

WHERE THE PAST MEETS THE FUTURE

Fashion retailer Uniqlo already has a number of outlets in Paris, but what it has done in Le Marais sets its latest store apart

We all get used to what a store interior looks like and know what to expect when we walk into a branch of a particular retailer. Think Uniqlo and the chances are you will imagine a white box, brightly coloured stock and the occasional red dot matrix display spelling out in-store promotions. Lately, screens with moving content have been added to this mix and mannequins that rotate on platforms have also been introduced.

Nonetheless, so distinctive is the feel of a Uniqlo store that whether it's a piece of Haussmann architecture close to the Opéra

in Paris, a store in the middle of Oxford Street or the giant store on New York's 5th Avenue, the sense is the same. And with all of this, the impulse to buy some inexpensive garments can prove pretty hard to resist.

There are exceptions to this, however, and the new Uniqlo store, which has opened in Paris' fashionable Marais district, is a case in point.

The store is housed in a former 19th-century iron foundry and from the outside looks typical of the architecture found in this part of Paris. But look inside and you'll find a successful melding of the highly contemporary and the historic. ▶



The 19th-century iron foundry location gives the store a distinctly Parisian feel



The interior of the Marais store combines modern and historic sensibilities

Walk through the initial entrance and the shopper is in a covered courtyard with a gabled glass roof whose panes are contained within a cast-iron framework. The space is white, three storeys high and acts as a precursor to entering the shop. Windows that look out on nowhere are all around and the ground level and first-floor windows to the left and right act as screens across which images and letters flit. As an introduction to a store the impression is highly contemporary, yet a setting that could only really be Parisian.

To the right there is a booth in which



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customers are invited to strike a pose that will be recorded digitally, with the offer of a free Uniqlo canvas tote bag and the chance to win a gift token worth €100 or €500 to spend in the store. It's an easy way for the retailer to strike up a relationship with its customers and is intended to be used by those who have already visited the shop.

So to the main action, and passing through the classically severe door at the far end of the atrium, the shopper is in Uniqlo Le Marais. Looking up, the view is in some ways similar to the atrium, with the central portion of the roof





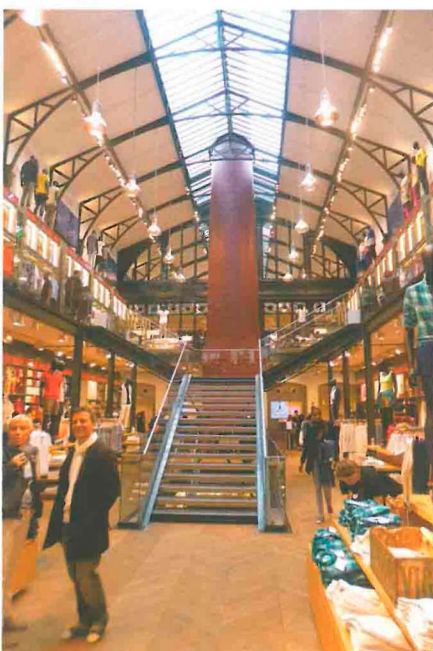
formed of glass and supported by cast iron once more. This is only partial, however, and the rest of the roof and space immediately beneath it is a Belle Epoque pattern of cast iron that provides the framework for the building.

All of this is secondary to the chimney. This is a massive red brick-built structure that rises from the middle of the floor and heads up towards and through the roof. It has been left in place because the building is listed, but it does lend real character to what might otherwise be another Uniqlo interior, in spite of the fancy ironwork.

The stock itself is predominantly displayed around the perimeter, with the bulk of it on the ground floor. A balcony arrangement overlooking this provides an extra level and is accessed by a glass-sided staircase that runs up towards the chimney, before it divides, Palladian style, to allow shoppers to get to the left or right-hand side of the shop.

And yes, there are scrolling red dot matrix boxes on the lower and upper levels, and there are mannequins that rotate – just as one might expect from this retailer and its long-term collaboration with Japanese design consultancy Wonderwall. Yet in spite of the retro 1950s/60s take on ‘space age’ and Japanese manga cartoon sense that characterises many Uniqlo interiors, it is the building that comes to the rescue in this instance. ‘Comes to the rescue’ because there is always the danger with any form of roll-out that a store chain can become a little identikit.

In the Marais store, thanks to a canny choice of building and a sensitivity to surroundings, the Uniqlo store takes on a lease of life that is quite unlike anything anywhere else. ●



Shoppers are invited to strike a pose to receive a free tote bag and enter a competition