



Mason Studio's models offer both permanent and transient solutions for retail spaces: A single-corridor bricks-and-mortar shop (far left) with subtly integrated distancing cues and display-only products, and a portable space for service professionals (above and left) with an interior that can be customized as needed.

## Rethinking Retail

TWO INVENTIVE SERVICE CONCEPTS BY TORONTO'S MASON STUDIO OFFER PROPOSALS FOR WEATHERING CHANGE — TODAY AND IN THE FUTURE

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**Mason Studio has cemented its reputation** for modern, elevated retail environments featuring understated, light-drenched spaces activated by natural materials and subtle colours. Watching the pandemic unfold from Toronto this year, founding partners Ashley Rumsey and Stanley Sun saw an opportunity to address a pressing question: How can design be leveraged to redefine retail spaces in a way that protects customer safety and ensures a business's survival?

"The pandemic is just another catalyst for continued change in this industry," Rumsey says. "When all of this hit, we got excited about the opportunity to think about how retail could be different and how

design is used to change not only the physical spaces but also the operational models of these businesses."

Observing how shop-keepers were reacting to mandated closures and rules governing capacity and distancing, as well as changing consumer patterns, the studio embarked on a series of case studies for reimagined commercial environments. The objective: establish distinctive models that offer flexibility, safety and an in-person customer service experience. The two-fold result: a bricks-and-mortar solution and a mobile concept with nary a wayfinding arrow or make-shift barrier in sight.

The physical shop is conceived for corner sites in

urban and non-urban settings alike. A semi-outdoor, one-way corridor is lined with oversized window displays to be filled with a revolving selection of view-only products from which patrons can make selections through a complementary digital app. The windows also provide views into an interior workshop, where staff fulfill online and in-person orders before placing them in lockers that customers can access after providing cashless, contactless payment.

Rather than add conspicuous wayfinding or signage, COVID-19 measures are discreetly integrated: The corridor promotes intuitive one-way travel, while curved buttresses delineate space and encourage physical distancing. The intricate mosaic floor pattern also offers subtle hints for staying two metres apart. Natural materials, a muted palette and curved LEDs framing the arch of the passageway keep the space from feeling sterile.

The mobile concept explores a different possibility, one that allows a traditionally bricks-and-mortar service provider — in Mason's case studies, a hair salon and a tailor — to go wherever their customers are via a retrofitted semi-trailer with enough interior space to allow the provider and client to interact safely, about 14 square metres. A textured, semi-translucent glass facade allows for natural light and visibility, simulating a storefront experience. Otherwise, the fit-out is completely adaptable: In the tailor shop, curved wood panelling, integrated LEDs and suspended brass clothing racks define the space; in the hair salon, it's monolithic flooring, countertops and cabinetry.

"This has really ignited great exploration in our studio," says Rumsey. "We'll probably take it further, with other ideas about how the concept can serve different communities and how retail can continue to evolve. The pandemic has allowed us to really think about how design is an opportunity to improve the way that we live and not just create stopgap solutions." [masonstudio.com](https://masonstudio.com)