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## Design, the Imperfect Box and Retail Branding

Architects and Designers alike are challenged to engage three primary components into successful retail design solutions: maximize site opportunities, engage and implement a program of requirements, and define a unique brand solution. Neither all sites nor all lease spaces are created equal. Frequently lease space units have little inherent architectural site value, a field of columns with opaque roofs and minimal identity. If not on a pad site, this is a best case scenario. How the designer engages the site can contribute to how program and brand solution are introduced into a project. A strategic driven design process can add significant project value when considering design as a return on investment. How can a site stricken with banality and irregularity be transformed into a strong branding opportunity?

### ■ The world is flat.

Retail first level entry is a common objective for public tenant improvement space. Unfortunately, as it turns out, the world is not flat. Many sites off a public right-of-way require a manipulation of ground plane to get to the slab

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level of a lease space. Common byproducts of this condition are unsightly ramps, stairs, guardrails and handrails. An alternate solution is to ramp with less than a 1:20 slope no handrails or guardrails are required. A gently sloped ramp can engage the entire width of a space and give it an unexpected dynamic. Another approach is to create tiers separated by a single riser. Tiered spaces have traditionally been considered to be more sophisticated and visually appealing and from a circulation perspective, more episodic. Design an object stair or ramp. Changes in grade are most commonly downplayed with banal stair and ramp design to be spatially and monetarily economical. The result is usually a visual liability to the design. Instead see these grade changing devices as design opportunities and celebrate them with generous size, materiality and even color.

■ **Retail spaces have challenging lighting conditions.** Typically, the

retail envelope has no or limited access to natural light. Maximize the public elevation by opening it up. De-materialize the public entry elevation with glass or door systems to allow the most natural light available to penetrate the furthest distance into the space. After the sun sets, it's up to artificial lighting to create a brand message. Energy codes are moving the trends in public commercial space lighting away from decorative pendant and track light fixtures. Energy inefficient lamp sources are giving way to LED and fluorescent technologies. Lighting coves, interior skylights, lit soffits and recessed wall wash light fixtures add architectural character and brand experience to retail design solutions.

■ **Space planning is branding.** Defining and controlling circulation paths and site line views are paramount in branding retail planning solutions. Devices such as millwork display, seating, floor finishes and even area lighting can be used as planning tools to build a spatial brand. POS locations are another potential strategy to organize site lines for customer employee interaction. Dressing

up the POS area in terms of a finish experience can assist in creating a stronger impression of a shopping environment. While space plans will always be most efficient in a rectangular shaped space, it is often irregularity that can provide uniqueness and identity and a brand positive message to a design. A strategic retail planning process can identify opportunity with perceived challenges. One contingent of nearly all space plans is the structural column. In even the best laid plans, structural columns break up contiguous spaces. It turns out columns are a necessary evil of roofs. Make the column a branding design feature. An original design concept with coupled with a branding material story or shape can transform a perceived liability into an asset.

Engaging a strategic-driven retail design team early in the process can assist end user and broker alike in providing insights to the spatial and interior design opportunity within potential lease spaces. Thoughtful consideration of site opportunities, integrating program and brand message are key tools to bridge the gap of real estate assessment for commercial retail planning.