Research

Retail Futures 2027

Emerging Resilience

IA Retail



Foreword

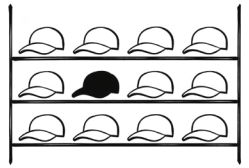
We find ourselves in a time of profound change. Climate uncertainty, AI, and economic pressures are reshaping daily life and our sense of stability.

In the midst of uncertainty, we are building resilience, redefining what matters, making room to breathe and simply be, and becoming more resourceful with what we already have.

For brands, these shifts create an opportunity to understand where people are headed in 2027 and beyond, and what that means for the spaces we design and the experiences we create.

Join us as we explore the three core shifts shaping consumer needs and the future of retail design.

01 The Search for Substance



02 The Age of Unbound



03 The Rise of the Resourceful



Our Methodology

Our methodology draws on continuous research with more than 3,000 U.S. consumers, social listening, emerging brand signals, and insights from more than 5,000 retail projects across categories.

By connecting what people are telling us with what we're seeing in the market, we translate those signals into the experience and design drivers shaping what comes next.

3k+

U.S. Consumers

5k+

Retail Projects Across Categories



Tecovas SoHo

01 Research
What we're seeing emerge

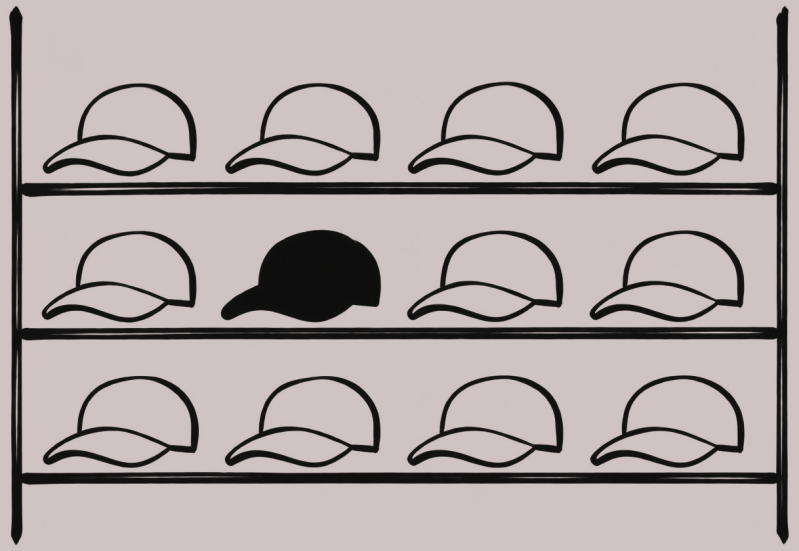
02 Consumer Insights
What people need

03 Brand Signals
How the market is responding

04 Experience Drivers
What it means for experience

05 Design Drivers
How it could take form

The Search for Substance



In 2027, brands will need to sharpen, not broaden.

In our 2026 Future Forecast, we found that the acceleration of AI made human qualities feel increasingly valuable, bringing the ‘Humanity Premium’ into focus.

Now, we’re living through a time of saturation in trends, imagery, and content. The rise of “AI slop” captures a broader fatigue with things that are technically competent but culturally empty: made for everyone, yet meaningful to no one.

Bombarded with more information, micro-trends, and thought pieces than we can process, we face a paradox: infinite choice and personalization have led us to greater predictability and sameness.

Consumer Signals

Consumer mindsets are increasingly defined by declining trust and a craving for certainty and clarity.

Declining Trust

92%

say the rise of AI-generated content is making it harder to trust information online.

DoubleVerify, 2026



Micro-Trend Overload

72%

of social media users report feeling overwhelmed by the volume of content they see daily.

WorldMetrics, 2026



Rising Uncertainty

90%

are uncertain whether the content they see online is reliable or real.

Gartner, 2026



Brand Signals

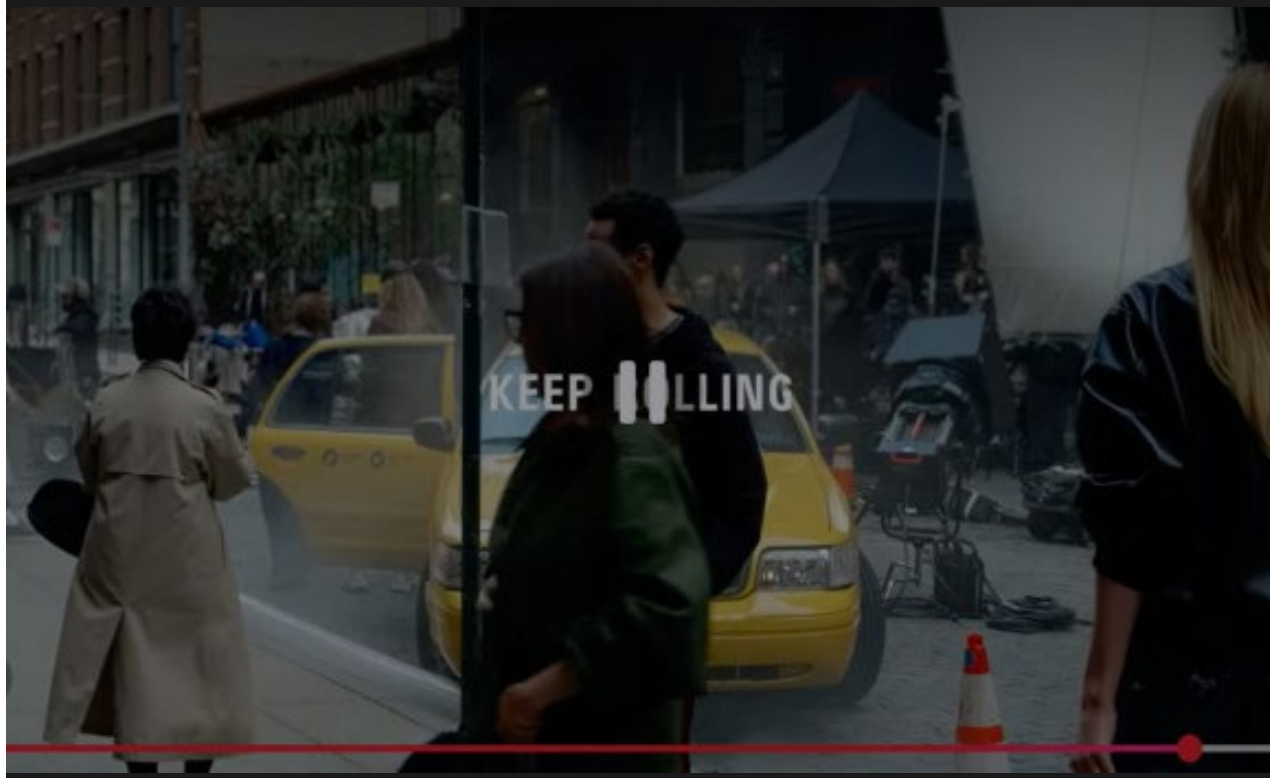
As the landscape of ‘same’ grows, standing apart will become its own form of cultural currency.

Amid endless feeds of algorithmically flattened taste, consumers will increasingly seek out the things that require a little more knowledge to find, understand, and appreciate, using what they discover, where they go, and the brands they know as signals of taste, discernment, and cultural fluency.

97%

of consumers say authenticity is a key factor in their decision to support a brand.

Clutch, 2026



Balenciaga

Balenciaga’s burner Instagram account revealed the making of its most recent campaign, using off-duty moments, creative process, and imperfection to give audiences insider access and reinforce trust.



Daisy Chain Fields Festival

Olivia Rodrigo's Daisy Chain Fields Festival was a one-day music festival created to celebrate women in music, with 100% of proceeds going towards women's rights organizations. Its success shows how moving away from the 'middle' and taking a clear stance can make consumers feel represented, understood, and part of something larger.

Brand Signals

In response, brands are going deeper rather than broader.

There is a focus on the cultural codes and values that already make them distinct, pulling back the curtain on how things are made, and creating experiences that feel personal, specific, and true to their values.

80%

of consumers say the brands they interact with must be a good fit with who they are.

Edelman, 2026

Living Example

Mitchell & Ness



Mitchell & Ness' Philadelphia flagship shows what happens when a brand goes deeper into its own cultural codes rather than chasing what's next.

Rooted in the idea of "Philly's Own, Since 1904," the multi-floor flagship designed by IA, turns more than a century of sports heritage into a living brand experience, layering local symbols, rituals, stories, and opportunities for participation throughout the space.

01

Symbols

A 700-pound Liberty Bell replica and distinctly Philly cultural signifiers.

02

Rituals

"Ring the Bell" and "Fly, Eagles, Fly" tap into behaviors fans already own.

03

Social Proof

Merchandise and customization turn fandom into identity-driven expression.

04

Community

A third-floor event space shifts the brand from retailer to cultural host.

2027 Retail Experience Drivers

In 2027, the search for substance will push retail design beyond surface-level storytelling, toward spaces that are radically specific, visibly authentic, and reinforced through collective participation.

01	Collective Validation	Trust reinforced through community, shared experiences, and social proof.
02	Radical Specificity	The era of one-size-fits-all is giving way to identity-driven brand expression.
03	Indisputable Transparency	The invisible made visible, bringing hidden systems, processes, and expertise into public view.

2027 Retail Design Exploration



01

Collective Validation

User-generated content
Shared focal points
“Phygital” implementations
Multisensory immersion
Multipurpose social spots

02

Radical Specificity

Hand-painted details
Culturally significant motifs
Providing choice
Personalization studios
Themed micro-environments
Adaptable technology



03

Indisputable Transparency

Behind-the-scenes access
See-through materials
Open, visible workstations
Work-in-progress displays
Product journeys



The Age of Unbound



In 2027, the opportunity for brands is to lower the stakes.

Life on the edge of the next big disruption has created a growing appetite for experiences that feel lighter, slower, and less demanding. A counterculture to constant striving is emerging: less optimization, stimulation, and pressure to perform, and more permission to wander, play, and simply be.

In our 2026 Future Forecast, we noted that consumers searched for moments that disrupted their routines through productive friction and challenge. Today, this has shifted into a desire for experiences that make life feel like it's slowing down.

From side quests and hobby-maxxing to 'hushpitality,' people are seeking silence and reclaiming pursuits that aren't linked to self-improvement.

Consumer Signals

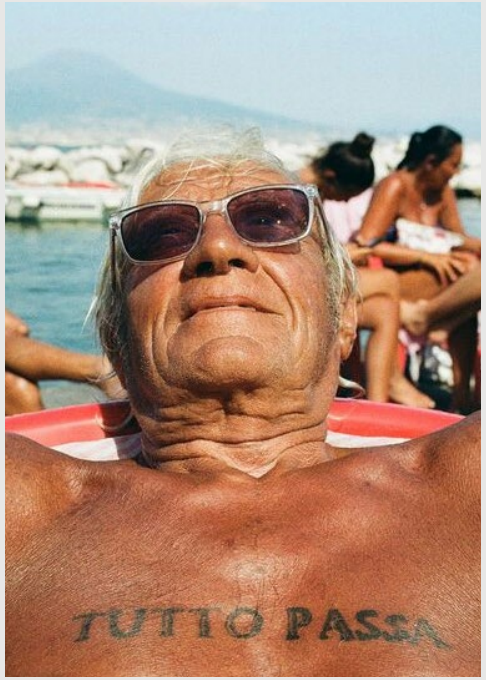
After years of “locking in,” consumers crave experiences free from the pressure of constant self-improvement and optimization.

Pressure to Optimize

81%

feel they are falling behind their peers in at least one aspect of life.

Forbes, 2026



Low Commitment

76%

of Gen Z want casual, low-pressure, and less overwhelming social environments.

The Harris Poll, 2026



Purposeless Pleasure

51%

of Gen Z say having a hobby contributes to their joy.

Pinterest, 2026



Brand Signals

Caught between inherited ideas of success and a more uncertain reality, consumers are rewriting what “making it” means.

As more people push back against a culture of constant growth, brands have the opportunity to help lighten the load while creating space for curiosity, play, and participation without pressure.

84%

of Americans consider wellness a top or important everyday priority.

European Spa Magazine, 2026



District Vision

District Vision’s LA flagship extends beyond retail after hours. By hosting meditation, education, and community programming, the store turns into a sanctuary, creating space for pause and recovery.



Sephora

Sephora's Quiet Hours reduce music, lighting, and in-store sensory stimuli to create a calmer shopping experience, making beauty retail more accessible for customers seeking comfort, focus, and sensory ease.

Brand Signals

Rather than maximizing engagement, some brands are deliberately creating experiences that let people step out of 'leisure optimization' and into simply being.

90%

of customers said Sephora's Quiet Hours made stores feel more inclusive and welcoming for all.

Sephora, 2026

Living Example

GreenRow



IA's design for GreenRow's first SoHo flagship brings to life the idea of a retail environment turned sanctuary.

Designed to feel like a lived-in residence rather than a traditional showroom, the store invites visitors to slow down, explore, and experience comfort, craftsmanship, and sustainability firsthand.

01

Sanctuary

Residential design cues transform the store from a transactional environment into a place of comfort and escape.

02

Restoration

Soft textures, greenery, and slower-paced exploration encourage visitors to pause rather than optimize.

03

Wandering

The environment rewards curiosity and discovery, inviting guests to browse without pressure or urgency.

2027 Retail Experience Drivers

In 2027, retail design will honor the age of the unbound by loosening the knot, encouraging lower-stakes participation with the promise of refuge, recovery, and joy.

01	Permission to Wander	Encouraging effortless exploration through low-stakes, open-ended experiences.
02	Community Without Commitment	Creating belonging without expectations, obligations, or long-term commitment.
03	Embedded Recovery	Integrating moments of refuge, recovery, and presence into the infrastructure of daily life.

2027 Retail Design Exploration



01

Permission to Wander

Non-transactional spaces
Collision paths
Exploration loops
Nonlinear discovery
Lingering spaces
A hint of mystery

02

Community Without Commitment

Shared presence
Moments for light participation
Places to just observe
Open workshops
Amphitheater seating



03

Embedded Recovery

Points of pause
Skylights, light wells
Projection-mapped refuge
Quiet sensory zones
Vertical space as sanctuary
Soft transition spaces



The Rise of the Resourceful



In 2027, consumers expect the built environment to be as resourceful as they are.

As financial stress, affordability concerns, and economic uncertainty reshape everyday life, consumers are embracing repair, secondhand shopping, and reuse as practical ways to stretch resources, navigate uncertainty, and regain control.

As consumers learn to do more with less, they expect brands to demonstrate the same adaptability, favoring visible action over sustainability claims and greenwashing.

In our 2026 Future Forecast, consumers sought spaces to belong beyond consumption. Today, they seek spaces that enable participation, self-sufficiency, and community.

Consumer Signals

Once driven by nostalgia, sustainability, and thrift culture, resourcefulness is becoming a necessity.

Financial Stress

88%

of Americans reported financial stress entering 2026.

NEFE, 2026



Doing More With Less

82%

of consumers are using items longer before replacing them to save money.

McKinsey & Company, 2026

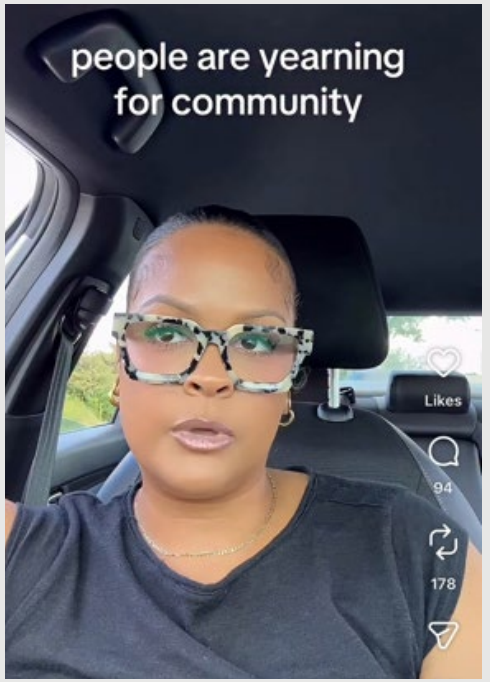


Seeking Community

47%

of Americans feel lonely on a typical day.

Talkspace, 2026



Brand Signals

This shift in mindset marks a transition between convenience culture, which despite its ease and efficiency has left us feeling stuck and unsatisfied, and the rise of the resourceful consumer.

As more people push back against a culture of constant growth, brands have the opportunity to help lighten the load while creating space for curiosity, play, and participation without pressure.

69%

prefer to repair items instead of buying new ones.

McKinsey & Company, 2026



Levi's

Levi's San Francisco flagship serves as a hub for the brand's Wear Longer Project, hosting repair workshops that teach customers how to mend and maintain the pieces they already own. By bringing repair into the store, Levi's turns product care into a visible, community-focused experience that builds knowledge, strengthens connection, and helps extend the life of its clothing.



The Dayton Arcade

The Dayton Arcade is a historic Ohio commercial destination that, although bustling in 1904, was left vacant for years. It was recently restored and adapted into a mixed-use hub featuring retail, hospitality, housing, offices, and community spaces. The Arcade's glass dome, original terrazzo floors, mosaics, and decorative metalwork were carefully restored and left visible throughout the redevelopment.

Brand Signals

Rather than relying on claims alone, brands must demonstrate how existing assets, materials, and environments can be continually adapted, reimagined, and given new life.

75%

say they want parks and public spaces to do more to reflect shared history and culture.

Trust for Public Land, 2026

Living Example

Williams Sonoma & Pottery Barn



Rather than building from the ground up, IA reimagined a former Barnes & Noble as a combined Williams Sonoma and Pottery Barn, extending the life of the existing building through adaptive reuse while creating a renewed retail destination.

While adapting the existing building was more complex than starting from scratch, the project shows how reinvention can strengthen community presence and enhance the customer experience.

01

Resourcefulness

IA prioritized reuse over replacement, maximizing the value of resources that were already there.

02

Enhanced Journey

A grand staircase and a new terrace carved into the existing massing create an engaging path through the store and stronger connections between the levels.

03

Community Anchor

The building's 360-degree visibility reinforces a strong sense of local presence, keeping the store a recognizable destination.

2027 Retail Experience Drivers

In 2027, resourcefulness will reshape retail through more intentional spaces, empowering people to adapt and reinvent, and making circular reinvention visible and desirable.

01	Productive Incompleteness	Spaces intentionally designed to adapt as programs, tenants, and needs change.
02	Empowered Facilitation	Environments that empower communities to adapt, contribute, and reinvent together.
03	Circular Reinvention on Display	Repurposing buildings and materials and making the process visible to consumers.

2027 Retail Design Exploration



01

Productive Incompleteness

Modular display systems
Raw materials
Evolving displays
Co-created environments
Community-built installations

02

Empowered Facilitation

Workshop spaces
Space for skill building
Visible repair
Interactive learning exhibits
Before-and-after displays



03

Circular Reinvention on Display

Adaptive reuse
Designing for disassembly
Reclaimed materials
Upcycled installations
Embedding history



Retail Futures



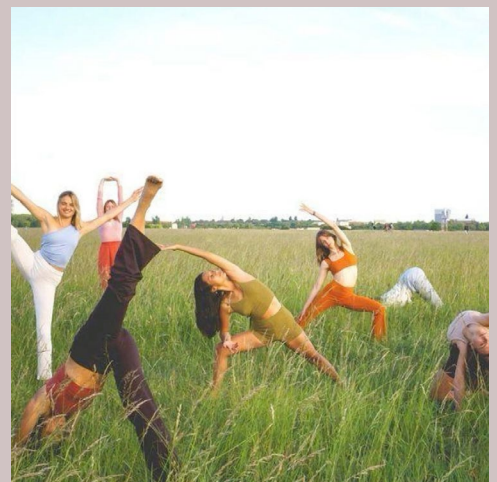
Pull back
the curtain.



Signal
resilience.







Lower
the stakes.





IA Retail

Authors

HumanX by IA is a research initiative committed to shaping the future of design, grounded in a nuanced understanding of consumer needs, behaviors, and expectations.

Get ahead of 2027.

Book a tailored HumanX session to identify what's next for your consumers, brand, and spaces.



Carlotta Dove

Director of Consumer Experience
& Founder of HumanX

IA's Retail Studio

c.dove@interiorarchitects.com



Olivia Gillett

Retail Strategy Specialist
& HumanX Researcher

IA's Retail Studio

o.gillett@interiorarchitects.com

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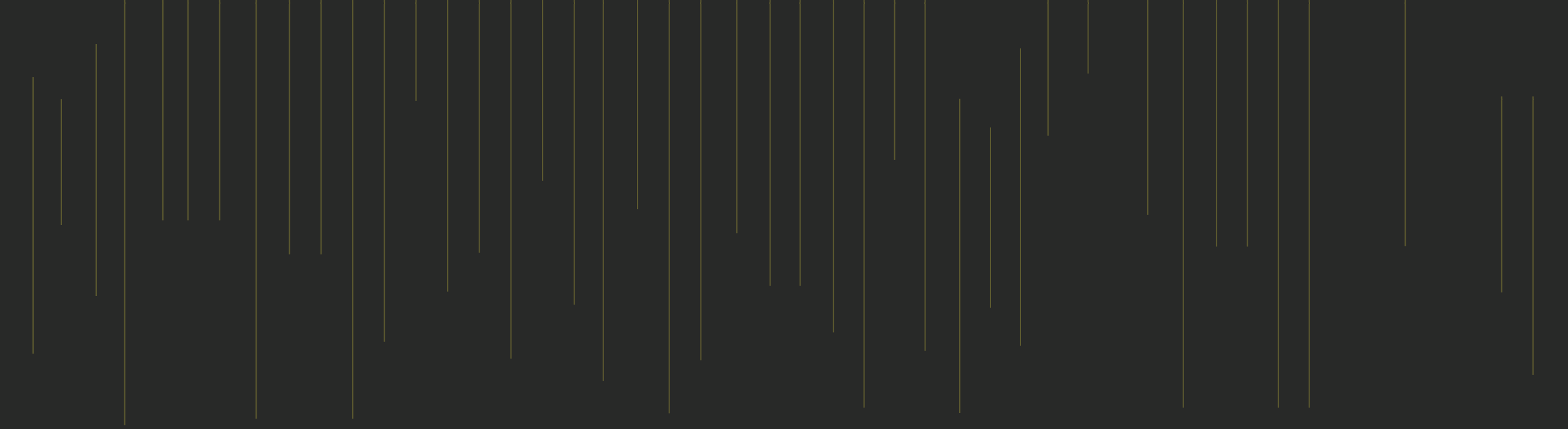
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