



A popular site...
that's **not online**

We got together with Judith Everaarts, an Interior Architect from Claessens Erdmann Architects who specializes in retail design, to hear all about her work on the new Albert Heijn XL supermarket store in Eindhoven.

Judith told us that in a world where so much shopping can be done online, the challenge for any ambitious store design today is to persuade customers that it's worthwhile making effort to swap 'clicks' for 'bricks', and that a well-designed store can still offer fresh experiences and inspiration.

Authentic experiences

According to Judith, "There's a big rise in online yes. But people still want face-to-face contact."

The question is: how can we attract them? "It's important for shops and supermarkets to give more space for fresh food and to feature food specialists who have knowledge and authority" she states.

In Judith's view people are looking for, "Real, authentic, very honest experiences."

Take a closer look at the design of the Eindhoven XL store and you understand immediately what Judith means. Albert Heijn's vision for their biggest supermarket was for the space to be a super 'market place', with more space dedicated to fresh food, local producers and specialist products. They wanted to create a different type of customer journey where fresh food and dry food were brought together so that customers could pick the ingredients for an entire meal at the same time.

The store environment is more contemporary and, compared to competitors, more energy efficient. The overall feeling is modern rather than cozy, with design that balances the contemporary and authentic. Customers say they feel seduced and inspired, while reactions from trade media and grocery experts are all extremely positive too. So how was this achieved?



“ People are looking for real, authentic and very honest experiences.”

Judith Everaarts

Lighting is key

Lighting is one of the key ways to improve the customer journey and change the overall in-store experience. It can create the right atmosphere and mood for each section therefore affecting buying behavior and encouraging people to change their shopping habits.

"Lighting used to be an afterthought – the last thing you would consider," remembers Judith, "But things have changed completely."

She told us how she has noticed how retailers are much more conscious of the role of lighting in store. "Everyone is a lot more knowledgeable."

Judith also explained that at Eindhoven, finding the right combination of natural and artificial light was crucial.

Controls allow the store to be flexible and clever with lighting, by applying the correct level of light at different times of day and in different areas to set the right mood for customers.

Retail as theater

One of the most striking features at Eindhoven XL store is the way lighting is used to create atmosphere and enhance the customer experience. It cleverly highlights products, gives each area its own personality, and guides the customer's eye as they journey through the store.

Claessens Erdmann Architects wanted to put the products and customers at the center of the store design. "We felt that design should be used in a consistent and unobtrusive way, so we chose furniture in natural colors and materials. We wanted the environment to be more contemporary and efficient compared to the competition." Judith tells us.

In collaboration with Blink Office, Claessens Erdmann Architects also helped to completely revise the in-store communications to make them more informative, again putting customers and products at the heart.

New York in Eindhoven

Another innovation was a New York-style grid system to make the store's layout functional and logical. Judith and the team took inspiration from the layout of New York City, which is based on a defined grid system of streets. It's a very efficient layout for Manhattan and also for the store in Eindhoven.

So the entrance is like Central Park, with natural, open, space. There's a pizza oven in store and people can eat the pizza at the entrance area. There's a café where fresh food from the different departments is served like salads, cheeses, fresh-baked bread for sandwiches, and juices from the juice bar.

Continuing the New York theme, the central aisle running up the middle is like Broadway, with clear lines of sight to the various departments. In each, there are 'masters' of each department on a platform performing to the customers, for example preparing fresh food and cooking or others talking about products and ingredients and giving dietary information.

"In the dry grocery area we used accent lights to highlight special products and for cross merchandising." She tells us, "We were thinking of these like 'Little Italy' or SoHo to make things more special."



“ We wanted a different customer journey.”

Judith Everaarts

Omni-channel

experience

Albert Heijn were keen to make their store part of a seamless shopping experience, so the word 'omnichannel' became a big part of conversations around how to make the experience for customers consistent and joined up.

"We wanted a different customer journey," Judith told us. However the customer choosing to do their shopping, be it online from a computer or mobile device, by telephone, or in person in the store, everything should be easy, convenient and enjoyable.

At Eindhoven Albert Heijn introduced new online facilities in-store with touchscreens placed in various departments. For example, a screen at the meat counter allows customers to order larger deliveries (say, for a BBQ party) to be delivered straight to their home.

One of the Netherlands' most energy efficient supermarkets

Understandably, Judith is proud of the energy efficiency achieved at Eindhoven, "We used solar panels to generate energy, and of course LED lighting offers energy saving and best performance at the same time."

The Eindhoven XL store has become a benchmark and its key features are now being translated to other stores, so Judith will be starting the next store for Albert Heijn soon.



People still love to go to stores

Finally, we asked Judith what she thinks the next 5 years will look like in terms of customer experience and retail design. We spoke about the huge growth of online and the fierceness of the competition out there. But also about how customers are still looking for personal and authentic experiences.

"Change is happening," she agrees, "But not quite as fast as people think. People love to go to stores to find real and authentic products, local, fresh products with a story."

Clearly, it's crucial for retailers to understand the market trends Judith identifies and to embrace these changes by designing pleasant and unique retail environments.

In fact, that's the thinking at the heart of the Albert Heijn XL store in Eindhoven. Every detail, every innovation and every piece of lighting has been designed to create a better customer experience. And it works.