

Gender Neutral

Retailers are starting to question traditional gender roles, which in turn is having an impact on store design and the customer journey, finds Retail Focus.

Text: Lyndsey Dennis

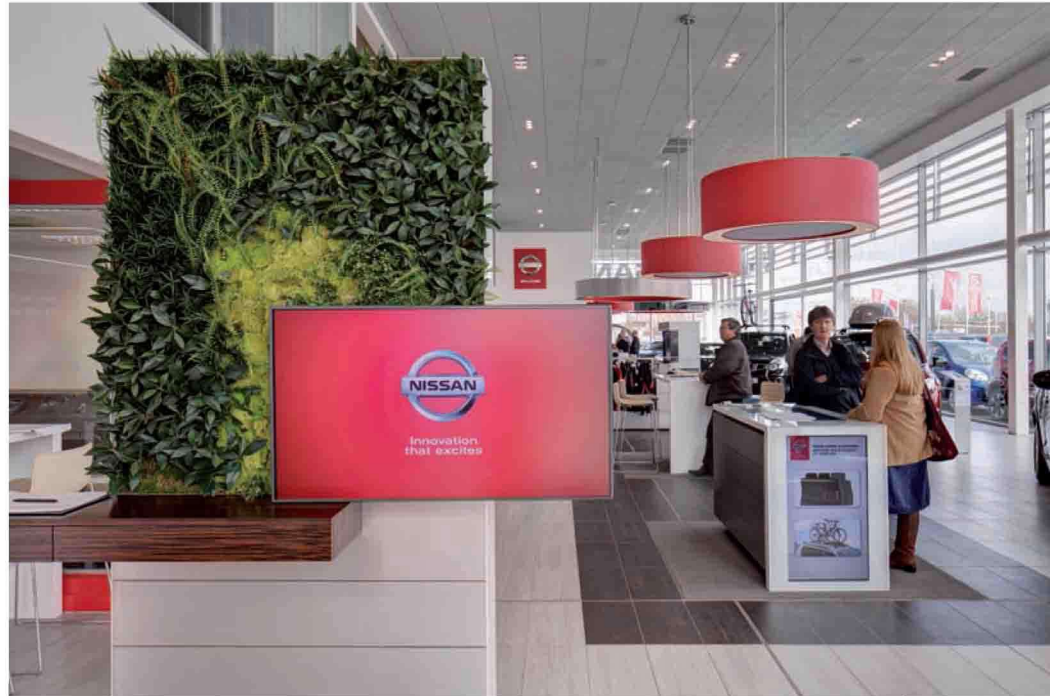
Many fashion houses are blurring the line between feminine and masculine, and several have created androgynous labels for women who wish to dress more masculine. In turn, this has seen the store design change to a more neutral model for both men and women.

'Zara launched a gender neutral fashion line in April earlier this year called "Ungendered". A few years back we had Kanye West wearing skirts, the rise of transgender models such as Andrej Pejic dominating the runway, men walking on women's runways and vice versa. ID magazine had its girl-boy issue. Selfridges had Agender and Rick Owens experimented with gender boldly within his menswear collection,' notes Michael Sheridan, chairman and founder of brand and retail design agency Sheridan&Co.

Selfridges' Agender campaign last year saw the department store create a pop-up over three floors of its Oxford Street flagship. Produced in collaboration with designer Faye Toogood, the space housed a variety of ranges suitable for both sexes, celebrating fashion without definition, and was complemented by a full run of windows. Gender neutral shopping destinations opened at Selfridges.com and in both the Manchester and Birmingham stores. The retailer launched five unisex collections and selected an additional 40 brands to be worn by any sex. According to Linda Hewson, creative director at Selfridges, Agender wasn't about harnessing a trend but rather tapping into a mind-set and acknowledging and responding to a cultural shift that is happening now.

'I think gender-neutral concepts are part of a wider macro movement of consumers moving beyond stereotypes. We are progressing from traditional methods of consumer segmentation. For example, Nike launched a new concept whereby an 86-year-old nun is at the front of the campaign running an ironman, defying expectation and stereotypes,' says Sheridan.

He believes the internet has allowed consumers to become more fluid, open minded and knowledgeable. They have the freedom to express themselves



Above: 20.20's showroom interiors for Nissan are warmer, with softer materials, better lighting and areas to dwell and talk.

more creatively and interact with a wider community. A few decades ago, young people didn't have access to communicate with like-minded people from across the globe. It was very much the people you were living with in a town. But now, thanks to social media, young people can do that and are constantly inspired by an incredible amount of visual content.'

Children's retail is another area where the line is blurring, removing the 'pink' and 'blue' segregation as well as such toys as dolls in the girls' section. Early Learning Centre's latest format, designed by strategic retail design consultancy 20.20, includes a gender neutral product presentation and focuses on themes that encourage children to play. Target, one of America's largest supermarket chains, has created a gender neutral toy aisle for children after a disgruntled parent tweeted an image of one of the retailer's store signs that said 'Building Sets' and 'Girls' Building Sets'. The retailer reassessed its stores and decided to move away from gender-based signs.

Jim Thompson, managing director at 20.20, says areas such as traditionally male

retail environments (DIY stores, electronics shops and car showrooms) are seeing big shifts. All of these are demonstrating a change in attitude by brands and retailers over who makes the buying decisions. This is driven by more couples working full-time, sharing mortgages and finances, and having an equal say over what we buy and own.

'Gender neutral retail relies on many factors, but we expect fashion retailers wanting to showcase a unisex product offering will shift further towards a broader lifestyle approach to VM and inspiration,' says Thompson. 'Many department stores have noted the rise of women shopping in menswear departments in search of a better fit or a cheaper alternative for basics like t-shirts and socks. So, if men's and womenswear departments are split up on different floors, it is easier to tempt women onto the men's floor than the other way around. A truly gender-neutral shopping experience is therefore much easier in stores where menswear and womenswear share a single sales floor. It literally breaks down the barriers.'





In DIY and electronics, he says there is a shift to more demonstration-led retail to make products more accessible to all. 'We're seeing products out of the box and more VM to sell the end result, rather than just the task and tools.'

Car showrooms are moving away from the hard sell. 'The salesman is less visible and has become more of an adviser, after customers have used online tools for their decision making. We are also seeing a big shift in location, with car showrooms appearing in shopping centres, rather than out-of-town parks. This leads to a much more gender-neutral shopping environment,' believes Thompson.

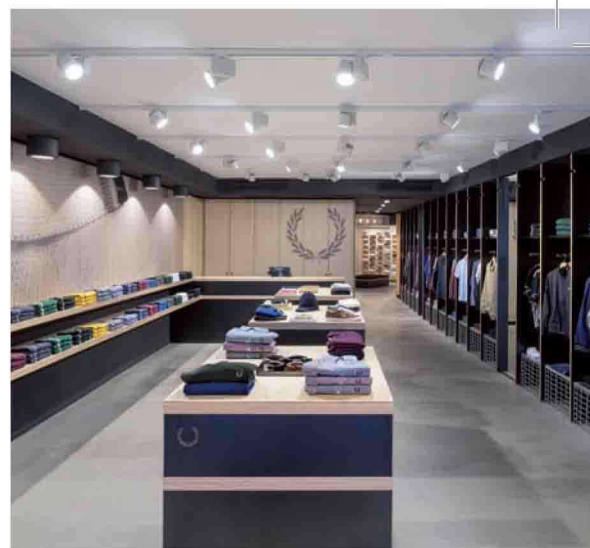
Architectural firm BuckleyGrayYeoman has completed seven stores for Fred Perry, and gender neutrality has never been a specific consideration. Rather, it is inherent to the brand's history and identity. 'Fred Perry, as an iconic English brand, has always had a wide appeal to both men and women, and the store designs reflect this. The merchandise is split between type - apparel and accessories are displayed separately rather than by gender - and within both apparel and accessories spaces, men's and women's items sit side by side, with little or no aesthetic difference between the two,' says Claire Osborne, architect at BuckleyGrayYeoman.

'At the recently refurbished Fred Perry Cologne store, we reorganised the plan

arrangement to create two distinctive rooms. Upon entering the store, all clothing (men's and women's) is visible in the front display area and accessories are to be discovered in the room to the rear. Neither gender is exhibited more prominently, and the unitised plywood display system along one wall allows for flexibility,' explains Osborne.

'The materials we have used are chosen because they align with the brand's aesthetic rather than being particularly male or female. The stores always incorporate some robust materials - steel and concrete - used alongside some more refined ones: timber and metal detailing for instance. A combination of tactile concrete, parquet flooring and polished brass was particularly successful in the EmQuartier store we have recently completed in Bangkok, Thailand. This gives a balanced aesthetic, which is gender neutral and still retains a distinctively British sense of style, refinement and wit.'

The window displays of a Fred Perry store typically do not feature apparel and instead focus on an installation or the concept behind a new collection, thereby reinforcing the brand's identity and remaining gender neutral.



Left: 20.20 helped Dutch DIY retailer Praxis move away from a traditionally male environment through the use of stories and zones.

Alirve: At Fred Perry's latest stores, neither gender is exhibited more prominently.

Below: Selfridges' Agender campaign celebrated fashion without definition.

Bottom: Gender neutral clothing is becoming more common in such stores as UNIQLO, where there is no divide between male and female departments.



Generation Z is the hottest conversation for all marketers at the moment, but will the future of retail be shaped by this generation, which according to cmo.com uses five screens on average (a smartphone, TV, laptop, desktop and iPod/iPad)? 'These kids grew up with the internet. They are the first generation to have same-sex parents or parents from inter-racial marriages. This naturally makes these kids more open-minded. So I would argue, although that gender is one factor, it is one part of the mosaic of a wider movement. The future of retail will push boundaries. It will be stereotype-neutral so to speak,' concludes Sheridan. **Rf**

