



Left: Casa Cavia brings together the “art forms” of architecture, design, books, food and flowers in its premises, such as its Ampersand bookstore-meets-library space. Right: chequered marble hallways lead to a leafy, plant-filled courtyard. Far right: renovated from a 1927 mansion, Casa Cavia is named after the Buenos Aires street upon which it sits

IMAGE: JUAN HITTERS



Creative concepts

From London to Buenos Aires, cutting-edge boutiques are now doing things a little differently. Charlotte McManus takes a look at the stores that are shaking up the retail world



Of late, it feels as though barely a day goes by when some publication or another, in the most ominous of tones, declares “the death” of bricks-and-mortar retail. The high street is in jeopardy, these gloomy articles declare; e-commerce has taken over and shopping spaces are on the way out.

Admittedly, it’s no secret that much traditional retail is struggling — in the UK, the industry’s ongoing hardships are set to continue “and could well intensify”, according to a December 2018 report by the KPMG/Ipsos Retail Think Tank, adding that there will “undoubtedly” be retail casualties to come. Furthermore, according to Deloitte’s “Global Powers of Retailing 2018” study, Europe’s stake in the Top 250 global retailer revenues has dropped from 39.4% to 33.8% since 2006, while the much-discussed “retail apocalypse” continues in the US with unprecedented levels of store closures. The reasons for this are complex, ranging from such country-specific issues as Brexit to more widespread factors, from the impact of online shopping to the increasingly global — and therefore increasingly homogenised — nature of shop spaces, or simply the rise in consumers, especially millennials and Gen Z, spending on experiences rather than products.

There is hope, however. Scattered across the globe, a number of high-concept stores have done away with outmoded retail formats to offer something entirely different. These spaces are often multifunctional, bringing together everything from fashion, design and art to local

makers, food and drink, performances and events, all carefully curated to evoke a specific aspirational lifestyle. Experiential models can be implemented to stimulate real-life interactions, forge communities and appeal to a shopper's senses — something that can't be achieved on an online platform — while a fluid retail structure, with frequently-changing product offerings, keeps consumers coming back to discover what's new. Additionally, the very physicality of these spaces is capitalised upon, employing cutting-edge architects and designers to create beautiful, one-of-a-kind environments.

In Buenos Aires, Casa Cavia — named for the elegant street it sits on — was renovated from an airy, high-ceilinged 1927 mansion by London and San Francisco-based architecture firm KallosTurin. Casa Cavia is a contemporary, multidisciplinary celebration of Buenos Aires' Belle Epoque period, bringing together top Argentinian talent and the “art forms” of architecture, design, books, food and flowers under one roof. Founder and creative director Lupe Garcia enlists local craftspeople to bring the house to life with creativity, from ceramicists and perfumers to music producers and artisan bakers.

Fragrant floral arrangements can be found in the Blumm Flower boutique, while on the first floor, publishing house Ampersand operates a bookstore-meets-library space, complete with tomes from Garcia's personal collection. There is also an on-site kitchen, dining room and bar, serving up food and drink inspired by Casa Cavia's literary offering, from an author's favourite tipples to dishes taken from famous novels. There are numerous spaces designed to invite visitors to sit, talk and appreciate the surroundings, from low-slung benches in the chequered marble hallways to a leafy, plant-filled courtyard with tables and chairs set next to the emerald green pool.

Space to sit and reflect also plays a huge part at the Zhongshuge bookstore in the historic waterside city of Yangzhou, China. Capturing the attention of design lovers worldwide when it first opened its doors in 2016, Shanghai-based studio X+Living created the optical illusion of a dimension-bending tunnel of tomes by using curved shelves and dark mirrored flooring to perfectly reflect the arched floor-to-ceiling display on the glass below. The 10,764sq ft interior takes its cue from Yangzhou's physical landscape, with the slick floor referencing the scenic rivers and the shelves its high, curved bridges.

Once visitors enter, the “river” draws them deeper into the store, as they follow its flow to discover a colossal collection of books, as well as different rooms branching off the main space, such as a reading room and children's area.

Over in the US, stores have been struggling, but a re-imagining of retail has led to some interesting openings. The creative hub of California boasts many

Right: at the Zhongshuge bookstore in Yangzhou, China, X-Living led by design director Li Xiang, created the optical illusion of a dimension-bending tunnel of tomes with curved shelves and dark mirrored flooring to reflect the arched floor-to-ceiling display on the glass below



“Once visitors enter the Zhongshuge bookstore, the ‘river’ draws them deeper into the space, as they follow its flow to discover a colossal collection of books, as well as different rooms branching off the main space”



a first-class concept store — Dover Street Market, one of the biggest names in the game, recently opened a branch in Los Angeles — but one standout space is Casa Perfect, which last year set up shop in Elvis Presley's former Beverly Hills home. This ultra-private showroom and retail experience is the second set in a residential space from design-and-art gallery The Future Perfect — its first opened two years ago in West Hollywood.

An impeccable example of archetypal Californian design, the renovated house — built in 1958 by architect Rex Lotery — comes with clean lines, panoramic LA views and bright West Coast sunshine pouring in from floor-to-ceiling windows, as a swimming pool sparkles outside. Each room — including a bar, den, veranda, master bedroom and guest house — is furnished with a carefully chosen edit of The Future Perfect's objects and furniture, artfully blending contemporary design with original modernist detail to resemble an achingly sophisticated functioning home. Highlights include lamps by Kelly Lamb, chairs by Luca Nichetto and coffee tables by Neri & Hu.

"Shopping has become a chore," David Alhadeff, founder of The Future Perfect, has said. "Casa Perfect is our way of reawakening the excitement of discovering the new."

While the majority of retail labels have made the transition from analogue stores to digital platforms, in recent years some of the top names in luxury e-commerce have gone in the opposite direction, expanding into bricks and mortar with sophisticated townhouse spaces. Moda Operandi Madison on New York's iconic Madison Avenue is one such example, the second outpost from the designer-focused style site. A select appointment-only boutique spread over two floors in a renovated 1910 townhouse, with interior design by Samuel Amoia, the space sees a modern Milanese mood enlivened with touches of the unexpected, from candy coloured walls to sculptural statement lighting

fixtures. However, it is the retail approach that proves most interesting, taking its cues from the responsive flexibility of e-tail — or "high tech, high touch", as co-founder Lauren Santo Domingo calls it. Using the valuable customer data mined from *ModaOperandi.com*, from size and style to favoured brands, the Madison boutique can be entirely tailored to reflect a customer's individualised preferences, meaning every shopping experience is truly unique — and also private. Quality, not quantity, is the focus.

"E-commerce has retrained the way we shop and the in-store experience hasn't responded to that — we wanted the freedom to be flexible," Santo Domingo has said. "So many shops are just about putting as much product as possible in front of your eye... that's not what we're trying to replicate here."

On this side of the pond, Browns East opened in London in autumn 2017 — the iconic boutique's first bricks-and-mortar store in 20 years. It's also the first based around the Browns Nomad project, a quasi-permanent, roaming retail approach that will create unique spaces tailored to the city and neighbourhood they are set up in — a twist on the pop-up model. Located in a former two-storey print factory in Shoreditch, a flexible retail approach is combined with innovative tech by Farfetch's Store of the Future concept to combine the brand's clicks and bricks platforms. Men's and womenswear are intermixed in a gender-fluid approach, while immersive installations and exclusive collection drops also feature.

As well as moving into bricks and mortar, London-based global e-tailer MatchesFashion is going one step further in its attempts to seamlessly merge IRL and URL with an omnichannel approach. Having opened the doors to its much-lauded venture, 5 Carlos Place, last year, the Mayfair-based, red-brick Queen Anne-style building offers shoppers a truly multifaceted retail experience that



IMAGES: 5 CARLOS PLACE, CAT GARCIA; BROWNS EAST, ED REEVE

"Physical retail is now about experience and how it makes you feel. It needs to be surprising, inclusive and personal. Customers are looking to connect and discover something if they come into your space"

Far left: offering shoppers a multifaceted retail experience across five floors, MatchesFashion's 5 Carlos Place includes space for events and workshops as well as for browsing its latest collections; with interior design by Samuel Amoia, Moda Operandi Madison has candy coloured walls enlivened by sculptural statement lighting fixtures; set in a former print factory in Shoreditch, Browns East combines innovative tech and immersive installations with new collection drops

spreads across five exquisitely designed and decorated storeys. Starting from the ground floor, MatchesFashion's latest collections and collaborations can be browsed or interacted with via QR code, while above is a permanent events space for masterclasses, private dinners and musical performances. Then there are the private suites for bespoke shopping appointments, with the fourth floor dedicated to online livestreaming with workshops and panel discussions. Finally, live broadcasting takes place in the attic, including the company's popular weekly podcast series *The Collector's House*.

"Now, more than ever, our customer wants everything in their life to feel considered," says Jess Christie, MatchesFashion's chief brand officer. "For us, the future will be even more personal, using technology to really understand our customer and make their life easier."

"Physical retail is now about experience and how it makes you feel. It needs to be surprising, inclusive and personal. Customers are looking to connect and discover something if they come into your physical space. Exclusivity has fallen out of fashion; now it is about presenting limited-edition pieces and experiences in a welcoming framework and building loyalty within the competitive digital landscape."

