

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, with some areas appearing slightly darker or lighter due to the play of light and shadow.

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

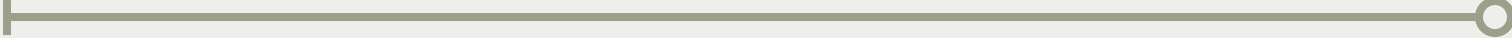


OUR TAKE: 2026 RETAIL DESIGN DRIVERS

**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

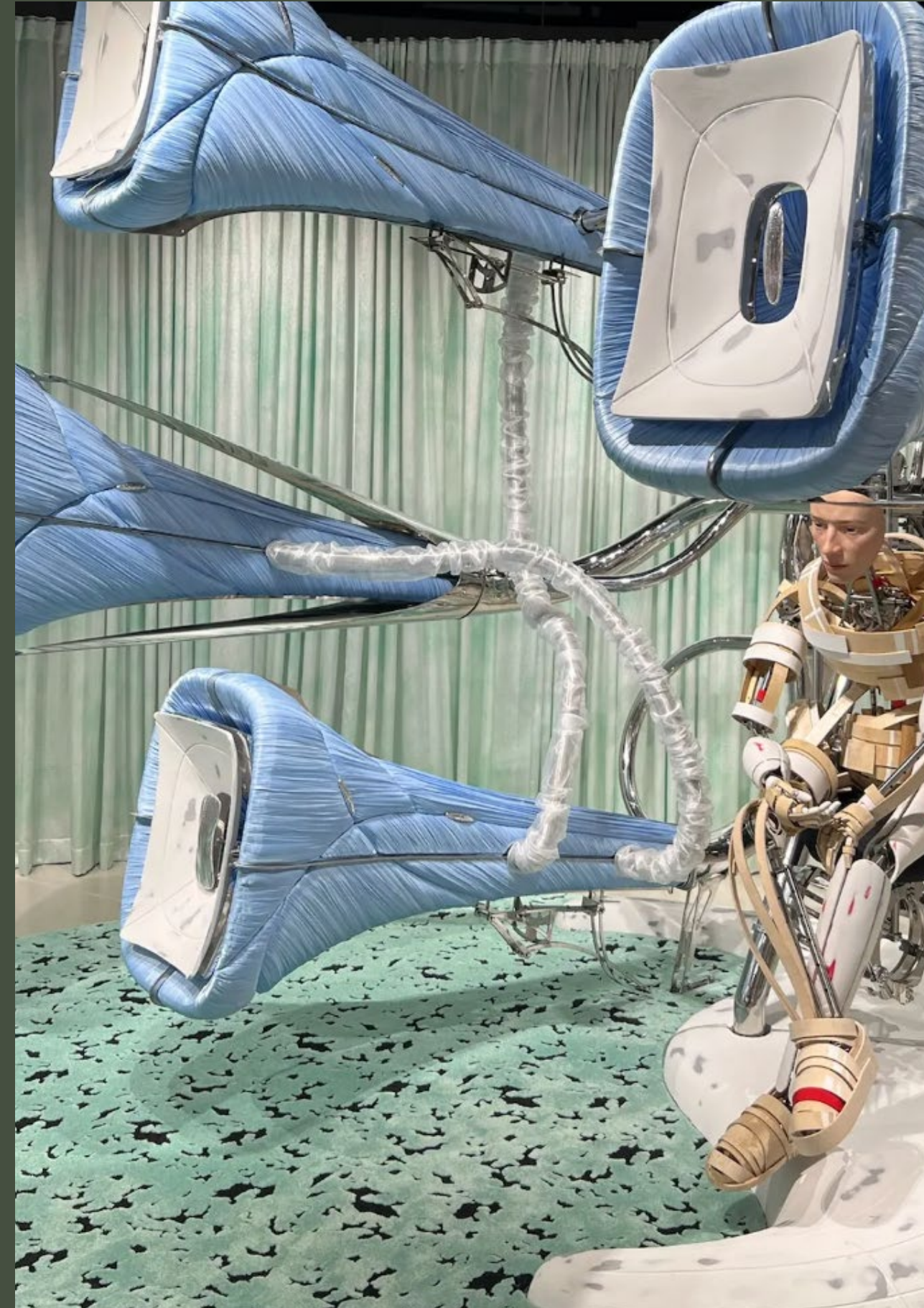
# GENTLE MONSTER

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.

EFFICIENCY ERA



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.

AUTOPILOT TRAP



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



2026 +

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

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.

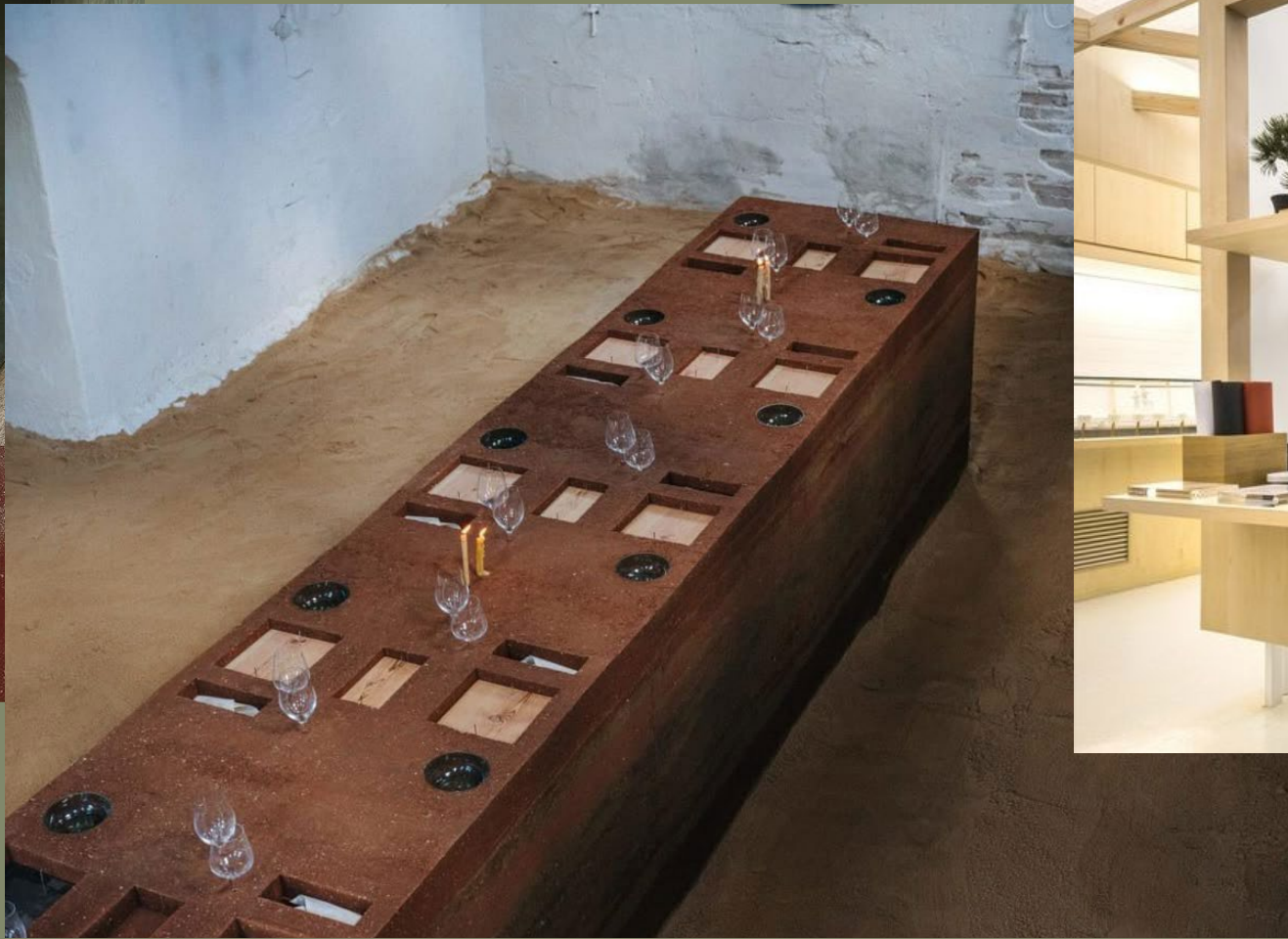
Participatory Design    Spaces for rituals, workshops, and collective engagement.

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.

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