

The meaning of

What makes a store a luxury? How does the transition occur from a perfectly respectable but nonetheless mid-market emporium to a place regarded as special – where experience, service, interior design and product range are all out of the ordinary?

It used to be that luxury stores were easy to spot; these were the places where leading and expensive brands were found and where shoppers would go when in treat mode, or perhaps just to gawp appreciatively but purchase no more than a fancy cup of coffee.

Then along came the concept of *masstige* (luxury for all), offering middle-market consumers a little slice of a world that more normally is denied them. The outcome is confusion. Knowing when a store merits the luxury tag is more difficult today than it has ever been.

Andrew McDonald, managing director of design consultancy Four IV, notes the shift: “Luxury has become very homogeneous. There’s a whole group of people who wouldn’t be seen dead with a Chanel handbag – they’re interested in commissioning something.”

Even here, the ground is uncertain – the ability to customise products has become almost workaday, and so another hallmark of the luxury experience has been diminished.

Where next then for luxury merchants, and how do they differentiate themselves?

Alison Cardy, managing director at design consultancy HMKM – which, like Four IV, has worked on department stores across the globe – is clear about what needs to be done: “We’re talking about creating more experiences in stores. We’ve worked with Selfridges and it’s much more about experiences than just the product these days.”

Boutique retailing

The key question then is whether a department store, which tends to be the natural home of luxury, is the experience, or is this role fulfilled by the occupants of the space that it offers?

Adam Shilton, HMKM associate director, says Bangkok’s newly opened shopping and leisure

complex, EM Quartier, is a “fully boutique approach to department store retailing”.

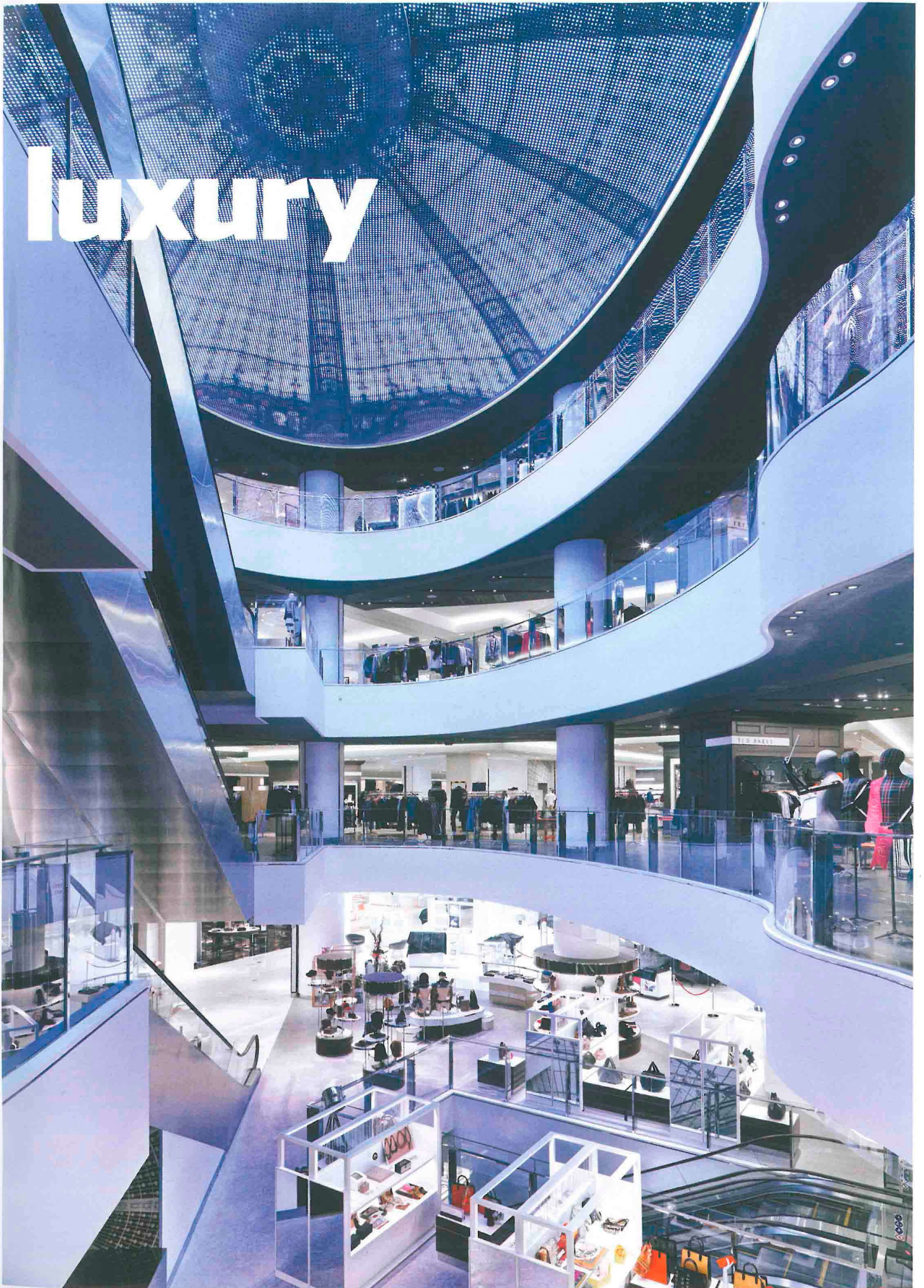
“This is the department store being more nimble,” he says. “We basically designed 30 boutiques under one roof.” Adopt this approach and there is, of course, a possibility the end result is an upscale quasi-market where every luxury stall is different. This might sound desirable, but the danger is that the sense of place is lost and with it the overall luxury aura. The trick is to give individual brands the ability to make their presence felt, without losing sight of the store as a whole that the shopper happens to be in. According to Shilton, this translates as “floors, walls and ceilings and how they are used to promote the idea of where you are”.

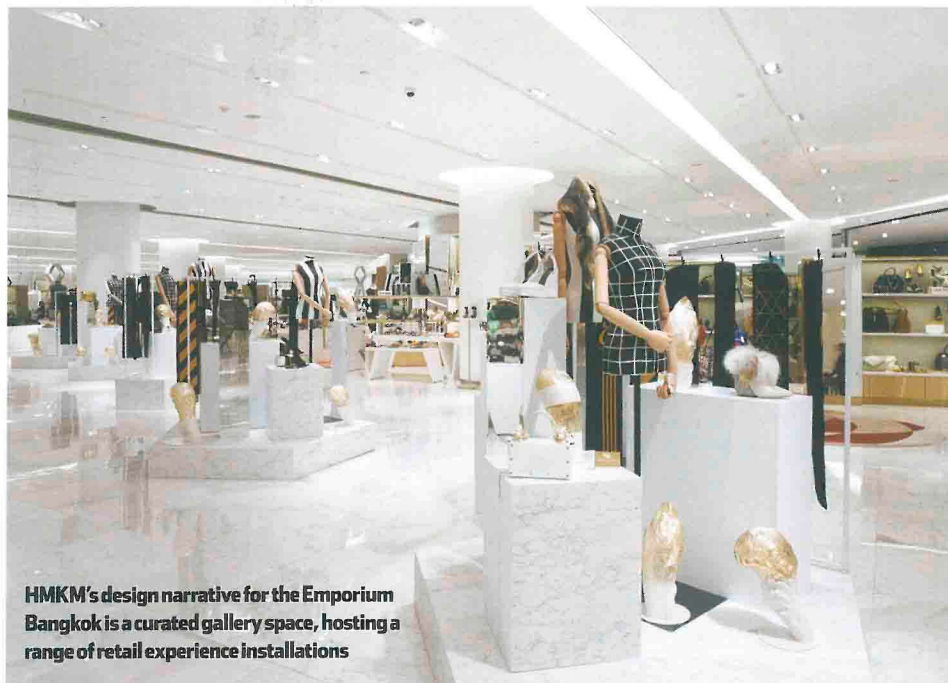


HMKM is the firm behind the retail styling of both the Emporium Bangkok (this page) and Galeries Lafayette Beijing (opposite)

Customising products has become almost workaday, and so another hallmark of the luxury experience has been diminished

luxury





HMKM's design narrative for the Emporium Bangkok is a curated gallery space, hosting a range of retail experience installations



Designs tend to be international. What happens in London tends to happen in New York and Tokyo

Once established, things can still change: luxury retail is mutable. Chris Dewar-Dixon, founder and creative director at Four IV, says one of the things that sets Selfridges apart is its constant reinvention of itself: "It's an egalitarian space where the luxury is space and change." He contrasts this with Harrods, which he says caters for a very specific market.

This train of thought is in line with Shilton's. He says that personal shopping areas are important in particular markets, such as the Middle East, in order to foster "special moments" in a store and to ensure a degree of privacy.

It's clear that the association of luxury with exclusivity is as close today as always it has been, but some of the benchmarks by which a luxury experience is assessed have altered.

The same is true of the business of fitting out a store. Simon Campbell, managing director at Portview Fit-Out, says constructing the interior of a luxury store is certainly different from a mass-market environment: "In shopping centres you tend to be presented with a box and you get on with it. [In luxury interiors] the locations tend to be a little quirkier and you have to work within these constraints."

Practically, this means greater attention to detail (something that Campbell stresses), a more opulent palette of materials and a more international outlook.

The designs tend to be international, rather than local, in feel and generation," he says. "It's



much more about working to an international standard. What happens in London tends to happen in New York and Tokyo."

Location logistics

Darren Hill, managing director at ISG in the UK and Western Europe, agrees that the devil is in the detail: "The process for delivering a luxury environment is very different from some more mainstream clients.

"The fabric of the building has to suit the brand and you have to use a whole raft of materials and there are very fine tolerance levels [as far as installing these are concerned]. This means much more pre-planning to the required finish."

Owing to the high-profile locations where luxury retailers tend to site stores, the logistics of being able to do the work can be more

rigorous than in conventional malls or high streets, he adds.

While using luxury materials may be more exacting, it is the ability to bring together the many parties involved that marks out a luxury shopfitter-cum-project manager.

A case in point is the use of wallpaper, says Campbell: "It might take just a few days if you're fitting out a standard shop, but in luxury you may be dealing with craftspeople and the process can take weeks to achieve the desired effect."

The final element to account for within the luxury retail environment concerns service. Technology has a part to play, but service at this level means it cannot stand on its own. At the Burberry flagship store in Regent Street, for example, an iPad is part of the sales staff's armoury.

The reason is straightforward. Many



Luxury experiences are not confined to the physical. Luxury can function on a virtual basis

interaction. And yet even a cursory glance at the Net-a-Porter website makes apparent that online luxury department stores can be made to work. Dewar-Dixon says: "It seemed like a model that wouldn't work and yet it is incredibly successful."

It appears that luxury is a movable feast and the form it takes will depend as much on the context of the market in which it appears and the relative affluence of a population, as it does on the nature of the goods on display. Equally, luxury experiences are not confined to the physical. Luxury can function on a virtual basis, in spite of the absence of a human element (other than the physical delivery of the goods).

In short then, little is in fact clear and the ready availability of luxury items through a wide variety of mechanisms makes tying down what is involved difficult. Whether this is a part of the retail industry that is in transition is a moot point. In theory, anybody can be a luxury consumer, but whether this is a substantive fact rather depends on who you are talking to and where the conversation is taking place.

The only certainty is that this is part of retail which continues to attract large numbers of players and seems to be expanding across the globe – and it is likely to continue doing so.

(designed by Four IV), the French luxury department store chain is looking for five more store locations in China.

Does this rule it out of the luxury category, or given the size of the population and the country, is five stores at luxury level a sustainable option? The answer may well be the latter and the task ahead for Galeries Lafayette in China will be to offer stores that reflect the brand's values, but also which have distinguishable individuality. Luxury is not about roll-out, unless masstige is part of the concept, in which case it is questionable whether what is on offer really merits an upmarket label.

Finally, it is worth examining whether luxury and the luxury experience can be made available online.

The intuitive reaction might be no, as true luxury is posited on a level of service that assumes a considerable degree of human

less-exalted retailers provide shoppers with access to their broader range offered online, but via an in-store kiosk. In luxuryland this is palpably unacceptable – shoppers need to be made to feel extra special, and one way of doing this is by making the latest technology available to them. In essence, this is a standard service expected in a store of this kind, except elevated above the norm in that customers can have everything a brand has to offer displayed to them without having to make a single keystroke.

Dewar-Dixon says that luxury retailers are increasingly following a line already taken by leisure operators. "In hotels and spas you can see a service aspiration that can be transferred to luxury," he says.

A further point is that for luxury to live up to its billing, there shouldn't be too many outlets. Yet as Dewar-Dixon observes, while Galeries Lafayette opened a flagship in Beijing