



# Retail as a narrative medium

➤ Can spaces  
create closeness  
through stories?

# ➤ Why retail must change

Physical retail is navigating a crisis that extends far beyond sales figures; it is a crisis of role and relevance in people's lives. In a world dominated by digital efficiency, speed, and algorithmic convenience, the physical space risks obsolescence if it merely duplicates what the online world offers. To survive and thrive, physical retail must offer the one thing the digital realm cannot replicate: presence, relationship, and shared experience.

The data is unequivocal. A large majority of global consumers indicate that experience is now the fundamental driver of purchasing decisions. According to recent insights, approximately 73% of people consider experience a crucial criterion for choosing where to buy. In Italy, this expectation is even more pronounced, with 70% of consumers expecting new, personalized purchasing experiences.

The willingness to invest in these experiences is also rising. Global consumer studies highlight that the willingness to pay a premium for high-quality experiences has increased, moving from 65% in 2024 to 69% in 2025.

This shift is fueling a booming economy. The global experiential retail market is growing rapidly: estimated at approximately 132 billion USD in 2025, it is forecast to expand to 543 billion USD by 2035, with a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of ~15.2%.

In this scenario, retail is called upon to redefine its identity. It is no longer enough to be a point of distribution; the store must become a destination.

Written by

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Aesop. Retail as a local and sensory narrative. The story of the place is translated into materials, atmosphere, and service.

# From point of sale to place of meaning

The contemporary store is no longer just called upon to sell products, but to construct contexts of meaning. The most relevant retail spaces today are not those that offer the most inventory, but those that succeed in creating an experience that is recognizable, coherent, and meaningful over time.

We are witnessing a fundamental paradigm shift:

*From transaction → to relationship:* The value lies not in the exchange of goods, but in the connection established between brand and person.

*From service → to hospitality:* The customer is no longer a user to be processed, but a guest to be welcomed.

*From space → to experience:* The physical environment is not a container, but an activator of emotions

It is in this transition that retail begins to behave like a medium, capable of transmitting values and generating relationships.

## ➤ Retail as a narrative medium

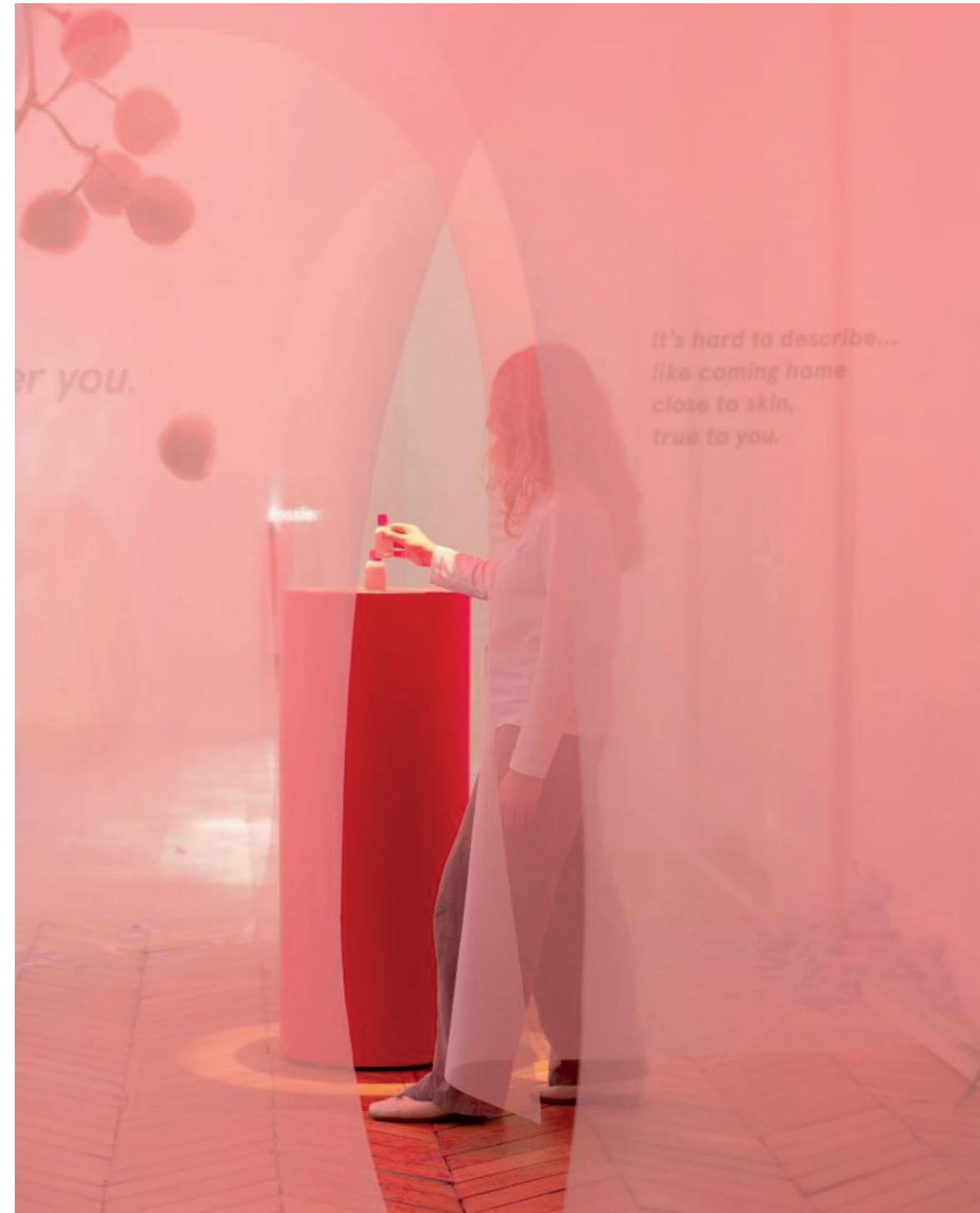
Defining retail as a narrative medium means recognizing the physical space's capacity to tell a vision, transmit values, and generate meaning through lived experiences. It is not about simply “communicating” a story, but about creating the conditions for people to live that story.

This distinction is critical:

*Storytelling is communication:*  
telling a story to an audience.

*Story-living is experience:*  
inviting the audience to step inside the story and become a protagonist.

When stories are lived rather than just heard, they generate something deeper than attention: they generate closeness.



Glossier “Fleur” Pop-Up. A sensory and poetic journey that uses artificial intelligence to transform visitors’ emotions and movements into personalized poems in real time, celebrating individual identity as the “final ingredient” of the brand’s fragrances.



## How stories generate closeness

Closeness does not arise automatically from physical proximity. It emerges from shared experiences that activate emotion, recognition, and a sense of belonging.

### **Legitimized presence:**

Spaces that allow people to “be” without the pressure to “buy.”

### **Permanence and shared time:**

The luxury of spending time in a space creates a bond.

### **Rituals and continuity:**

Recurring gestures and formats build familiarity.

### **Co-constructed narrative:**

When the user contributes to the story, they own a part of it.

### **Authenticity and vulnerability:**

Spaces that feel human, not sterile stages.

### **Memory:**

Experiences that leave traces, turning space into a collective archive.

Aesop. Retail as a local and sensory narrative. The story of the place is translated into materials, atmosphere, and service.



# What is happening today in retail



Patagonia. Retail as a social and values-driven platform. The store hosts collective stories and shared practices, not just products.

The transformation of the retail landscape is not merely aesthetic; it is structural. The contemporary trends we observe are not just new ways to sell, but new ways to be together. The shift is moving decisively from “Store as warehouse” to “store as stage and shelter.”

To understand how retail creates closeness, we must look at **four key evolutions**:

**Retail as a destination, not just a point of sale:** in an era of immediate digital availability, the physical store must justify the journey. It creates closeness by becoming a “destination”—a place people choose to visit not because they need a product (which could be delivered), but because they need the specific energy of that place. It transforms the customer from a user into a “pilgrim” of sorts, seeking an experience that can only happen *there*.

**Stores as cultural hubs:** the most relevant spaces today function as cultural publishers. They curate exhibitions, host debates, and offer workshops. This builds closeness because it shifts the relationship from transactional (money for goods) to educational and relational (time for growth). When a brand helps a person learn or discover something new, it creates a bond of gratitude and authority.

**Immersive yet habitable experiences:** while “wow” moments attract attention, only “habitable” spaces retain it. The trend is moving away from cold, museum-like showrooms toward spaces that invite “dwelling.” Closeness is generated when a space feels comfortable enough to let one’s guard down—balancing the spectacle of immersion with the comfort of hospitality.

**Community-driven and hyper-local:** global brands are learning to speak local dialects. Retail spaces are increasingly designed as “community-first,” reflecting the specific culture, history, and rhythm of the neighborhood they inhabit. This generates closeness through recognition: the customer feels that the space belongs to their world, rather than being a generic outpost of a corporate entity.

## ➤ Case study: Mondadori Duomo

The bookstore as a narrative ecosystem

The renovation of the Mondadori flagship in Piazza Duomo by Il Prisma stands as a paradigmatic example of retail as a narrative medium. Located in one of the most iconic squares in the world, the project faced a dual challenge: to celebrate the monumental context of the Duomo while reasserting the book as the central protagonist of the experience.

The store is not designed merely as a repository of volumes, but as a place of experience and exploration. The layout is conceived as a narrative journey through different “worlds”, each designed to evoke specific emotions and modes of engagement.



Mondadori Duomo, Milan - project by Il Prisma.



Mondadori Duomo, Milan - project by Il Prisma.

## The Arena: the heart of the community

The central architectural element—the Arena—represents the physical translation of the concept of legitimized presence. It is designed to function exactly like a civic town square: a place where citizens are welcome to stop, sit, and observe without the implicit obligation to consume. By integrating a wide staircase and open seating areas, the space creates a natural amphitheater for events, talks, and cultural moments. It transforms the solitary act of buying a book into a collective ritual of participation, effectively blurring the line between a commercial shop and a public cultural institution.

## Mondolibri: the club of belonging

While the rest of the store welcomes the general public, the Mondolibri area is designed to nurture the core community. It is a space dedicated to the most loyal readers—subscribers and club members—offering them a sense of exclusivity and specialized service. However, the design is not exclusionary; rather, it acts as an invitation. By visualizing the value of membership through a dedicated, curated environment, it intrigues casual visitors and incentivizes them to join the circle, transforming sporadic customers into affiliated community members.

## Just Comics: a Gen Z sanctuary

This area is a radical departure from the classic bookstore aesthetic, tailored specifically for the target audience of Manga and Comic fans. The design speaks their visual language: neon lights, urban materials, and pop aesthetics. Crucially, it leverages the “phygital” nature of this demographic by integrating a highly Instagrammable zone. Here, visitors can photograph themselves against the backdrop of the real Piazza Duomo mixed with life-sized comic characters—merging the physical prestige of the location with their digital social identity.

## We Are Junior: immersion and play

The children’s area is designed to engage the youngest readers through two complementary modes of storytelling. On one hand, technology drives immersion: a large “immersive cylinder” surrounds children with animated stories, allowing them to step inside the narrative visually and audibly. On the other hand, the space emphasizes physicality: tactile play areas and “dens” encourage children to interact physically with the space and with books. It is a hybrid environment where story-living is both a digital wonder and a tangible game.



**Mondadori Duomo** illustrates how a retail space can function as a cultural medium. It does not just sell books; it stages the act of reading and discovery. By offering diverse “chapters” of space—from the quiet intimacy of the reading nooks to the collective buzz of the Arena and the digital vibrancy of Just Comics—it generates closeness. It becomes a place where the solitary act of reading finds a collective home.

## ➤ Design implications

Designing retail as a narrative medium requires moving beyond the organization of space and product to construct experiences capable of generating relationship, continuity, and belonging.



Baldinini, Milan - project by Il Prisma.



### 1. Designing time

Experience is continuous, not instantaneous. Retail must function as a dynamic system that evolves over time through narrative cycles, seasonal themes, and rituals of return.

### 2. Designing permanence

People should feel permitted to stay without the pressure to purchase. Permanence is the foundation of “lived experience.” Design must include spaces of pause, reading, and encounter.

### 3. Designing the threshold

The entrance is the first narrative act. It must be legible, inclusive, and welcoming—acting as a “buffer zone” that transitions the user from the chaos of the city to the narrative of the store.

### 4. Designing space as language

Design tells, does not just decorate. Atmosphere, materials, light, and sound construct meaning. The narrative should be coherent but not didactic—allowing users to intuit the story through their senses.

### 5. Designing rituals, not events

Isolated events create attention; repetition builds community. *Micro-rituals* (recurring formats, recognizable gestures) generate familiarity, and familiarity generates trust.

### 6. Designing participation

Stories work best when they are co-constructed. People should be able to contribute, modify, or leave traces in the space. The most engaging spaces are those that remain “incomplete” on purpose, inviting user interaction.

### 7. Designing the human role

Staff are part of the narration. Their behavior is an integral part of the experience. They must evolve from sales assistants to *hosts and facilitators of the community*.

### 8. Integrating technology as invisible support

AI and phygital tools should strengthen continuity and personalization but remain invisible. They should support the narrative (e.g., dynamic content, personalized suggestions) without interrupting the human connection.

### 9. Designing memory

Experiences that matter leave traces. The space should become an *archive of stories*, layering memories over time to build a sense of history and belonging.

### 10. Measuring Value Beyond Sales

Success goes beyond economics. We should value metrics of “closeness”: time spent (dwell time), return rate, social engagement, and community participation.



Baldinini, Milan - project by Il Prisma.

## ➤ Conclusion

Designing retail as a narrative medium means shifting the focus from sales to relationship, from novelty to continuity, and from space to shared story.

In a digital age, the ultimate luxury is a place where we feel recognized and connected. When retail succeeds in telling a story that includes us, it ceases to be a shop and becomes a destination—a place of meaning where, through the medium of the space, we find closeness with others.

“ReBurberry at Selfridges” is a pop-up initiative at the renowned London department store, dedicated to circular fashion and the care of archival garments. It transforms the retail space from a simple place of purchase into a hub for circular services, where the focus shifts from selling new products to caring for, restoring, and reselling pre-owned items in order to extend the brand’s value over time.



## ↗ Contacts

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