

STORES

The traditional definition of a 'flagship' is eroding and it is now used in a variety of contexts. **John Ryan** reports

The thing about contemporary life is that many of the certainties once held dear have either disappeared, or are in the process of doing so.

The high street is now in shoppers' living rooms, and there are almost no times of the year when they can't go shopping. Even landmarks such as retail flagships can now be small as well as big.

The latter point has little to do with technology, which is at the heart of many of the changes taking place, and much more to do with a change in the way people shop.

But before considering this, there is a simple question that needs to be asked. What is a retail flagship?

In naval terms, a flagship is the best vessel in a fleet, the one the others in the flotilla look towards for direction and to offer inspiration on how they should conduct themselves. And for a long time, that was what was understood when the term was deployed in a retail context.

Traditionally, it meant that a stroll down Regent Street or Oxford Street would involve passing very big stores stocking the entire product range a retailer might have.

Many shops of this kind are still in these locations, but there are others there that also call themselves flagships but are relatively small.

The rise of specialist retailers means chains still aspire to have flagship branches that inspire other stores – it is just that they do not have to involve hectares of floorspace.

Into this category fall outfits such as the newly opened T2 on Regent Street, the Swatch store on Oxford Street and Karen Millen in Knightsbridge.

The other point worth mulling is that flagships do not have to be in London, although many are.

Paperchase has a flagship on Tottenham Court Road, but it also has one on which it has conferred the title on Glasgow's Buchanan Street.

Equally, The White Company has a substantial London outpost on Sloane Square, but pride of place probably goes to the brilliant white modernist store in Norwich, which looks like a little piece of Hollywood beamed down into the heart of a medieval city.

The flagship's



T2

See galleries of retailers' flagships on
Retail-week.com/stores



changing role

WHAT DEFINES A FLAGSHIP?

Scale and offer A showcase for a retailer's entire range

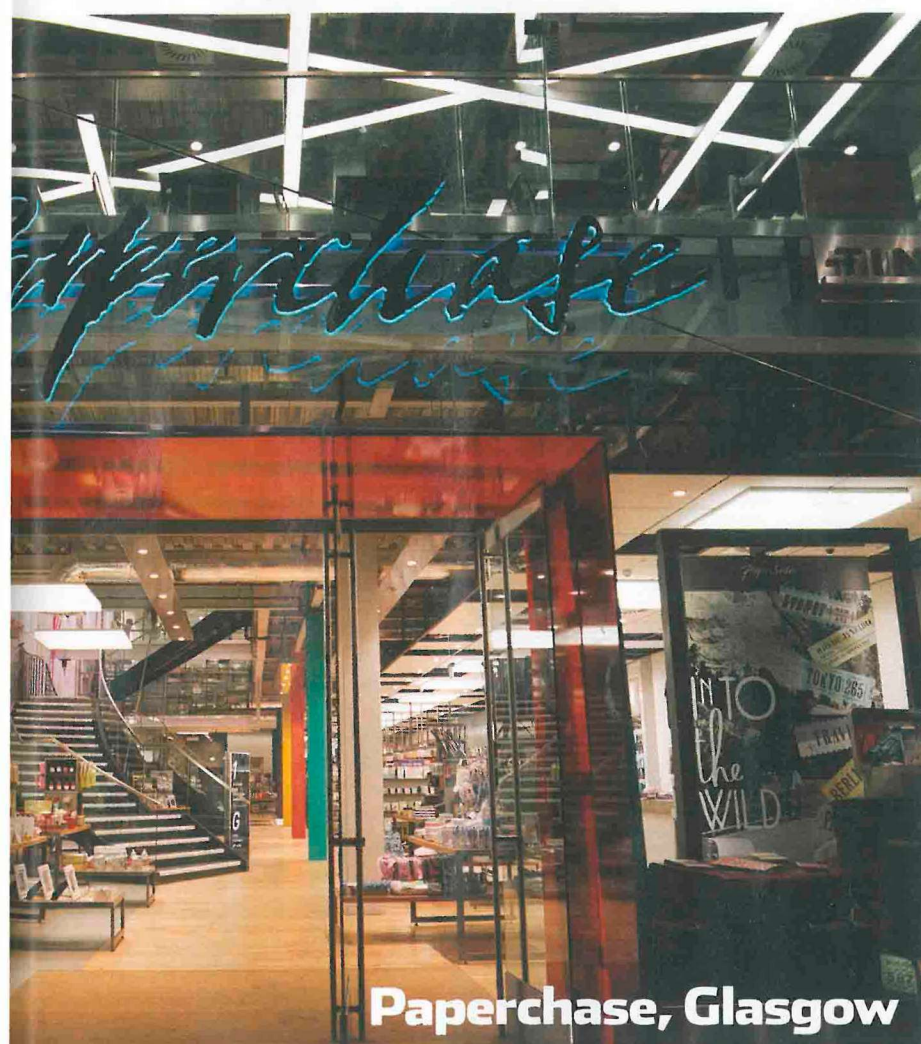
Concept store Focusing on a particular category or idea

Online only The idea of flagships as a physical space is eroding

A model for others Defining a retailer's store portfolio

Agents of change

Reinventing and redefining customer experience



Paperchase, Glasgow



INSAPHOME/IST

Blurred lines

So where does this leave those in search of clarity when using the word 'flagship'?

Tim Greenhalgh, chief creative officer and chairman of consultancy Fitch, says that traditional ideas of what constitutes a flagship are at odds with the evolving landscape:

"One of the things that we're interested in is, is a flagship a website? Could it be an app or is it a physical space? The idea of a flagship as a physical space is something that has to be questioned."

Or put another way, the flagship as an entity is amorphous and defining it will depend on who you happen to be talking to.



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► Howard Saunders, a New York-based retail consultant, suggests that perhaps a flagship should be viewed as an idea that takes different forms, rather than just a big shop: "A flagship is the place a brand showcases all aspects of its personality. It's not just about range or scale, but about creating a space where we can engage at all levels."

Viewed in this manner, it's quite hard not to think that a flagship should be a large space. The Uniqlo store on New York's Fifth Avenue is a case in point. This is a very big shop that changes internally on a regular basis. It represents an expression of everything that Uniqlo stands for – bright, futuristic, fashionable, price-led.

But if size is the main indicator of a showcase store then it would be hard not view almost any supermarket of scale as a flagship.

However, Anthony Wysome, head of development at Waitrose says that flagships, as a notion, don't really exist in food retailing. "What we're after is consistency, not a store that stands out on its own," he says.

Certainly, big supermarkets strike a branded attitude and they are about range, but that doesn't make them flagships.

The other question that has to be raised is whether it is possible to have more than a single flagship in a retail chain? Brands such as New Look have referred to selected top-tier stores as "brand flags" – a departure from the idea of leading a fleet.

Breaking tradition

All of which means that there are flagships in the traditionally understood sense of the word, but there are a host of other formats and ideas that are vying for consideration. That may mean that the concept of a flagship is dying, less because they are disappearing and more because the waters have become muddled.



KAREN MILLEN



WHITE COMPANY

A flagship is a range of experiences that make a store a destination

Greenhalgh makes the point that there are other areas of retail endeavour that might be more useful for retailers: "Concept stores are more interesting than flagships. Surely we need to be learning more about what stores do, than just standing back and admiring big shops?"

It is a fair point, but how can the status quo of the flagship in 2015 be summarised? It seems reasonable to assume that for many scale will remain a defining factor, as will an element of surprise.

Perhaps Selfridges in London serves as visual shorthand for all that a flagship should be about.

Despite there being several Selfridges around the UK, the London store is definitely the one that most people think of when the name is mentioned. But it is a movable feast. One of the reasons that this retailer inspires repeat visits is its ability to reinvent its offer on a regular basis.

In-store pop-ups are one of the characteristics that Selfridges has made its own, ranging from tie-ups with exhibitions at the V&A to the opportunity to see yourself turned into a lollipop, courtesy of a 3D printing machine.

It is the kind of thing that makes a flagship. It is a range of experiences that make this store a destination, as well as its 600,000 sq ft. It has scale, range and experience – and some of this is replicated online. Only one quibble – in-store wi-fi remains an elusive quarry in Selfridges on Oxford Street.

A place probably remains for the flagship as a label in the deep expanse of retail, but as the types and formats of stores that warrant the definition continue to shift with the tides, it seems that the flagship is headed towards uncharted waters. ■