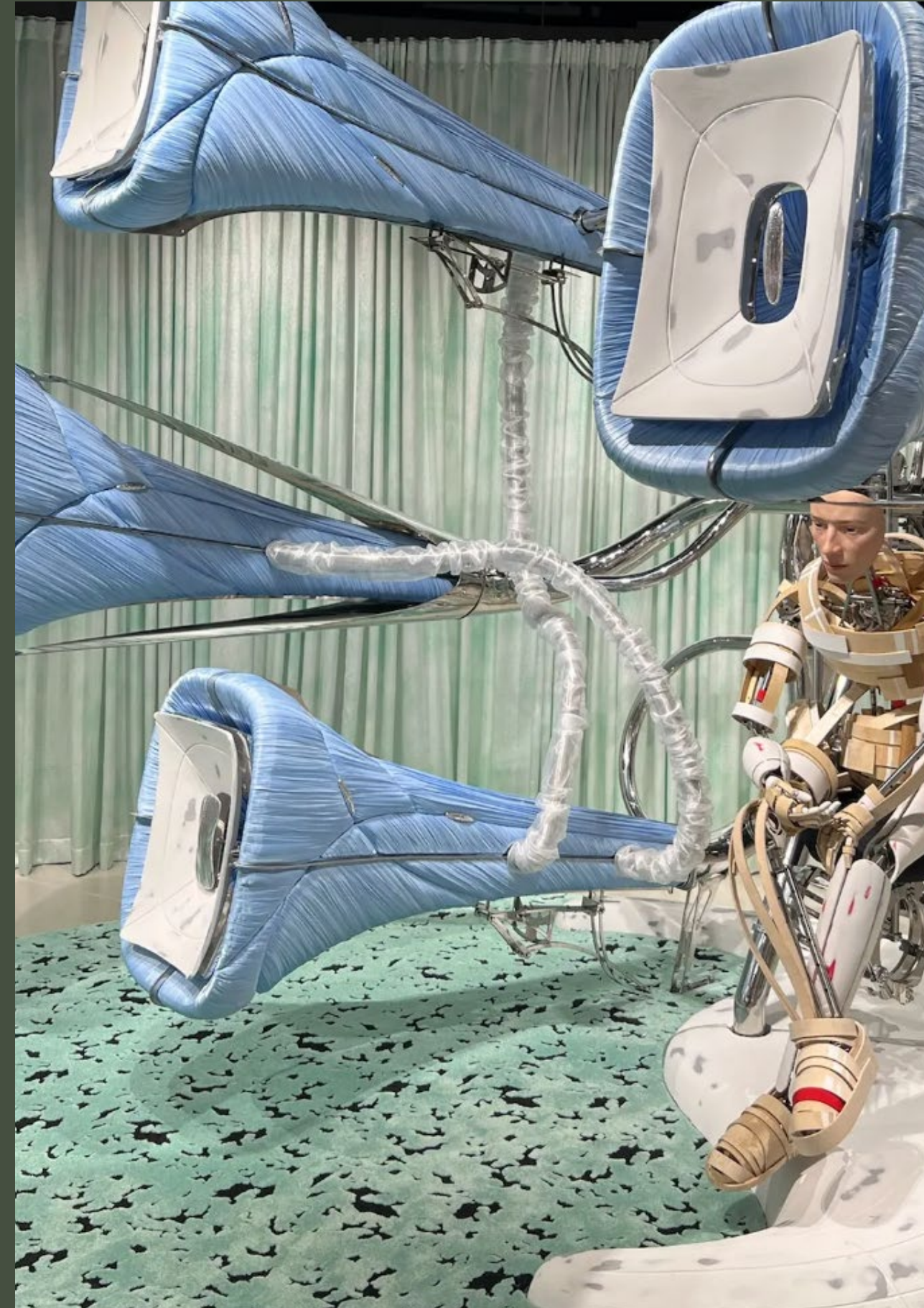
GENTLE MONSTER

Retailers are responding by reintroducing discovery. Gentle Monster's 2025 activation challenges the passive rhythms of everyday consumption, pulling visitors out of routine and into moments of surprise.

Retail becomes theater: shifting layouts, kinetic sculptures, and surreal installations disrupt the linear path to purchase.

Retail Design & Experience Signals

- Friction as luxury
- Surprise as engagement
- Store as a stage



OUR TAKE: 2026 RETAIL DESIGN DRIVERS



OUR TAKE: 2026 RETAIL DESIGN EXPLORATION



Friction as a Feature

- raised floor transitions
- subtle slowing of pacing
- slightly elevated elements
- recessed niches
- lean-in or reach access
- hand-activated interactions
- weighted doors
- angled partitions



Unscripted

- non-linear aisles
- shifting sightlines
- flexible furniture
- rolling seating
- movable shelving
- clustered lighting



Controlled Chaos

- layered materials
- velvet against steel
- stone with neon
- wood over resin
- greenery with glass



The Unknown

- unmarked doors
- covered product statement plinths
- mystery packaging



Agency Design

- dual circulation paths
- exploration loops
- interactive checkouts
- adjustable lighting
- adjustable furniture

THE RISE OF THE FOURTH SPACE



Through commercialization, the very concept of community has been stretched thin, signaling extraction more than belonging.

Demand is shifting toward brands that create fourth spaces, places where people don't just gather but co-create and shape what unfolds. By 2026, belonging will hinge less on invitation and more on agency once inside.

SECTION 03

CONSUMER SIGNALS

As third spaces erode, the pressure to consume and to consume quickly has only intensified, leaving little room for genuine pause or connection (as explored in our 2025 report *Designing for a Disconnected World*).

Now, consumers are beginning to search for new anchors of belonging beyond home and work, spaces to unfold and unwind without consumption as the entry price.



95%

believe public spaces don't meet community needs (Planetizen, 2025).



90%

of people now have three extra free hours a week vs. 2019, but ~90% of that time is now spent solo (McKinsey, 2025).

CONSUMER SIGNAL EVOLUTION

This shift in consumer mindset has been evolving over the past decade, with COVID accelerating the craving for new forms of in-person rituals.

As a result, more consumers are now seeking spaces where they can find their niche, pointing toward new forms of belonging that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of home, work, and leisure.

BRANDED CONSUMPTION



2015 - 2019

Third spaces like cafés and malls became optimized for transactions and social media moments, leaving little room for genuine connection.

LOCKDOWN FATIGUE



2020 - 2022

Lockdowns erase access to third spaces, intensifying cravings for in-person rituals and collective experiences.

THE RISE OF THE FOURTH SPACE



2026 +

Need for brand and retail activations acting as fourth spaces intensifies.

NICHE COMMUNITIES



2023 - 2025

Face-to-face connection emerges as a new status symbol, with people looking to form new rituals of interaction.

THE RISE OF THE FOURTH SPACE

LIVING EXAMPLE

TELFAR NYC

Telfar's 2025 NYC flagship redefines retail by fusing community, culture, and commerce in a 10,000-square-foot SoHo hub. The space features rotating live streams of shoppers and Telfar TV, along with communal seating that invites anyone to linger, not just purchase.

Retail Design & Experience Signals

- Retail as a cultural hub
- Organic community interactions
- Continuous local activations



OUR TAKE: 2026 RETAIL EXPERIENCE DRIVERS

Casual Collisions Unplanned encounters and light-touch connection.

Blended Boundaries Dissolving categories of work, play, shop, and wellness into fluid daily rhythms.

Curated Commitment Lightweight participation options that feel meaningful without long-term obligation.

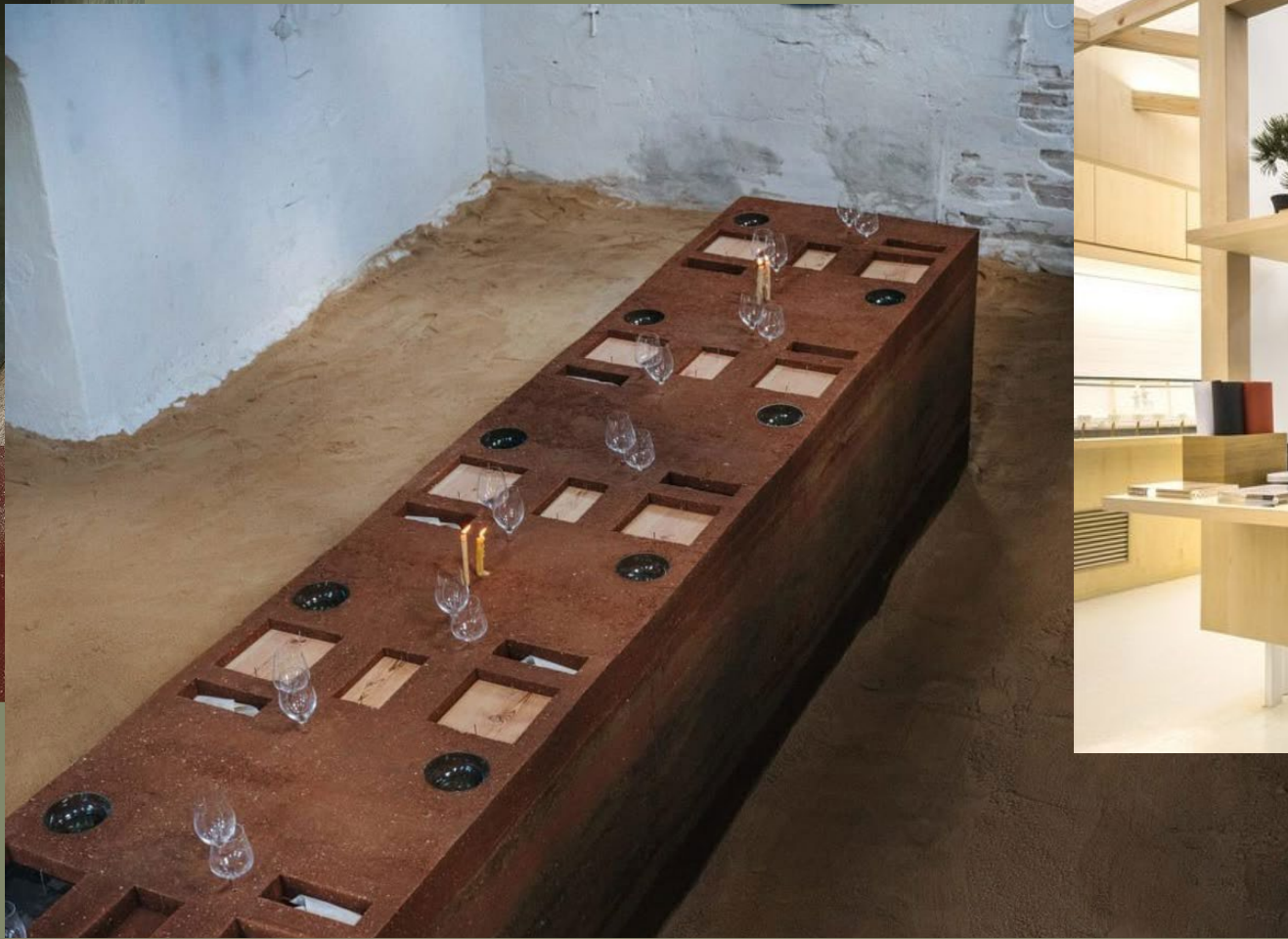
Participatory Design Spaces for rituals, workshops, and collective engagement.

Anchors of Belonging United practices to encourage connection not just to the brand, but between consumers.

OUR TAKE: 2026 RETAIL DESIGN EXPLORATION



Casual Collisions
unplanned encounters
light touch connection
paths of intersection
overlapping zones
transitional spaces
perch furniture
textured transitions
pools of soft light



Blended Boundaries
flexible partitions
hybrid furniture
layered finishes
shift mood lighting



Curated Commitment
lightweight participation
analog stations
drop-in workstations
short stay “stools”
lightweight materials
impermanence



Participatory Design
workshop counters
work in progress displays
raw edges
visibly fastened materials



anchors of Belonging
rituals
collective practices
public-like gatherings
lingering
exchange
heavy grounding finishes

2026 IMPERATIVES



Embrace
imperfection.



Don't fear
friction.



Embody
community.





...and treat human
connection as your
ultimate design signal.

AUTHORS



CARLOTTA DOVE

Director of Consumer Experience
IA Retail

c.dove@interiorarchitects.com



CHLOE JONES

Intermediate Designer
IA Retail

c.jones@interiorarchitects.com



RON SINGLER

Principal, Design Director
IA Retail

r.singler@interiorarchitects.com

An aerial photograph of a vast, green field with visible brushstrokes, suggesting a painting. Several small figures of people are scattered across the landscape, including a person on a bicycle at the top, a person walking a dog, and a group of people sitting on a bench in the top left. The overall scene is surreal and artistic.

IA

RETAIL FUTURES

2026 Outlook

HumanX by IA Retail