

## STORES

The Uniqlo flagship has recently reopened after a lengthy refurbishment – but was it worth the wait? **John Ryan** reports

# Uniqlo brings boutique

**A** year and nine days since it closed for refurbishment, Uniqlo at 311 Oxford Street has reopened.

Now, 374 days is a long time – a lot longer than almost any store refit – but as Takao Kuwahara, chief executive of Uniqlo in Europe, puts it: “There were some challenging construction issues. There were a lot of challenges for us in changing the lights and escalators.”

Kuwahara treads a fine line in understatement. When the store first opened in 2007 it was the largest Uniqlo on the planet. Since then it has been surpassed by branches in Shanghai and New York, among others.

One of the tasks the retailer faced was to make this a global flagship store once more and one that would fly the flag for the UK – the first market in which the retailer opened shops outside its native Japan.

## Localised emphasis

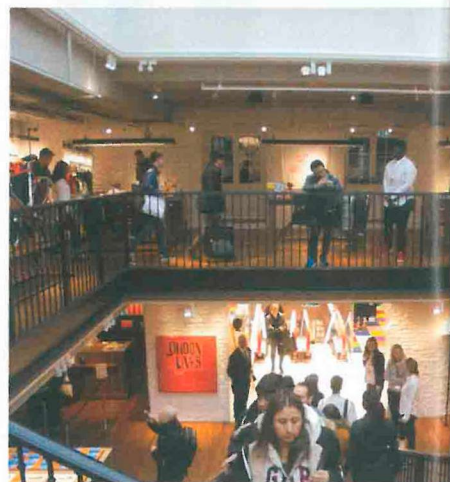
There are two other Uniqlo branches very nearby in London’s West End, one east of Oxford Circus and a second on Regent Street. In order for this one to stand out and enjoy flagship status, it had to offer something special and be bigger than its sister branches.

Kuwahara says: “In the past our stores were more standardised. Now we try to respect each market store by store.”

For that reason the Uniqlo store in the Marais district of Paris is housed in a former 19th-century factory where many of the original features have been retained and part of the basement level has been turned into a mini-museum.

On Oxford Street it has been a case of expanding the store’s footprint – which has roughly doubled to more than 24,100 sq ft over five floors – and creating a big point of difference on the two new top floors.

Prior to the refurbishment the two new selling floors were already part of Uniqlo but functioned as the retailer’s European head office. As part of



the remodelling, the head office was moved to Kingsway in Holborn and the two floors were converted into retail space.

Kuwahara explains that the new floors are completely different from any other Uniqlo and that in terms of the retailer’s estate this store is unique because “it is two concepts in one store”.



More pictures of Uniqlo's recently revamped London flagship on [Retail-week.com/UniqloOxfordSt](http://Retail-week.com/UniqloOxfordSt)



# flair to Oxford Street



## Reconfigured geography

Stand at the entrance and the work done by the in-house team, in collaboration with design consultancy Wonderwall, to fashion a two-in-one store of the kind Kuwahara mentions is not immediately apparent.

The ground floor, however, has been almost completely altered, with a glass mid-floor vitrine showcasing a

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**Takao Kuwahara, Uniqlo**

fountain of boxes that cascade from one level up.

Each box is covered in Liberty print in order to promote a new product range Uniqlo recently launched in collaboration with the luxury department store.

Behind this are the escalators. They formerly flanked the left- and right-hand walls but have now been relo-



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cated to make them a feature of the store design.

This works well, principally because they provide a framework for the scrolling red dot matrix displays that are a hallmark of Uniqlo's 'global flagships' across the world.

There is a small problem with the store geography, however, because this is quite a deep, narrow floor and the central escalator bank occupies a large portion of it.

That said, in common with Primark, which has done something similar in many of its newer stores, it is a show-stopping feature.

## WearHouse essentials

Some of what is on view feels familiar and those who have visited Uniqlo stores in Berlin, Paris, New York or Shanghai will not be entirely surprised.

Like the shops in a number of these locations, the ground floor offer is split between the sexes. The basement contains the men's offer and the two floors above ground are devoted to womenswear.

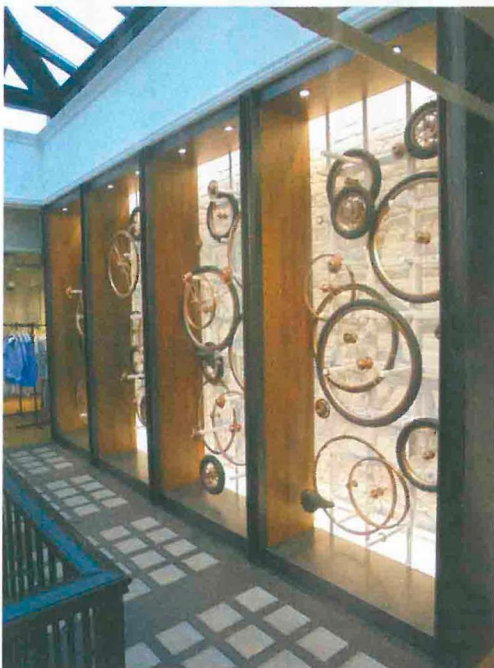
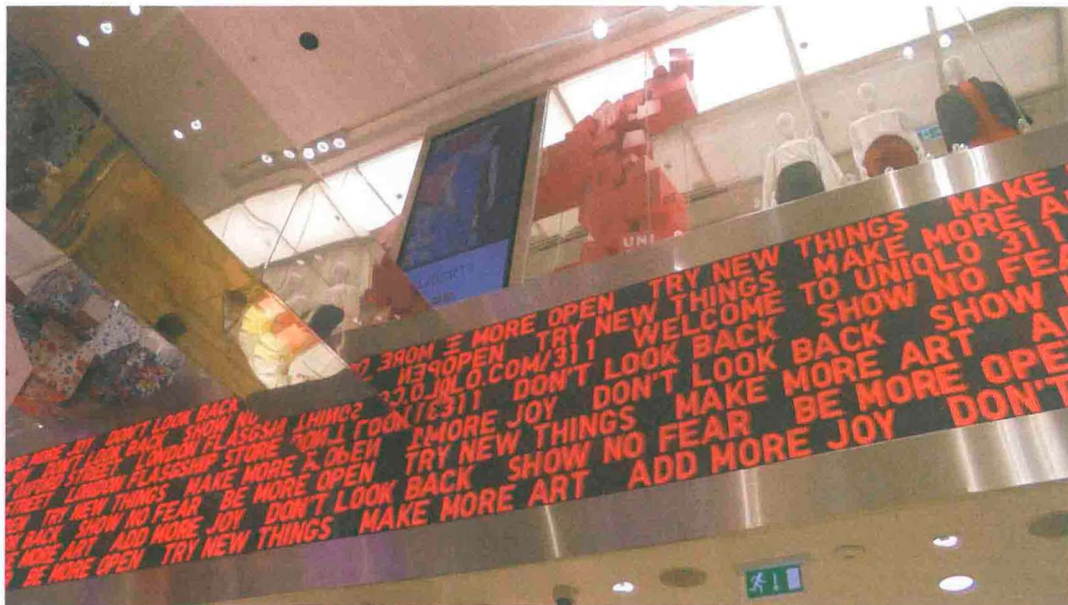
On the top two floors things alter dramatically. There is a children's department that is much like the rest of the store, but beyond is the Uniqlo WearHouse, which contains stock that is exactly the same as on the preceding floors.

It is, however, completely different in look and tone from the rest of the store, or any other Uniqlo outpost for that matter, and it even has a dedicated entrance from the ground floor, for those who want to skip the rest of the shop.

This is the "second concept" that Kuwahara has referred to and has more in common with a branch of Urban Outfitters than the retro space-age feel of a standard Uniqlo flagship.

In large part, this is down to the use of vintage wood, instead of the usual bleached and varnished wood in combination with shiny metal that is deployed across most Uniqlo stores.

The WearHouse consists of a complete floor on its lower level, while above, accessed by a black metal and wood staircase, there is a gallery level affording views of the floor beneath.



Much of the lower floor is filled with wooden tables on which objects that are regarded as everyday essentials for fashionable Londoners are displayed. In practice this means a mix of cosmetics, accessories, magazines and suchlike.

## Winning appeal

Arriving at the upper level, the shopper is confronted by an installation formed of bicycle wheels that have been arranged on the wall at the top of the staircase. All of them have been copper-plated and backlit.

Overall, the effect is of a part of the store that looks and feels like an independent boutique, and shoppers will no doubt be surprised that the stock is in fact the same as that in the rest of the building and that the prices are not higher.

Finally, there is a worn wooden deck situated at the top of the shop where special events will be held.

It is a moot point whether this store will repay the very substantial investment that it represents but, on balance and judging by the reaction of the shoppers on reopening day, it seems probable that it will quickly gain a loyal following.

This may not seem like an enormous retail space by the standards of Oxford Street, but it looks poised to punch above its weight and the lengthy refit has been worth it.

## UNIQLO, 311 OXFORD STREET

### Reopened

March 18, 2016

Status 'Global  
flagship'

Design In-house  
and Wonderwall

Store fit-out ISG

Ambience A two-  
in-one shop