

Above: Store: Urban Groove; Artist: Bianca Beetson; Designer: Yolk - Michael O'Sullivan. Photo: Vincent L. Long.

Right: Store: DeFuze; Artist: Craig Flood; Designer: Box Interiors—Scott Wernet and James Campbell. Photo: Vincent L. Long.

retail therapy

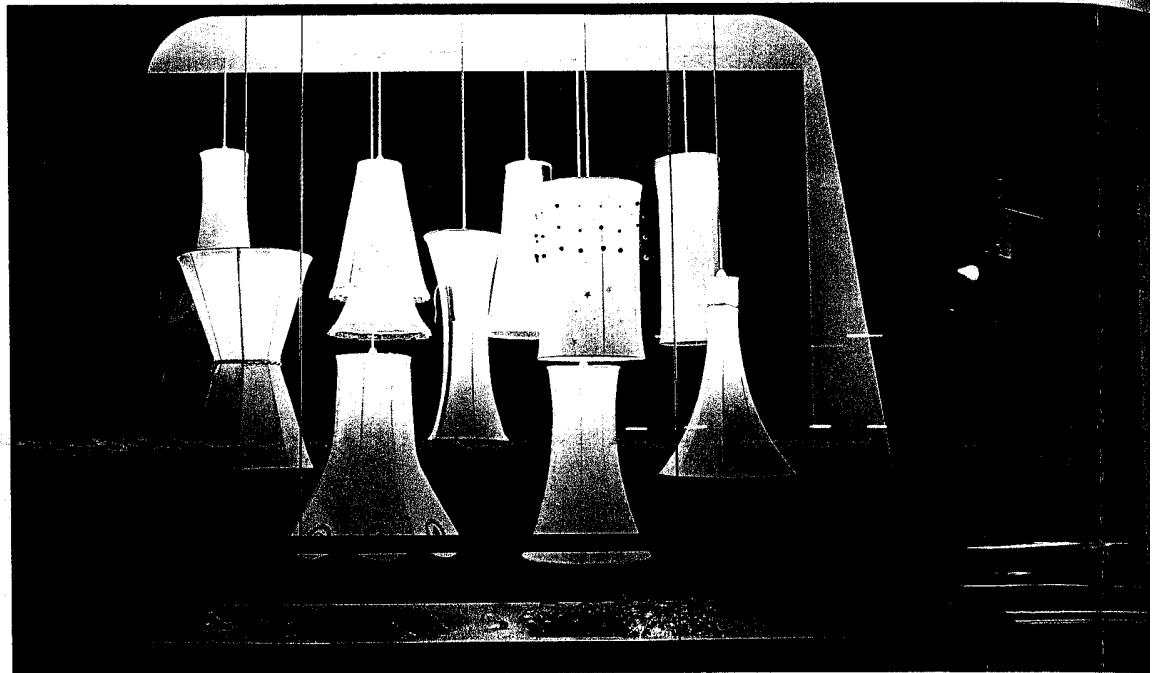
SHIRLEY POWELL REPORTS ON RETAIL THERAPY, A SHOP-FRONT EXHIBITION OF PUBLIC ART, WHERE COLLABORATING ARTISTS AND DESIGNERS WORKED WITH INDIVIDUAL FASHION RETAILERS—A THREE-WAY DIALOGUE WITH THE RETAILER AS CLIENT

BRISBANE AND QUEENSLAND HAVE BEEN FOCAL POINTS FOR PUBLIC ART DEVELOPMENTS IN RECENT YEARS. As well as commissions under the Queensland Government's 'Art Built-In' policy, artists and art-workers have been involved in forums, publications, corporate commissions and projects involving temporal or ephemeral work. Free from some of the constraints of permanent commissions, ephemeral work presents a different and more experimental opportunity for artists.¹ *Retail Therapy* was a recent project of this kind—an integrated public art exhibition, using the shop-fronts of fashion retailers in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley. Collaborating artists and designers worked with individual retailers—a three-way dialogue with the retailer as client.

Project manager Amanda Greeves, of Spark Consultants, describes *Retail Therapy* as the 'next generation' from *Tekhne*, an earlier public art project in Brisbane. *Tekhne*'s focus was on "collaboration as a potentially useful and enriching exercise for both artists and architects in their everyday practices."² *Retail Therapy* extended the model to include a client, making it less introspective and more like a typical design project. It also deliberately included interior designers in some artist-designer teams.

Store: Urban Groove;
Artist: Bianca Beetson;
Designer: Yolc—
Michael O'Sullivan.
Photo: Vincent L Long.

Retail Therapy street
view; 3 stores:
Supafun 5 (artist: Glen
Henderson); Honor
Lulu (artist: Susan
Lincoln); Loisida (artist:
Sebastian Di Mauro).
Photo: Vincent L Long.



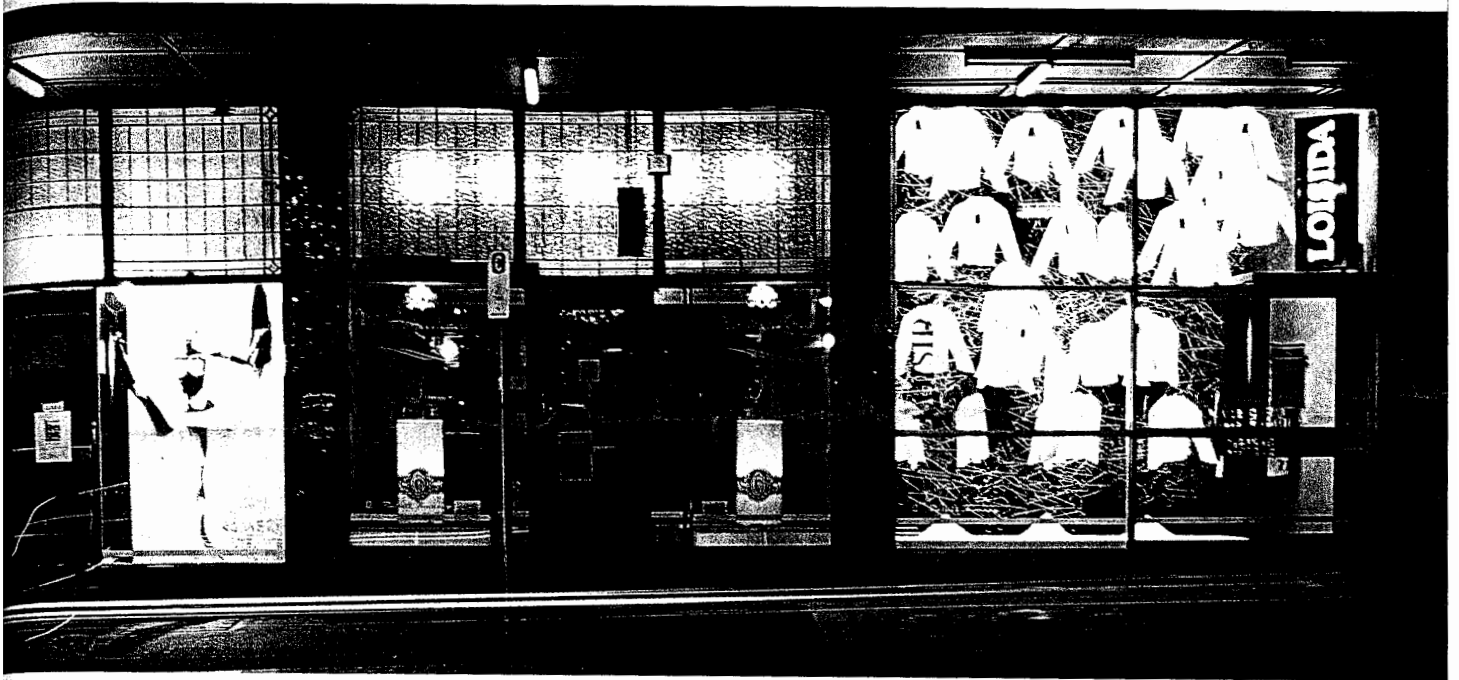
Retail Therapy was an initiative of the Design Institute of Australia (Qld Council), the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Qld) and Artworkers Alliance³, and it's a real strength for practice in Queensland to see key design and art associations working together on ambitious projects like this. Artworkers provided curatorial services to the project. Artworkers' project curator Renai Stoneley described it as a challenge, requiring "a brief that ensured a level of flexibility while responding to the complexity of the project's objectives to encourage future artist/designer working teams."

Retail Therapy occupied 14 shop-fronts. The most successful installations captured some essence or attitude of the client retailer, and also made sense within the individual artist's practice. The brief sought a response that was site-specific, relating to the retailer's philosophy or approach. The context and the brief held together the *Retail Therapy* concept; what made it engaging was the diversity of the completed artworks. Wit, the body and occasional sexual references were present, and some works ventured into topical social and political territory.

At the Brunswick Street end, Daniel T Guinsberg and Bligh Voller Nield worked with "the original valley guy" Peter Leach, creating a work based around the Paul Frank label and the store's name, Tarmac 1.⁴ Next door, NV Intimates

was in the experienced hands of Cox Rayner Architects and Craig Walsh; underwear swirled provocatively in a bubbling wall of water, alongside promotional material for angler's lures. Nearby in Ann Street, *Retail Therapy* intensified. At Ultra Suite, artist Jodie Cox and Minale Bryce & Partners worked with taut, lengths of entwined fraying denim and graphic bands of red fabric; the result made a connection with the artist's installation practice, and framed designs from Sass and Bide. Further along, artists Jay Younger and Matt Dabrowski partnered with Haysom Spender Architects at Marz. Mars is also the name for the God of War. Here, two screens projected images to passers-by: one representing the World Trade Centre attack, the other showing local individuals describing their responses. In a noisy public space, the viewer was drawn into a private (yet at the same time global) 'conversation'.

Further along Ann Street, artist Christine Morrow paired with Donovan Hill. Identical 'frames' were created in the windows of Blonde Venus, either side of the entry. Rough white concrete blocks and a gold backdrop created a stage or frame, lit by contemporary spherical lights. Within each of these spaces was an 'artwork', a vintage leather satchel or small travel bag, painted with a landscape image, one titled connoisseur and one titled amateur. Inside the store were two smaller, similar 'artworks', placed side-by-side and titled visitor and



tourist. This quieter installation played with the construction of meaning, and ideas about consumption—from historical associations about ‘packaging’ the Australian landscape experience, to the commodification of ‘other’ experience. In a world where one can always take home some merchandise memento, the urban tourist/art consumer was discreetly offered a souvenir ‘artwork’—a pair of Bonds (map of Tasmania).

At Loisida, artist Sebastian Di Mauro and architects Alice LTM Hampson, Sheona Thomson and Sarah Foley, produced an elegant, sculptural impact. With an owner who designs, manufactures and retails the store’s clothing, the team had “direct access to the psychology behind the store”.⁵ Di Mauro explains that the owner’s brief referred to the structured nature of her own designs, as well as interests in Japanese fashion design, the Japanese tradition of folding, and natural elements (as a source of inspiration). The storefront was treated minimally. Ordinary wire coathangers were used to construct a delicate screen, and a wall of suspended, white paper ‘lanterns’ was created from a repeated, generic jacket shape. Salt—a purifying element—covered the storefront floor. Di Mauro welcomed the opportunity to produce ephemeral work, and his enthusiasm about the collaborative process is a curator’s and project manager’s dream. “It was really a team effort... For me as an artist it was also important that I

was true to my own practice, as well as working with the client and the architect.”

With 14 teams of clients, artists and designers, *Retail Therapy* exposed itself to the potential difficulties of collaboration. Clearly some partnerships were stronger and more effective than others, but if the project drew attention to the challenges of collaboration, and showed examples of successful work, that’s a positive outcome. From within the world of retail and merchandising, *Retail Therapy* also presented an ongoing and interesting tension about art practice and how even it is ‘packaged’ for consumption.

endnotes

1. C. Walsh, *Breeding the New: Public Art and Temporal Space*, discussion paper commissioned by Arts Queensland, 1996.
2. C. Rice, *tekhne: artists + architects*, *Tekhne* exhibition catalogue.
3. *Retail Therapy* catalogue acknowledgements.
4. *Retail Therapy* catalogue.
5. Quote from Project Manager Amanda Greeves.

• *Retail Therapy* dates: 21 to 30 September, 2001.

• This article was supported in part by the Artworkers Alliance and Spark Consultants.

Shirley Powell is Executive Director of Craft Queensland (currently on leave) and also a writer based in Brisbane.

Object gratefully acknowledges the support of the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland towards the publishing of articles in this issue.