

RETAIL ROAD TRIP: *CHICAGO*

We're always searching for retail's brightest and best — that's why we're embarking on a cross-country road trip to find out how leading home furnishings and lighting showrooms do business, what sets them apart and why they do what they do. Are you ready? Get in.

BY ALISON MARTIN



The first stop on our road trip is *Lighting & Decor's* hometown, Chicago. Home to Willis Tower, deep dish pizza and Al Capone, Windy City showrooms have their work cut out for them. Here's how Luminaire and Hortons Home Lighting are meeting the challenge.

CHICAGO GRAPHIC: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM / KURSAT UNSAL

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So much of design and home decor is pushed on the consumer, Luminaire store manager Scott Davis says. "Here, it's about making the right choices for each individual's life and personality."

LUMINAIRE

High above the corner of Franklin Street and Superior Street, a brown line train rumbles down the El tracks, heading for the Loop. The sound eclipses conversations, barking dogs and even ambulance wails, but inside the Luminaire showroom, the rumble feels like part of the music.

With three levels and 21,000 square feet, Luminaire has been a River North institution since 1989. The neighborhood boasts the largest concentration of art galleries outside of Manhattan, and inside the showroom, furniture creates scenes that could be backdrops for realist paintings.

"It's almost like creating more of a gallery quality as well as letting you know that yes you can come in and these things are for your home too," says store manager Scott Davis.

Davis came to Luminaire a year and a half ago, and he manages a team of 15 people. Nasir Kassamali and his wife, Nargis, who immigrated to the United States in 1973, own the showroom. Inspired by artists such as Mies van der Rohe, Alvar Aalto and Arne Jacobsen, the Kassamalis opened their first showroom in 1974. It was a 500-square-foot kiosk located in North Miami Beach, and it sold mainly European lighting. Two years later, the business moved to a 4,500-square-foot showroom and then moved again in 1984 to Coral Gables. The Chicago showroom followed five years later.

Kassamali continues to travel the world, talking with manufacturers and designers. He believes your environment is your third skin — the first being your physical skin and clothes the second. He aims to help people find the right piece for their skin.

Luminaire caters best to those who love design — art lovers, design

fanatics, anyone who's curious about finding something unexpected and new. Wanderers through River North's many art galleries will often stop in to admire the showroom's clean lines and minimalist designs.

"People come in off the street because it catches them," Davis says. "Even if they don't know or aren't an experienced designer, they come in and we show them around and educate them."

The showroom keeps few things in stock. Most of the furniture can be customized to fit different-sized spaces, and clients can choose from an array of upholstery styles. Davis says the Mid-Century Modern craze continues in Chicago, and now that younger people are buying homes, they're wanting a deviation from what their parents had.

Although Luminaire doesn't directly compete with all online retailers, some are still a concern for Davis. His clients aren't the type to purchase a couch or bed sight unseen, but they're willing to buy light fixtures and small tables online. Luminaire sells only its smaller items on its website, so it isn't undercutting the personal approach of its showrooms.

"That's why you don't see us selling sofas on [our website]," Davis explains. "It's more accessory-oriented."

Even as styles and shopping change, Davis feels confident that one thing will remain the same in the showroom: great design.

"Design really is for everyone," he says. "Sometimes it seems like it's very much becoming the new art in a certain sense. There's a nice bridge between art and design, but design even then has to be functional. You have to use it to better our lives — that's one of the factors."