

## STORES

Next's Norwich big-box branch shows edge-of-town retailing at its best. **John Ryan** pays a visit

# Next's big aspi

**B**ig-box retailing has come in for something of a hammering recently. The large stores on the edge of towns and cities have been cited by some as the reason that so many retailers have reported disappointing results in recent years, reflecting changing shopping habits.

Yet they can't be all bad, or else they wouldn't keep opening. And for proof of what is possible, look no further than Norwich.

A good 15-minute drive from the centre of the East Anglian city is the Longwater retail park, home to a massive Sainsbury's. This is the location retail bellwether Next has chosen for a store that unites lighting with lingerie, and hats with hydrangeas, all under the banner of its Next Home and Garden fascia.

## Against the grain

Open for just over a month, this is a shop that defies the normal rules of edge-of-town retail architecture. Any approach to the nearby roundabout that funnels traffic from the busy A47 means passing this enormous structure.

That it is a box is beyond doubt, but the term 'slab-sided' could not be readily applied to what confronts the shopper arriving at the car park.

Next boss Lord Wolfson has said the retailer is aiming to create "aspirational out-of-town" architecture. And this store is its policy in action.

Rather than a straight up-and-down frontage, as is usually the case in an edge-of-town shed, this heavily glazed, stone-veneered building with faux-brick sides has a galleried frontage. It features no-nonsense, stone-clad square pillars supporting a canopy from which the majority of the windows are set back.

It is a two-floor store with a Costa Coffee on the upper level, which affords shoppers a grandstand view of the car park.

More sense can be made of what is on offer inside by looking at the various logos that adorn the building. Depending on which end of the structure they happen to be at, shoppers will



## NEXT, NORWICH, LONGWATER

**Opened** August 6, 2015

**Number of floors** Two

**Product offer**

All-encompassing

**Reason for visiting**

A real destination

**Store design template**

Next and Dalziel + Pow

**Ambience** Relaxed stylish

face a sign that reads 'Next Costa' or 'Next Home' or, in a shed-like addition at the right-hand end, a logo that reads 'Next Home and Garden'. Each sign is mounted on the large panes of glass, meaning a largely naturally lit interior.

Heading indoors, one thing immediately evident – even on a very wet Monday morning – is that this is a store that attracts a shed-load of shoppers, a facet shared by few other retail sheds.

The interior is heavily partitioned and the various categories on offer, which range from ladies' shoes to 'kitchen seasonal', are separated into rooms by means of multiple internal walls. Passing through the ground floor, home to the womenswear, kidswear and accessories departments, it is more or less business as usual for Next, although the inside is newer and brighter than other branches.



More pictures of Next's Norwich store on  
[Retail-week.com/nextnorwich](http://Retail-week.com/nextnorwich)



# rations



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It is in the homewares and outdoor garden areas that things are different from the majority of Next stores.

Starting outdoors, the area devoted to all things horticultural is much like the posh part of a garden centre, where people go to treat themselves after dealing with hose pipes and rakes.

In this store the garden area is mostly about potted plants, which are displayed inside grey wooden

frames, some with slatted overhead canopies, while others are more exposed to the elements.

Stone tiles form a tessellated pattern underfoot, creating a sense that this is a piece of the indoors out-of-doors. It certainly does not have the semi-builder's yard feel that characterises the plant area in so many DIY operations.

Worth noting are the visual merchandising elements such as a raised frame



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► painted in vivid lime and set against a grey wall to highlight particular plants, as well as a graphic depicting a birdhouse in a rural setting. The attention to detail really sets this part of the store apart from its rivals.

## Light and airy

Inside the 'kitchen seasonal' area the same colour scheme has been applied, creating coherence with the outdoors. As in the garden, space is used generously and there is plentiful circulation room for shoppers. A rectangular skylight ensures that natural daylight permeates this part of the store.

From here, the shopper moves into the store's home department where furniture, carpets and curtains are on offer. This department has been heavily sectioned off by freestanding walls, deployed to make the space more manageable for shoppers and to act as cata-

logues, showcasing the range in each category.

Shoppers can look at, say, a leather sofa and then consider all the similar options that might be available on a graphic that fills each freestanding wall.

It is a bit like consulting a kiosk without having to press all the buttons to get access to the broader world of Next Home. It is also instantly understandable.

Lighting on this floor is warm and subdued and the wood vinyl mats help with the division of the space.

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Upstairs is home to the bedroom, bathroom and lighting departments, as well as a good-looking menswear department where dark, polished wood prevails, giving the ambience of a gentleman's outfitters of old. And of course there is the Costa Coffee shop, for when shoppers need a break from the relaxed style on offer.

It is fair to say that there is little revolutionary about this shop, but

that is not really the point. It is the third shop where Next shoppers can enjoy total access to the brand – the others are in Hedge End in Southampton and High Wycombe – and the hallmark of this store is consistency.

Delivering a proposition on this scale demands rigorous thought and execution if it is not to look and feel like a retail shed. It is without doubt one of the better stores in the area and worth the ride out to the urban periphery to take a look at.

All of which perhaps goes to prove that the edge-of-town sector remains alive and kicking. Big-box detractors could do worse than jumping on a train to Norwich to see what is possible – it's worth the trip. ■