

Retail's reality check

 By [Howard Saunders](#)

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Is all this talk of artificial intelligence, drones and robots worrying you? Maybe you're convinced your kids will soon be moving to the metaverse with Mark Zuckerberg and you're wondering if you'll ever see them again.



Writer, speaker and retail futurist Howard Saunders. Source: Supplied

And if you're in retail, well you'd be forgiven for thinking the entire industry is winding down ready to hand over the keys to smiling Jeff Bezos.

Exaggerated techno-predictions

The world has become so confusing, the future so scary it's amazing that any of us bother to get out of bed in the morning. Listen to a couple of Ted Talks or browse a few LinkedIn articles, by way of staying ahead of the game, and it's as if they're talking another language. They are. Tech geeks get turned on by excluding ordinary humans from their nerdy prognostications.

Cut through the jargon, however, and it's clear there's a push for a future in which humanity takes a backseat. This is understandable when you consider that mankind is the source of most of our problems, however that does not mean all these techno-predictions will come true.

This headlong rush for the future is surely fuelled by a dislike and distrust of the present. Whether it's robotics, smart cities, fake meat, autonomous vehicles or the much-hyped metaverse, it's clear we're designing ourselves a future that diminishes us. A future in which, out of guilt, we allow technology to take control.



Source: Supplied

I blame science fiction. We've imagined ourselves living in glass domes, being waited on by robots for almost a hundred years. Way back in 1930, Einstein's superhuman intellect predicted mankind would soon be overtaken by machines, leaving humanity as "a generation of idiots".

That's a century of fear-mongering and yet, when Elon Musk unveiled his billion-dollar Optimus robot in September last year, the reception was notably underwhelming: a teetering, tin humanoid staggered on and off stage like a cautious drunk. A drunk, incidentally, that couldn't begin to contemplate a small flight of stairs. These then, are the machines that in 2019 the mighty McKinsey warned would destroy 800 million jobs by 2030. They'd better hurry up.

“ So enamoured are we with the future, we wilfully ignore the smirking elephant in the room that knows the robotic revolution is a long, long way off. ”

Whether it's fake meat, the rise of rental culture, the internet of things or 3D printing, it seems the future we promise ourselves keeps getting kicked further down the road.

Even long-proven technology comes unstuck in the cold light of day. Drone deliveries, for example, life-saving in rural environments are utterly hopeless in our busy, high-rise cities. Likewise, autonomous cars may be the future in linear Los Angeles but they don't look so clever trying to navigate the potholes, roadworks and tangled lanes of most European cities.

More humans, less stuff

But hey, we've just emerged from a uniquely comprehensive global experiment and the results are now in. After two years of being locked indoors...wait for it... it turns out the vast majority of us want to get out and mix with other humans after all!

“ The evidence is clear: we prefer to visit shops and restaurants than swiping endlessly through Amazon. ”

This explains the dramatic surge in events, parties, celebrations and festivals last year. It seems, given half a chance, we'll turn up to the opening of an envelope.

And therein lies the secret of great retail. In a world where we can access everything anywhere, retail is no longer about getting hold of 'stuff'. What really helps us part with our hard-earned cash is a place that feels alive and happening, whether it be a bustling bakery or a megabrand flagship.



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Thankfully, for us real-world enthusiasts, the future looks safe: Amazon is axing 10,000 staff, Zuckerberg's metaverse is bleeding cash, Beyond Meat is bleeding to death and Elon promises Optimus will be able to walk properly very soon.

Don't get me wrong. Technology is sure to reshape our world in bewilderingly beautiful ways. In less than a decade we've evolved into a global species of screen-addicted voyeurs and needy narcissists.

Our attention spans may have shrivelled and our morals evaporated but it's comforting to know that, at the end of the day, whatever spectacular gizmos they throw at us, we still want to hang out with like-minded friends, family, peers and colleagues in markets, shops, bars, delis and restaurants just like our digitally deprived ancestors did a century ago.

Stay strong my friends. Here's to a happy, prosperous, real-world 2023!

ABOUT HOWARD SAUNDERS

Howard Saunders, aka the Retail Futurist, is a writer and speaker whose job it is to see beyond retail's currently choppy waters. Howard spent 25 years at some of London's most renowned retail design agencies where he created concepts and strategies for dozens of British high street brands. His move to New York in 2012 inspired the book *Brooklynization* (2017). This cemented his role as champion for retail's future in our towns, cities and communities.

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