

# Drawn by the detail

*For as long as Rajesh Chhablani can remember, he wanted to be an architect. He had always had a flair for creative writing, arts & crafts and would even have the most expressive drawings of the human digestive system or a frog's life cycle in his journals. He believes that the ability to visualize the details is a key qualifier for a good designer.*

*While the love for structures made him opt for a foundation in architecture, it was the fascination with intricacies involved in setting up a store that made Chhablani, take on a career in Retail Design. After completing his undergraduate degree in Architecture from Academy of Architecture, Mumbai in 1995, Chhablani worked on several hospitals and commercial projects with Architect Raja Aederi. He later shifted to San Diego, California in 1998 to complete his Masters in Architecture.*

*Chhablani has had more than a decade's experience working with international projects and retailers such as Gap Inc and Victoria's Secret. While working for Victoria's Secret, he had developed relationships with many architectural companies, including WD Partners, an integrated retail solution provider for end-to-end retail design and development services. And when Chris Doerschlag, CEO of WD Partners, wanted to extend services into the Asia Pacific region, Chhablani joined as Managing Director of WD Partners India and moved back in 2006, along with his family, to set up the practice in India.*

*Chhablani talks to VM&RD, narrating his journey in the world of retail design and WD Partners India itself.*



**Rajesh Chhablani**  
Managing Director  
WD Partners India



## Can you tell us a bit about your journey in retail design itself?

After completing my Masters in Architecture, I began working for an architectural company that also did retail projects for grocery, c-stores, etc. It was while working closely with the clients on these retail projects that I realised that there was so much detail involved in creating a successful store; including all the various internal stakeholders within a retail organisation that need to participate in this effort. This curiosity drove me to pursue an opportunity with Gap Inc. in San Francisco, California to work on Gap, Old Navy and Banana Republic projects across the United States.



After three and a half years, when Gap had tremendously slowed their retail expansion, several leaders from the Gap Design & Construction team joined Limited Brands, the parent company of Victoria's Secret. I subsequently joined Victoria's Secret as Director of Design & Construction, working on several flagship concepts and test initiatives to bring in third party international shop-in-shop concepts into the store. My team would also manage all of the store rollouts of Victoria's Secret stores within the United States.

And after this I joined WD Partners to set-up its operations in India.

### **What is the design philosophy that WD Partners India follows?**

Retail Design is all about communicating the brand story during the customer's journey through the store, in a manner that also delivers a successful business. We deliver the appropriate brand story through our continuous engagement with the client from our initial assessment process and through our visual positioning stage, where we identify several dimensions besides our 7Ps i.e. the place, product, projection (graphic), price, people (customer), promotion & process to deliver a holistic brand experience. We strive to achieve this by being a single point of contact for a client over the long term to deliver services from initial market research and branding to rollout and project management. Our retail expertise extends across all retail industry verticals including petroleum, c-store, grocery, restaurants and apparel, etc.

### **What is the USP and strengths of WD Partners India?**

Clearly one unique proposition in this market is that we seamlessly integrate the 'ideation', 'translation' and 'execution' process. While this may seem very obvious, in my experience, this is where most retailers have struggled. While they may like and approve a design during the creative stage, they never realise it in its built form. This is such a wasted effort for the client as well as the retail service provider. I have observed this to be especially true of clients that have solicited services from very successful international retail designers and then engaged a local service provider to execute. In such a case the 'ideation' and 'execution' are disconnected since there was really no expertise to 'translate'. At WD Partners, while we bring our global experience, our team in India is able to deliver a very local solution working with various stakeholders from C-level all the way to vendors and contractors.

### **How much do clients really understand the role of retail design in India today, and**



### **how is this evolving?**

Clients are learning more about retail design everyday and unfortunately, as seen in the recent past, at a considerable expense. This is also due to the customers who are savvy shoppers when it comes to pricing but do not have high expectations on the design. In my opinion, retail design is evolving mainly with the ambition to succeed but still disregards very fundamental aspects around product adjacencies, brand consistency in customer journey, key memorable brand elements etc.

Can design deliver to purely commercial considerations (for example sales per sq. foot) rather than the look and feel of the store?

Design obviously delivers to the look and feel of the brand. And I believe, design can and must deliver to additional performance expectations like operations and sales. Delivering a 'brand right' solution includes satisfying a very critical component of the brand equation, which is price. I have always maintained that the brand equation has three components, price, quality and experience, and their proportion is dependent on the brand position. They work in various ways to deliver 'value'. You realise this value while shopping at a Tiffany store or while shopping at Wal-Mart because the customers' expectations of these components vary in each case.

### **What are the major challenges in the Indian retail design industry?**

In India, where retail design is evolving, one of the challenges that I have observed is that retail designers who practiced other verticals such as commercial or residential tend to apply the same principles for retail and this will never work. Unlike a Frank Lloyd Wright or a Zaha Hadid style of architecture, designers should not impose their style on the brand because the brand has its own culture. At WD Partners, that is what we call 'Based on what?' approach, where the answer has to lie in the essence or attributes of the brand! What is most ironic

is that we are in Bollywood country and we are so good at invoking emotions and storytelling. Just that talent applied within retail would deliver incredibly successful designs!! I learn a lot of lessons from watching movies. My team can attest to that one.

### **Which is your favourite project and why?**

My favorite project was a new flagship concept for Victoria's Secret in Columbus, Ohio. This was also my last project before moving back to India. We had just tested a new concept based on 'backstage sexy' for Victoria's Secret in sinister Las Vegas at the Forum Shoppes, where the space appeared to be a backstage at a fashion show. We decided to test this very risqué concept in Columbus, Ohio, a fairly conservative town in middle of America. Obviously the challenge lay in the fact that it was so close to the headquarters that the CEO and all other leaders of the organization would 'walk by' and later 'walk away' changing previous decisions. The answer from my team had to generally be 'Yes'!! The end product was fascinating and so was the experience, it always is in retail.

Another favorite project of mine is our own office in Mumbai, which itself is a brand translation of who we are. The design has been translated from the design of our corporate headquarters in Dublin, Ohio (which is 20 times larger). But being my first project in India on returning back; I was quite satisfied with the result and so are our associates!

### **The weirdest brief...**

My weirdest brief was for 'PINK', a sub-brand of Victoria's Secret to do design development for a 'large panty bar', 'small panty bar' and 'bra capacity fixtures' and then work with architects, vendors and contractors to implement it! Could you just imagine listening to the conference calls for this project?

**Chanda P Kumar**