

SHOPFITTING

With limited space, small stores are thinking creatively and their visual merchandising can benefit as a result. **John Ryan** reports

Small really is beautiful

Modestly sized stores have an edge because they can change with greater ease than their bigger rivals

Good things come in small packages' and 'small is beautiful' are familiar axioms that promote the inherent attractiveness of things that are modestly sized. This way of thinking is a long way removed from the principles that underpin big retail chains, where bigger tends to be better owing to economies of scale, roll-out and an ability to negotiate prices that smaller operators would find difficult.

Yet when it comes to store design and visual merchandising there are many instances

where smaller stores have an edge simply because they can change the way they look and try out new things with greater ease than their bigger rivals.

In addition, because some small stores tend to operate on more modest budgets, ingenuity and innovation have to be applied in the absence of costly materials palettes and top-end shopfits.

A stroll around London's West and East Ends shows what is possible and how the biggest retailers could learn from smaller shops whose premises wouldn't fill much more than a corner of the largest high-street juggernauts.



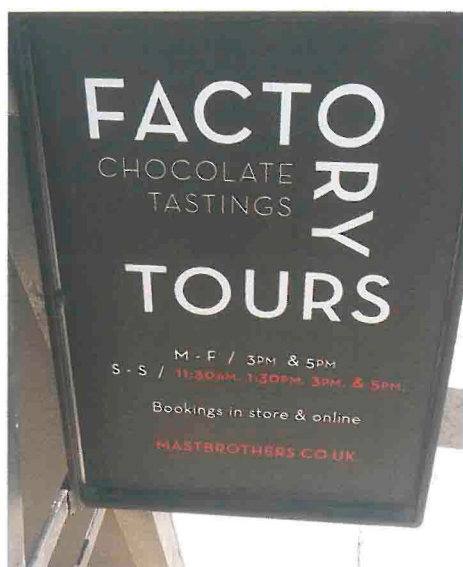
Kiko Milano, Covent Garden

There is a pair of Kiko Milano stores in London – one on Regent Street, next to Oxford Circus, and one just along from the tube in Covent Garden. The latter is a very flashy affair and at first glance the high-resolution screens inside the door on the left-hand side of the shop and the white, spotlight-studded ceiling rafts set against a black ceiling background, might lead the shopper to expect something distinctly aspirational as far as price is concerned.

Yet this is wallet-conscious stuff, and while the displays would not shame any of London's bigger department stores, the prices are mass-market, in spite of the shop's location on the main drag that leads down to Covent Garden's Piazza.

This is a relatively small store (though it does trade from two floors) and one that has a degree of permanence about its interior, owing to what is certainly a more expensive than average fit-out. As such it is something of an exception for a store on this scale, but the screens do allow the ambience to be changed at the flick of a button.





Mast Brothers, Shoreditch

The second Mast Brothers store opened on London's Redchurch Street at the beginning of 2015 and its chocolate factory interior was certainly different from what others were doing in the area. Walk past it today and the interior is basically the same as last year, although the window has changed, and it remains as minimalist and intriguing as it was when shoppers first walked in and were asked to pay £17 for a small (200g), beautifully wrapped bar of chocolate.

It is actually quite hard to make your way along Redchurch Street without noticing a window with a row of gleaming samovar-like

objects in it, each supported on a cube apparently fashioned from the same metal. A bus-stop sign invites passers-by to "Factory Chocolate Tastings Tours", helping the onlooker to make sense of the display, which presumably consists of the equipment they would need to produce the wallet-voiding products on display.

The best minimalism captures the eye as much by what is not there as what is, and this is an example of the style – the store could be selling almost anything and only a hint of what lies within is provided – that encourages the onlooker to want to know more.

J.Crew, Shoreditch

Although J.Crew is predominantly a store that appears in ritzy neighbourhoods, there is an outpost on Shoreditch's Redchurch Street. This is a men's store and in keeping both with the ambience of the area and the low-key note struck by many fashionable men's stores, the exterior of the shop is an unshouty grey with only a small sign informing shoppers about what they can expect inside.

Within, there are the carefully arranged tables of menswear that are *de rigueur* in this part of London, but it is the props that do all the talking. Arranged around the premises various items have been encased in clear acrylic blocks, ranging from a hammer and nails to a microscope of the kind found in school labs. The visual merchandising style has been employed throughout the shop wherever the customer's gaze may alight, with both perimeter fixturing and mid-shop equipment treated in the same way.



INTERIORS

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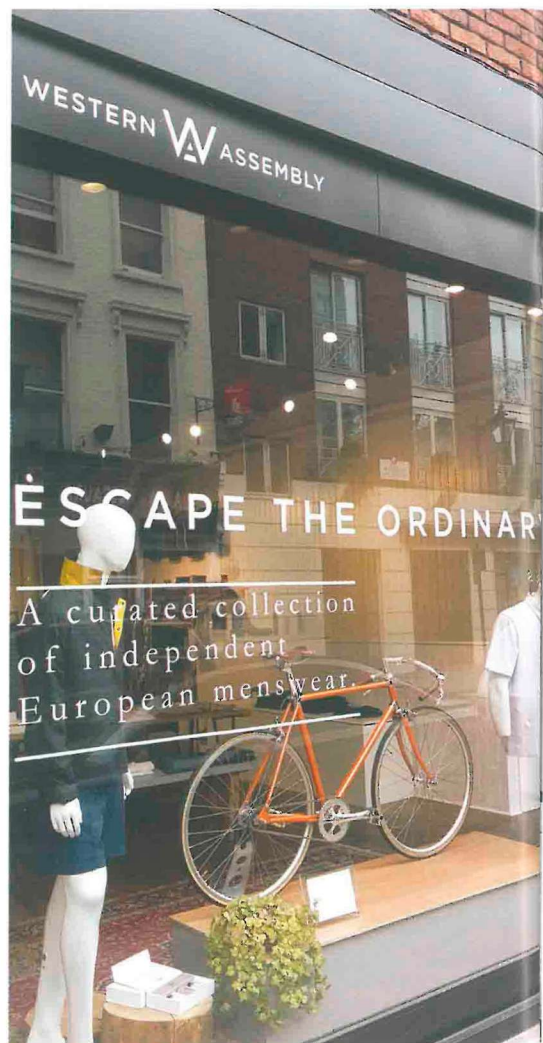
Malin & Goetz, Covent Garden

When it comes to small shops selling beauty products, the science lab is where store designers seem to look for inspiration at the moment. In the small beauty store sector, from Aesop and Penhaligons to Le Labo, test tubes and stripped-back interiors are everywhere on the basis that less means more (in terms of price, at least).

New York-based beauty retailer and brand, Malin & Goetz, is a new arrival in this country and to date has two stores, one in Islington and this one in the Seven Dials area of Covent Garden. Like others of its kind, this store heads to the lab for inspiration. Practically, this

means that the Malin & Goetz packaging does the work by being a minimalist and uniform white in colour with the product arranged around shelved niches in the walls, which have been finished with plain, light wood. To complete the scientific aura, lab flasks, beakers and bottles are used to fill the upper shelf around the perimeter.

A hint of colour is offered along the back wall, but it is neutral tones that dominate. Indeed, the store window could be the chemicals shelf in the school lab and the plain grey-black surround for the glass itself offers a feeling of seriousness about the business of beauty.



Western Assembly, Covent Garden

By the time you read this, this store will actually no longer exist, as it was a pop-up in the northern reaches of Covent Garden. That said, it does what the best menswear boutiques do, which is to take what can be an intrinsically conservative category and impart life by not overfilling the space and by using visual merchandising to add interest to the surroundings. The window urges shoppers to "Escape the ordinary" and to do so by using a fixed-wheel bicycle, the dominant feature of the display. This is about taste and the message that what is on offer is: "A curated collection of independent European menswear". This tells the shopper simultaneously that they are not entering a chain store and that the prices will be aspirational.

The fit-out for this store was in fact considerably better than that found in many more permanent enterprises and the brand is now looking for a permanent physical space to augment its activities online, which is where it started.