

# THE RHYTHM OF RETAIL



ROB  
SPANIER

“ We may think we’re  
looking for things  
to buy when we go  
shopping, but what  
we are really looking  
for is an **experience**. ”

—ROB SPANIER





UPSTAIRS @ URBANO 32

UPSTAIRS @ URBANO 32

UPSTAIRS @ URBANO 32

URBANO 32

Pizza/Bar/Social

URBANO 32

URBANO 32

1 P  
Disabled  
badge  
holders or  
loading only  
8 - 10.30am  
4.30 - 8pm  
No waiting  
or loading  
10.30am  
4.30pm

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## Prologue

**H**ave you ever wondered why some places that you visit feel better than others? Why you remember some places and others are simply dismissed from memory? Places can have an indelible mark on our psyche – good or bad. This book explores ‘the concept of place’ and considers the necessary elements that, together, help to ‘create great places.’

Places of all kinds can have an imprint on our hearts. I believe that some of the greatest places in history started with someone somewhere who believed that there was a better way to create an experience or experiences for people to enjoy – to remember. Places were created with a keen understanding that people only had a reasonable amount of time to get all the things in their lives (i.e., *The Psychology of Shopping* 101). ‘The butcher, the baker, and the candle stick maker’ began to congregate in cities, towns, markets, and souks because that’s what made sense – at the time. So, if smaller format retail was good enough for us so many generations ago – what has changed? I came to the realization that apart from the pace of play in the real estate development world, the theory was still the same. However, it somehow became easier to separate and segregate uses, and focus on more conventional retail users and uses rather than integrating and embracing this notion of place and all that comes with it.



The history of retail can be traced to the creation of places for people to congregate for the trading of goods and services. Businesses and purveyors of goods realized early on that co-locating with fellow merchants would allow them to sell their wares easier, faster, better, and smarter. Centers of commerce became the outlet for people to obtain goods and services that they otherwise would have never been able to obtain without a designated place, and it allowed for people to gather and connect. Central areas of commerce became a logical and intentional approach to shopping a long time ago and can be traced back to the earliest days of society. Therefore, retail is inextricably connected to the creation of place because, as some people contend, retail (or commerce) was actually responsible for its success.

Retail and placemaking go hand in hand. Humans are consumers by nature, and most of our day-to-day decisions are driven by our needs and wants to purchase those basic human necessities. But more than just our need to consume, retail creates opportunities for social interaction. As we all experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic – a moment in history that forced us all to be apart and away from those opportunities to connect and socialize – we lacked that universal sense of human connection.

Now more than ever, real estate developers are being challenged to figure out how to do better, beyond just delivering more of the same when it comes to retail and place. Cities, towns and, most importantly, the customer is demanding something more meaningful. While there has been a clear demand and sometimes an over developed supply of the big box stores (Walmart, Costco, Home Depot, etc.), they do not present spaces that foster intimate connections within communities. Simply put, due to their sheer size, big box stores disconnect us physically on the ground floor plane leaving long blank street walls, which, for the most part, turns pedestrians around who move onto exploring other more interesting destinations of interest.





This is why smaller, and, in most cases independent non-national retailers have become so attractive in the real estate development sector. Their size and their identity create a ‘rhythm’ along the street, and when coupled together with a mix of other uses (amenities, outdoor spaces, and experiences), start to form the semblance of a place. But beyond the impact small businesses can create physically, they can also provide an attractive environment that people are drawn to. It also helps that the ‘shop local’ movement is something that has become increasingly prevalent in our society over the last several decades.

I had the privilege of growing up in one of the greatest cities in the world (or at least that is my opinion on the matter), Montreal, Quebec. Montreal provided a platform and a place that allowed me to explore and learn all the things that make cities incredible through the lens of a European-designed small city. Growing up in a small neighbourhood called Notre-Dame de Grace (NDG), as a child, I had the pleasure of playing on the streets with my neighbours from different cultural backgrounds. At the end of my typical middle income neighborhood street was a fire station and the main arterial road where you could find everything you needed – the local fruit store, the bakery, the bank, the dry cleaners, the pharmacy, and even Steinberg’s, the large Montreal grocer of the era. Restaurants, a movie rental store, Fabricville (aka Fabricland), and even the Somerled Pool Hall were just a stone’s throw away.

Everything was within reach and what I think I took for granted growing up was how unique it was to live so centrally to so many things that were literally at my fingertips (there is nothing better than a fresh bagel right out of the oven from the local bakery on a very cold and snowy Montreal morning – trust me). My life began with an understanding that living in a city did not mean you had to get into a car to appreciate and experience place, and that place can actually come in many forms. I learned through my career that so many cities and neighborhoods over the last 25 years seemed to stray from this quality of life that I, in hindsight, took for granted.

The true essence of place is a fundamental understanding of human behaviour. The outcome of a great place should be to captivate, and to capture the wants, the needs, and the desires of people, who everyday must make countless decisions on how to best spend their two most valuable resources – time and money. The Rhythm of Retail is the understanding that creating places without ‘things to do’ is a fallacy. Places are the combination and the aggregation of so many things – the most important being, the proper combination (or curation) of great experiences for people to enjoy and experience.

The goal of this book is not to convince you that what I am telling you is right nor will it try to explain the wonders of city building. You won’t find a ‘how to guide’ answer or a series of measurements of what works. It is an attempt through my lens to share with you how I view ‘place’ and why I believe that Placemaking has always been present throughout history and has made our lives and the creation of these place-based environments all the better for it.

I hope you enjoy reading The Rhythm of Retail – a story of my journey and experience with Placemaking, and the successes and failures that I have had creating great places around the world. I also hope that you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed (and agonized) writing it.


And away we go...



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