

PARTY LIKE IT'S 1999



VMSD's 23rd annual International Retail Design Conference (IRDC) took place in Minneapolis Oct. 25-26, 2023, at the Marriott City Center.

BY THE VMSD EDITORIAL STAFF

Welcome to the Twin Cities! This past Oct. 25-26, VMSD's 23rd IRDC descended upon Minneapolis for two days of inspirational sessions, educational keynotes, hands-on workshops, offsite guided tours, and much more, hosted at the Marriott City Center downtown, and co-located with the 2023 Shop! Ideation and Retail Challenge (Oct. 22-24). Guests concluding Ideation mingled with arriving IRDC attendees at the hotel's Arora Restaurant & Bar with a cocktail reception sponsored by Schimenti the evening before (Oct. 24) the first official day of the event.



ABOVE Motivational speaker, author, influencer and YouTuber Lizzie Velasquez kicked off the 2023 conference in Minneapolis.

Start Your Engines

The first full day, Oct. 25, began with a jolt of inspiration from opening keynote speaker Lizzie Velasquez. A hurtful bullying video created about Lizzie thrust her into the international spotlight when she was 17 years old. Since then, the YouTuber, anti-bullying activist and motivational speaker has written two books and spread her passion for kindness, communication and connection globally. Lizzie spoke about resilience and a concept that resonated deeply with our audience – the human desire to be seen and respected, especially within a retail environment.

After Lizzie's moving presentation, attendees broke off into groups to participate in this year's hands-on workshops. "Messy Creativity," facilitated by Judy Bell, Founder and CEO, Energetic Retail – and featuring the Wizards from her latest edition of "Silent Selling" – charged attendees with a creative sprint using a purple marker inspired by the children's book "Harold and the Purple Crayon." Participants worked in small teams while the Wizards scanned the room for their top choices. At the end of the presentation, all potential winners were awarded Honeycrisp apples, a delicacy of Minneapolis. Linda Cahan of Cahan & Co. helmed the concurrent workshop, which challenged the audience to rely on their instinct and learn to listen to their gut.

Engaging breakout sessions – one highlighting Target's small-format concepts and expansion (presented by Ken McQuade, Lead Design Architect, Target, and Robyn Vogel, Director of Store Design, Target), and the other discussing M&M'S flagships with Chip Cook of M&M'S alongside co-presenter Ashley Randolph of Landor & Fitch – took place before the annual Networking Roundtable Discussions at noon.

VMSD's New York Editor Eric Feigenbaum and longtime VMSD Editorial Advisory Board member Tom Beebe took the stage during lunch to give a special presentation focusing on the history and impact of window designer Gene Moore. Following their

presentation, a vitrine (created by conference sponsor Recrylic) displayed archival Gene Moore items for folks to browse such as newspaper clippings and other notable ephemera.

Before attendees left for this year's Inspiration Retail Tours, Albert Gilkey, SVP of Store Design & Visual, Victoria's Secret & Co., intrigued the crowd with his presentation on the storied retailer's latest Store of the Future concepts.

Made for Walking

During the afternoon of Oct. 25, attendees split off to one of three tours as part of our Offsite Inspiration Tours, sponsored by KNOCK Inc. Those who picked the VIP Mall of America tour (hosted by Chandler Inc.) were treated to a behind-the-scenes look at how the iconic mall and its Nickelodeon Universe amusement park function. A few blocks from the host hotel, others attended an exclusive tour of Target's Nicollet Street flagship and its nearby headquarters. Hosted by the Twin Cities Chapter of the Retail Design Institute, the third option was a self-guided tour of the retail stores in Minneapolis' North Loop neighborhood, known for its retail, restaurants and breweries.



Caught in The Purple Rain

As the evening fell on the first day of IRDC, the 17th annual Iron Merchant Challenge began, co-hosted by ZenGenius Inc. and

emceed by Joe Baer, Co-Founder, CEO and Creative Director, ZenGenius. This year's event celebrated sustainability and the iconic Minneapolis-born musician Prince.

During the opening presentation, teams were reminded of the brief for the challenge: create a "Purple Rain" window for an eco-friendly second-hand store.

ABOVE *Kym Midanek of Patagonia accepts the 2023 VMSD/ Peter Glen Retailer of the Year award from VMSD Editor-in-Chief Carly Hagedorn and Managing Editor Olivia Taylor.*

The secret ingredient (which the teams must incorporate in their display) was announced to be, appropriately, a little red Corvette created by IRDC sponsor Recrylic.

With window displays created by Axis Display Group, illuminated by Amerlux and equipped with digital screens provided by Cue Gravity, teams had an hour to complete their designs. The purple clothing for the mannequins was sourced from second-hand stores, and mannequins, donated by Bernstein Display, were a fitting shade of iridescent purple. Unlike previous years, every team received the same materials, including purple raindrops.

Target hosted a pre-Iron Merchant Challenge cocktail reception in the atrium and donated materials for the challenge. The following day, attendees voted on their favorite window display – but there could only be one Iron Merchant to be revealed during the VMSD Awards Luncheon.

Another Round, Please

The second day of IRDC began with a sponsor case study breakfast session by Lunds & Byerly and Recrylic. Sarah Quinlan, Chief Economist at The Consello Group, then presented our opening general session, "The Economy in Transition (Or Not)." Quinlan examined the state of the retail economy and explained to the audience why she remains optimistic.

Attendees then split up for the morning's breakout sessions: Jackie Foo, EVP and COO, goeasy Ltd., and Mardi Najafi, VP, Retail Strategy and Design, Figure3, explored why comfort and trust are at the heart of easyfinancial's new design in "Putting People First: The Relevance of Human-Centric Design." Meanwhile, Sara Sullivan, VP of Retail Development, Experience & Operations, Insa, and Robyn Novak, Executive Director of Strategy and Development, Agar, treated attendees to a conversation about creating experiential spaces to grow brand loyalty for retailers with "intangible" products.

Following the awards luncheon, Samar Younes, Founder and Chief Imagination



Officer of Samaritual, discussed the ever-growing presence of artificial intelligence (AI) and how designers and companies can harness its power to evolve their products in her presentation, “Designing Tomorrow’s Retail: Neuro-Centric, AI-Enhanced & Planet-Friendly.”

In the afternoon, David Kepron of Aedifica and NXTLVL Experience Design led a panel discussion on the connection between art, design and the human brain. Engaging the audience to think differently about how our minds perceive the world, the panel included Gabriele Chiave of Estée Lauder Cos. Inc., Dr. Paul Zak of Immersion Neuroscience and artist Tracy Lee Strum.

A concurrent panel discussion featuring

Savannah Tarpey of Wayfair, Annie Bevan of SMS Collaborative and Phillip Raub of Model No., and moderated by Bergmeyer’s Christian Davies, dove into the evolution of sustainability as well as next steps for the retail and design industries.

As the final day of IRDC came to an end, the closing keynote presentation began: Jesse Moyer, Director, Global Store Design, Levi’s, alongside Bevan Bloemendaal, Chief Brand & Creative Officer, and Faith Huddleston, Studio Leader—Lifestyle, Retail Practice, both of NELSON Worldwide, discussed the staying power of the Levi’s brand as well as its iconic jeans and demin products. After exploring the retailer’s historical roots, the presentation concluded with attendees sing-

ing “Happy Birthday” to Levi’s and enjoying a cupcake.

Strike A Pose

VMSD’s annual Awards Luncheon took place during the second day of IRDC, Oct. 26, and honored winners from the 2023 Designer Dozen (featured in VMSD’s March/April issue) International Visual Competition (VMSD’s July/Aug issue), the Retail Renovation Competition (VMSD’s Sept/Oct issue), and our 2023 VMSD/Peter Glen Retailer of the Year – this year bestowed on Patagonia Inc. for its commitment to sustainability, customer experience and retail innovation. Kym Midanek of Patagonia attended the event to accept the coveted award on Patagonia’s behalf.

The VMSD awards wouldn’t be complete without the announcement of the Iron Merchant Challenge winner: This year, the Red Team, led by Sharon Lessard of Ensemble, took home the sashes. Congratulations to the winning team, and to Sharon for her second consecutive Iron Merchant win!

Get the Party Started

Following the closing keynote presentation, we said goodbye to IRDC 2023 with a closing party at The Pourhouse housed in the historic Lumber Exchange Building. With its prohibition-era vibe and friendly Midwest atmosphere, we enjoyed appetizers and drinks and got excited to bring IRDC to Kansas City in 2024.

The VMSD and IRDC staff wishes to thank all of our speakers, attendees, sponsors, educators, students and guests who joined IRDC 2023. To view the full gallery of photos, please visit vmsd.com. For more information regarding IRDC 2023 – or IRDC 2024 coming to Kansas City next fall – be sure to visit vmsd.com and [irdconline](https://irdconline.com).

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IRON MERCHANT CHALLENGE

Reception hosted by
Target
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THIS PAGE *The first day of IRDC included a presentation by Albert Gilkey of Victoria’s Secret and the 17th annual Iron Merchant Challenge.*

