FRAME

THE NEXT SPACE
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recovery mode

WHY DESIGN NEEDS A RESET

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Why somatic retail may be the reset we need in the age of digital saturation

As our days grow ever more screen-bound, how can stores be designed to help us slow down, switch off and reconnect with ourselves and others? Enter somatic retail: sensory, body-first spaces that offer something e-commerce can’t touch.

Words TRACEY INGRAM

Sarah Wijzenbeek

Overwhelm seems to be the default setting in today's always-online world. In his book *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention*, Johann Hari speaks with Sune Lehmann, a professor at the Technical University of Denmark, who likens our daily information overload to 'drinking from a fire hose – there's too much coming at us'. Experts are talking about an 'attention crisis', an issue that technology, while not solely responsible, has undeniably intensified. A 2024 Pew Research Center survey of almost 6,000 US adults found that 62 per cent of 18- to 29-year-olds are almost constantly online. Today, the average American college student can focus on one task for just 65 seconds, while office workers manage about three minutes. The rise of AI adds another layer of disorientation: was that conversation I just had with a human or a bot? Is that outrageous image on my social media feed a record of reality or a convincing fabrication? Smartphones have already absorbed once-disparate tools – handling payments, dimming lights, queuing playlists, snapping photos and soon, perhaps, storing our passports – but as they merge with ever more autonomous technologies, a quiet resistance to the idea of surrendering both our attention and our agency to machines is emerging.

THE BODY AS AN ANCHOR

For centuries, practices such as yoga and meditation have taught that when the mind is scattered, we can return our attention to the body to recentre ourselves. It's therefore no surprise that these techniques are becoming increasingly popular among younger, digital-native generations. Then there's the feeling that, in our post-truth climate, what we can see, touch and feel for ourselves seems like the only certainty we have. Against this backdrop, the pendulum is swinging from connectivity towards connection, with more and more people seeking ways to slow down and re-engage with the physical world in the present moment. Spaces where people can disconnect from technology and/or connect with each other face-to-face are multiplying. The Offline Club, for example, began in February 2024 with its first Offline Hangout in Amsterdam. The organization and the events it hosts have now spread to multiple cities throughout Europe and the UK. Reinforcing the community nature of the movement, people can start their own chapters by applying to become a licensed Offline Club City Leader. The Logging Off Club, which launched in December 2024, operates with a similar model, training facilitators to bring phone-free, in-person events to their communities. Meanwhile, *Business Insider* reported a 50 per cent global surge in searches for 'digital detox retreat' last year. Type those words in a browser and you'll now find countless options promising liberation from the (al)lure of your devices.

FROM POINT OF SALE TO POINT OF PRESENCE

This craving for tangible connection is trickling into the retail sector. After years of buying everything from socks to sofas with a thumb tap, we're rediscovering the pleasure of buying in person through a fresh take on physical shopping. Let's call it somatic retail. If physical retail centres on place, digital retail on access and phygital retail on integration, somatic retail is about presence.

The term 'somatic' stems from the Greek *soma*, meaning 'body'. Applied to retail, it marks a shift from purely visual, transactional experiences to ones that engage the full spectrum of senses. Stores are designed not only to sell but to awaken touch, taste, smell, sound and an awareness of the here and now. Where experiential retail often aims for photogenic spectacle – dazzling displays, sensory overload and selfie walls – somatic retail returns to what makes »

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At Dak Coffee Roasters' store in Amsterdam, Barde vanVoltt partnered with bio-based material expert Marijke Jans to incorporate organic coffee waste into the design. Hammered stainless steel and soft clay walls define the front retail space (see page 117), while a room clad in coffee-stained wood is designed for tasting sessions (this page).

Space Available founder Dan Mitchell describes the creative platform's Self Care Community Centre in Kemang, Jakarta, as an environment that 'invites people to slow down, engage in programmes of daily rituals and reconnect by making "space available" for nature – starting with the self'.

Ernest Theofilus

Wen Studio

The Beijing flagship for premium cycling brand Aitashop combines bike service areas with places to relax, drink coffee and connect with other cyclists. Yatofu Creatives designed the store to support events, art installations and community activations.

'THE NEED FOR CONNECTION, CARE AND COLLECTIVE WELLBEING HAS BECOME MORE URGENT THAN EVER'

us human. Instead of algorithm-driven suggestions, discovery comes through embodied exploration and human guidance. The body, not a cursor or a touch-screen, becomes the primary interface.

RITUAL-RICH SPACES

Some of the retailers embracing this approach are turning to tactile, grounding materials such as wood and clay. Take Dak Coffee Roasters in Amsterdam, for example. Granted, Dak sells a sensory-driven product, but its retail store takes the experience a step further, making you feel as if you're steeped in the ceremony of coffee itself. Barde vanVoltt partnered with bio-based material expert Marijke Jans to incorporate organic coffee waste into the design. Hammered stainless steel and soft clay walls define the front retail space, where there are a few spots to perch and slowly sip your brew of choice; dotted around are small cards suggesting you put away your laptop and take in the taste or focus on in-person conversation. A chrome tunnel leads to a room clad in coffee-stained wood that's designed for tasting sessions.

Those without the inherent sensory advantages of the food and beverage industry might find more inspiration in Space Available's Self Care Community Centre (SCCC) in Kemang, Jakarta. Space Available founder Dan Mitchell – one of the minds that set LN-CC's cultural retail blueprint in motion – describes the SCCC as an environment that 'invites people to slow down, engage in programmes of daily rituals and reconnect by making "space available" for nature – starting with the self'. This concept plays out spatially through five 'foundational rituals': move, meditate, listen, learn and nourish. Visitors might mend an item by hand in the Rework Lab before retreating to the meditation room for some inner exploration. They can take a seat at the communal Reading Room table, settle into the Listening Library for an immersive sonic experience or dine on a dose of medicinal mushrooms in the restaurant.

HOLISTIC WELLBEING

As Mitchell intimates with his mention of 'making "space available" for nature', the SCCC also has an environmental agenda. The circular project was built from over 11 tonnes of locally recycled plastic waste, and Mitchell describes it as a 'meaningful response to today's cultural climate, where the need for connection, care and collective wellbeing has become more urgent than ever in the face of rising mental health challenges and environmental crises'. In short: personal, collective and planetary wellbeing are inseparable.

Hari draws a similar connection in *Stolen Focus*. In his conclusion, he writes that the 'climate crisis can be solved . . . But to do that we will need to be able to focus, to have sane conversations with each other, and to think clearly. These solutions are not going to be achieved by an addled population who are switching tasks every three minutes and screaming at each other all the time in algorithm-pumped fury. We can only solve the climate crisis if we solve our attention crisis.'

Let's be clear: retail won't solve the climate crisis or the world's mental health challenges. Ultimately, we're still talking about commercial enterprises competing for attention and loyalty in order to sell products in a capitalist society. However, as more people look to turn down the 'fire hose' of overstimulation, perhaps brands can capture that attention in ways that benefit both people and the planet – not just their bottom line. ●