

STORES

The home of Habitat on Tottenham Court Road has had a facelift. **John Ryan** visits and talks to managing director Clare Askem

Habitat's refurbishe

Habitat's store on Tottenham Court Road has been the flagship for almost as long as any of the current management can remember.

As a store it joined the Habitat family in the 1980s and had a mild makeover in 2005, but much of what was on view, until very recently, was a throwback to a time when the retailer had few competitors and it was in the vanguard of design-led home furnishing.

Times changed, as did Habitat, and in 2011 the retailer fell into administration. All but three stores became history; Tottenham Court Road was one of the survivors and it now leads a portfolio of three standalone UK shops and about 80 shop-in-shops in branches of Homebase, part of Home Retail Group, which became the owner of the Habitat rump.

The shop-in-shops vary in size from 6,000 sq ft in Chichester to a more typical 2,000 sq ft footprint. All of these pale into insignificance when set against Tottenham Court Road, which trades from 24,000 sq ft across two floors. The bulk of this space is in the basement, a large portion of which was, in a former life, a car park.

Clare Askem, managing director, is keenly aware of the store's history and says it looked a little "tired" when the decision was taken to undertake a significant revamp. The refurbish button was pressed five months ago and most of the basement makeover is now complete.

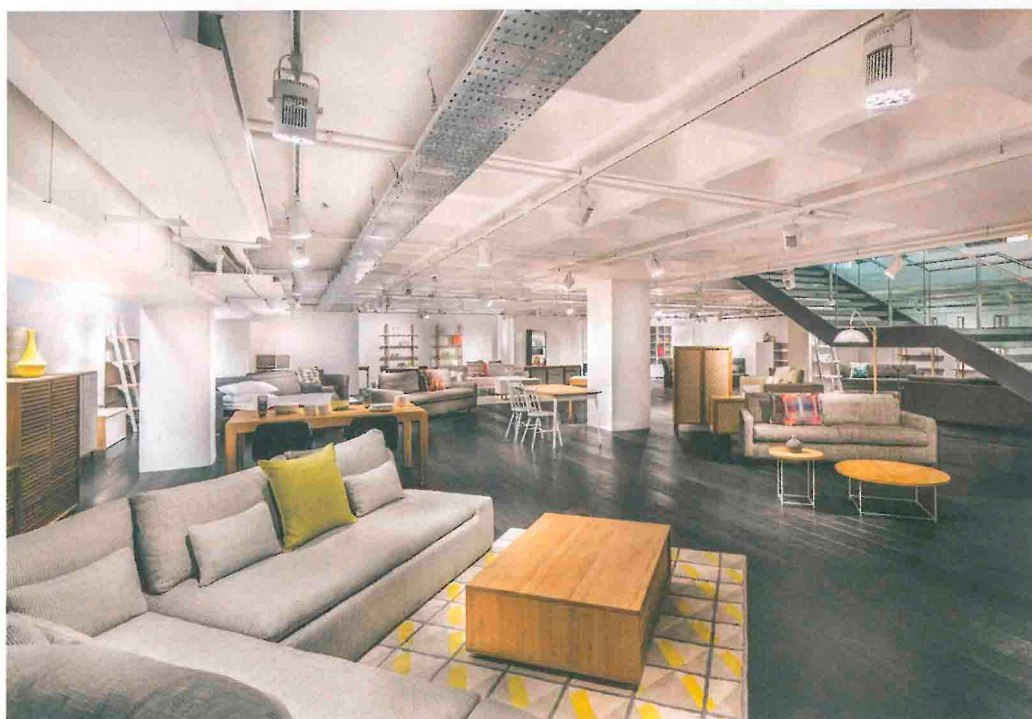
The ground floor will be finished by April 2016, providing the builders and shopfitters step up to the plate, according to Askem.

Meanwhile, it is the basement that is worth making the trip for. And for those previously familiar with the store, it is very different from what was there before.

It is fair to say that what's on view is a work in progress, but owing to the store geography the greatest part is probably over as far as the remodelling of the interior is concerned. The basement is accessed via a staircase in the middle of the ground floor. Plans are in place for the staircase to be changed in order that its orientation is



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HABITAT, TOTTENHAM COURT ROAD

Store refurb status

Work in progress

Design in-house

Basement ambience

Car park chic

Highlights Concrete coffered ceiling and dark stained floor

Outlook Resurgent

east-west, rather than south-west, as is currently the case.

That said, these are plans and there are no guarantees that Home Retail will allow the work to go ahead. Askem is hopeful however, and when a descent is made using the current staircase the revamped view is of a broad, open space.

It is a measure of the way in which shoppers have been conditioned by furniture retailers that

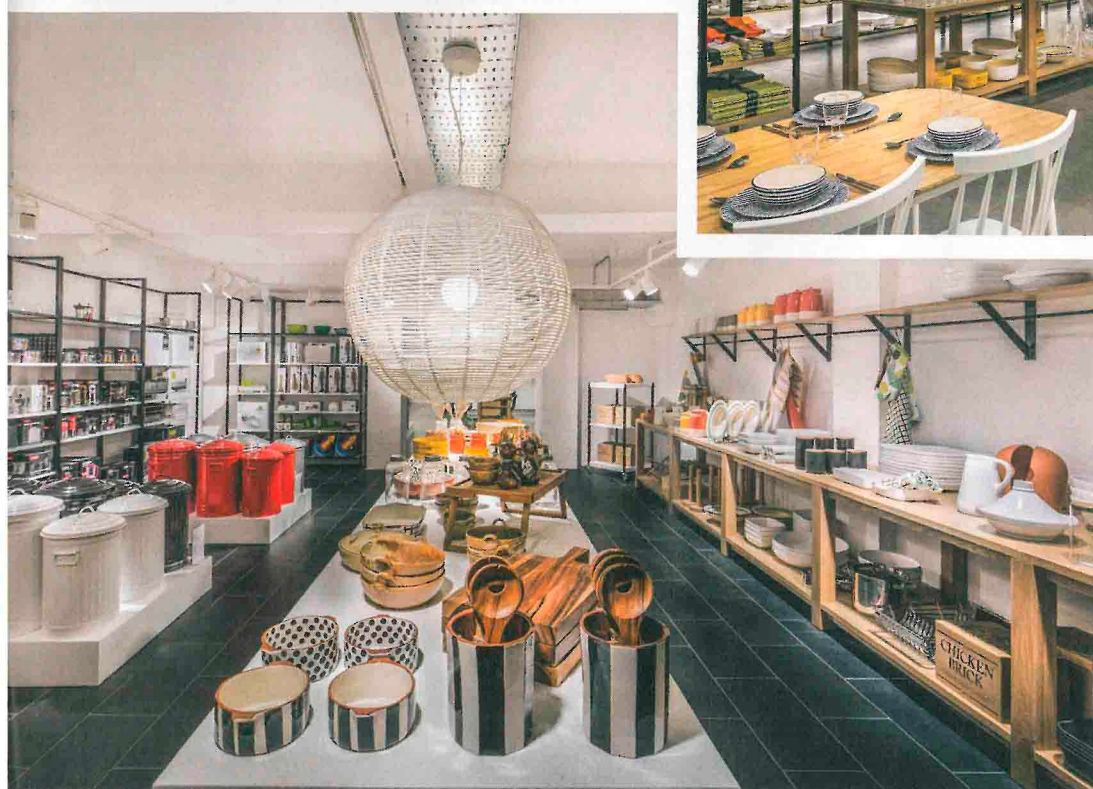
this is something of a surprise. The normal modus operandi in stores of this kind is for there to be roomsets. The theory goes that by combining cross-category items within a limited space, shoppers will be inspired and will head for the tills to buy not just a sofa, but all of the things that might be likely to go with it when creating a sitting room.

Not so in the new-look Habitat. Instead the basement is organised

More photos of the revamped Habitat store at
Retail-week.com/HabitatLondon



d flagship



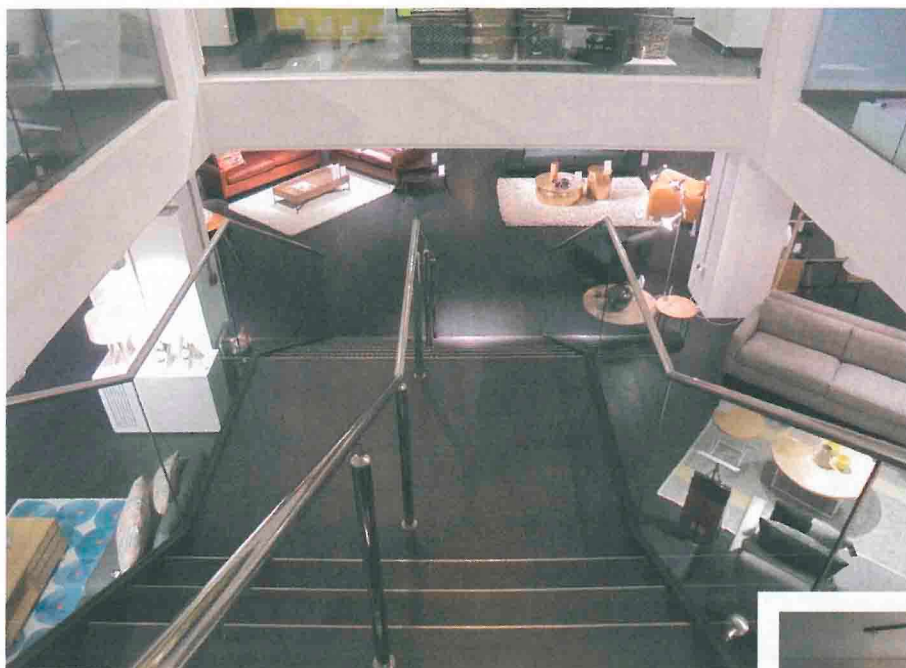
The feel is minimalist in keeping with the target customer type

largely by category with an area for sofas, armchairs and suchlike, a space for kitchenware, one for lighting, and on it goes.

Owing to the shape of the floorspace there is a strong sense of individual departments and the freestanding mid-shop walls that tend to characterise stores that use roomsets for displays are absent.

There is also an almost urban feel to the large area around the staircase. Askem says that the suspended ceiling

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► previously in place was taken down, raising the ceiling height (often a problem for retailers trading from basement locations) and revealing a coffered concrete structure from the time this part of the basement was a car park.

This has been whitewashed and as well as lightening the interior, it contrasts sharply with the dark stained timber floor.

The feel is minimalist, in keeping with the customer type that Askem says Habitat targets.

"We like to think of our shoppers as being cosmopolitan and that we are accessible to those seeking design for their homes, as well as some of the more student types."

Over the years, of course, the latter shopper will have decamped in large numbers to Ikea as well as some of the big supermarkets, a fact that is not lost on Askem.

That said, the impression created by this revamp is of a store

that places a premium on design while at the same time not feeling overly mass-market.

New areas

The lighting department, in particular, is noteworthy. Located in a semi-discrete room, the white walls of the rest of the floor have been dispensed with and in their place a light grey wash has been applied.

That gives the area a neutral feel while at the same time giving the lights on the perimeter and mid-shop displays the opportunity to shine, as it were, without the area becoming almost too bright.

There is no ambient light in this part of the shop, meaning that each item creates its own area of light and shade, adding drama to the vista.

There are also fitted kitchens and a kids' furnishings area, both new to Habitat and both given sufficient space to make



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them feel like credible offers in their own right.

As a refurbishment, this is not on the scale of, say, the John Lewis flagship on Regent Street, where multimillions were lavished on creating a new interior that would shift shopper perceptions of the retailer. It is nonetheless a highly effective use of budget.

When the ground floor is complete, which will involve moving the store entrance and possibly moving the iconic curving windows along the front of the store, this will once more be a destination for those seeking design while keeping an eye on costs.

And good news for those who have grown up with Habitat: the chicken brick – an item that no style-conscious kitchen in the late 1970s and early 1980s was without – is prominently displayed. Seem to remember buying my mum owning one of these, back in the day.

Plus ça change...