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Zurich Shoppers Take Dim View of New Lights, Miss Festoons

Dec. 21 (Bloomberg) -- Zurich's shoppers are up in arms after retailers in the city's main shopping street spent 2.4 million Swiss francs (\$1.8 million) on a series of flashing fiberglass tubes to replace strings of traditional bulbs used since 1971.

Shoppers say the 1.1 kilometer (0.7 mile) long row of off-white tubes doesn't reflect the spirit of the season. Retail groups, concerned that shoppers may stay away in the most important days of the year, have scheduled a crisis meeting for today.

``It just doesn't fit with Christmas," said Sigebert Rieder, 42, a bank worker inspecting 3,500-franc watches in Swatch Group AG's Omega store on Bahnhofstrasse, the main shopping street leading from the train station to Paradeplatz, home to the city's biggest banks. ``It's like abstract art, and not everybody cares for abstract art."

Angry shoppers have posted some 700 comments on the Web site of Zurich's Tages-Anzeiger newspaper and sent as many as 60 emails to the Bahnhofstrasse Association, the retailers' group responsible for the new lights. Cities such as Schaffhausen, an hour north of Zurich, ran newspaper ads including a voucher to lure frustrated Zurichers to the city near the German border.

``It's just ugly," said Peter Saner, head of the Swiss retail association, which represents companies including Jelmoli Holding AG, the owner of the department store of the same name in the city center.

Retailers generate the highest European sales per square meter on Bahnhofstrasse, according to Colliers Retail Services Schweiz in Zurich. Rents rose 47 percent to \$3,513 per square meter a year in the year through June, according to Cushman & Wakefield Inc.

No More Festoons

The new display, called the World's Largest Timepiece because it produces patterns of lights in a countdown to Christmas, is made up of 275 tubes, each seven meters (21 feet) tall. The tubes have 896 separate points of light that form images such as snowflakes.

and the debate centers on how often they should be lit.

``Other years I came specifically for the Christmas lights, but not this year," said Nadine Kuriger, 15, writing text messages on her mobile phone from a Bahnhofstrasse bench. ``I liked the old ones before better."

The new lighting replaced 20,640 round bulbs, which hung in strings of eight from 215 festoons stretched across the street. The old bulbs glowed with a slight yellow color, an effect some Zuerchers say was warmer than the new tubes' bright white.

``We got a lot of criticism," said Heidi Muehleemann, a board member of the Zurich Bahnhofstrasse association, in a telephone interview Dec. 12.

When the old lighting first appeared 34 years ago, its scope and design were new, Muehleemann said. The yellow bulbs were later imitated in many other cities and became overshadowed by lighted shop windows and storefronts, she said.

``I admire the courage" of the Zurich retailers, said Urs Welten, head of the Pro Innenstadt group that promotes inner city life in Basel, in a phone interview Dec. 20. Zurich's new light ``is phenomenal, but it's no Christmas light. I'm not sure if I had done the same for Basel."

To contact the reporter on this story: