

STORES

Zara's latest store will be another draw to Oxford Street's east end. **John Ryan** pays a visit

Zara's industrial

Until relatively recently the eastern half of Oxford Street, beyond Oxford Circus, was something of an also-ran when set against the big guns of Selfridges and the flagships of Marks & Spencer, John Lewis and Debenhams at the thoroughfare's western end. And of course there are House of Fraser, Uniqlo, River Island and Primark. Topshop sits at the heart of things at Oxford Circus, alongside Niketown and H&M.

But at the east end there was for a long time a gradual deterioration in the quality of offers as progress towards Tottenham Court Road was made.

A little under three years ago however, things changed and the balance of power between the two ends of this one and a half mile shopping street began to shift.

The first evidence was the opening of a Primark flagship on the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street. Suddenly there was a real reason, beyond the discount shops and purveyors of tourist tat, for shoppers to head in that direction.

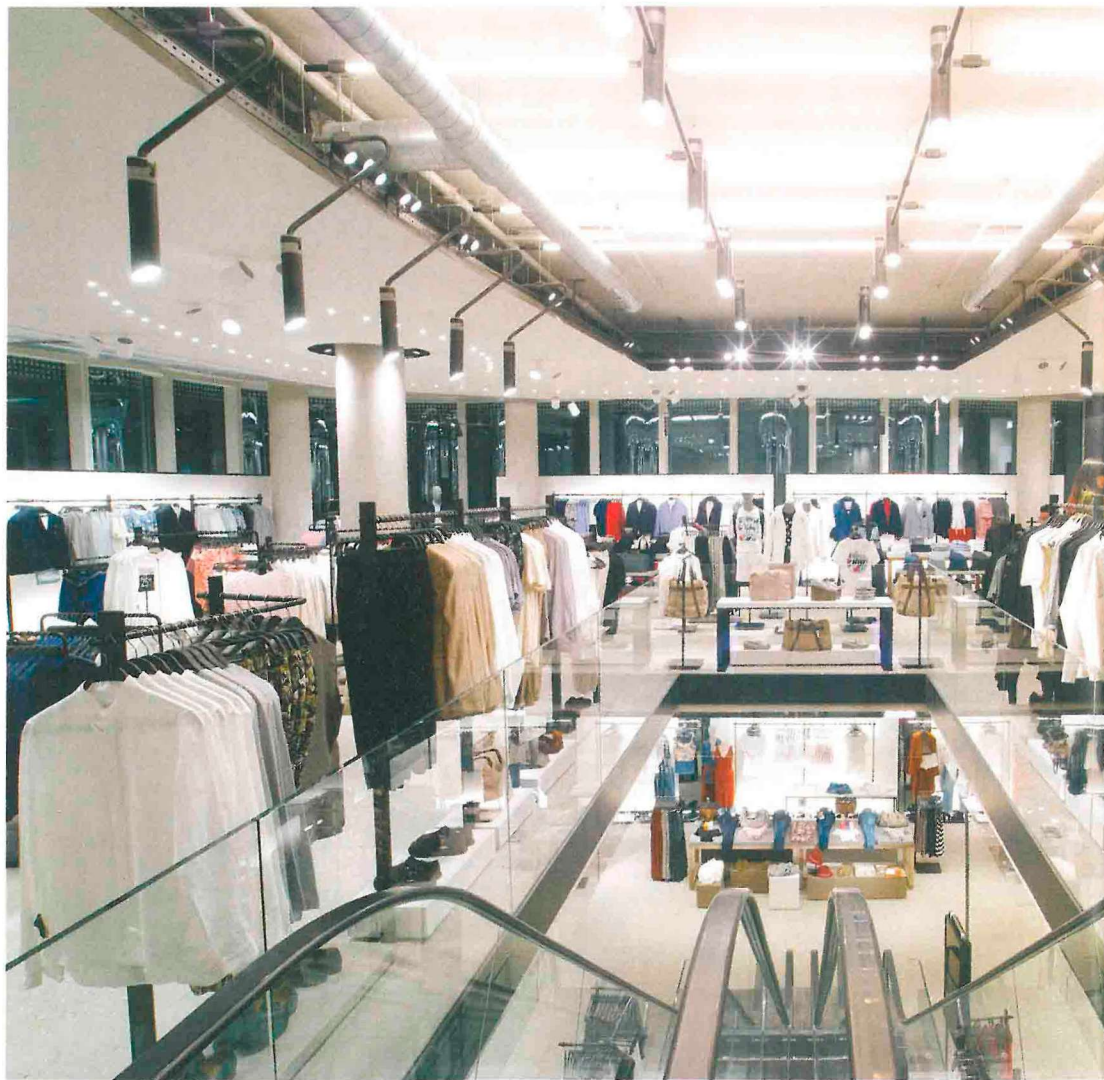
Seismic retail shift

Since then retailers have been raising their game at this end of Oxford Street and the latest proof of what is, in effect, a seismic retail shift in London's West End is the opening of a very large Zara at 61 Oxford Street.

The address puts it an athletic stone's throw from Primark and, with a total area of 48,400 sq ft spanning four floors, this is a big store and a substantial investment by parent business Inditex.

Oxford Street already plays host to four other Zara outposts, the biggest being the Zara flagship that forms part of the Park House development in the thoroughfare's extreme west. There is also a branch close to Bond Street, then another and one more just east of Oxford Circus.

The obvious question therefore must be: is this needed? The answer remains to be determined, but given the footfall attracted to the vortex that is Primark at Tottenham Court Road, there is bound to be some kind of overflow. Couple



that with the fact that Zara is an aspirational step up from Primark and at least a portion of those heading through the value giant's doors will make their way into this more mid-market Zara. There is also a school of thought that will say that the two retailers are not really in competition, but are instead complementary.

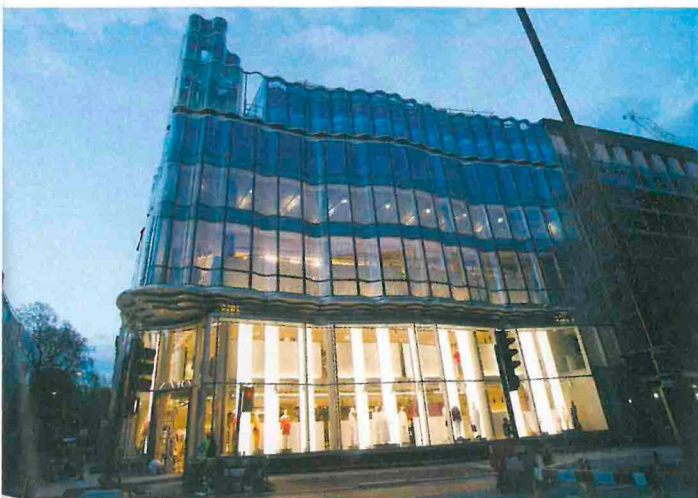
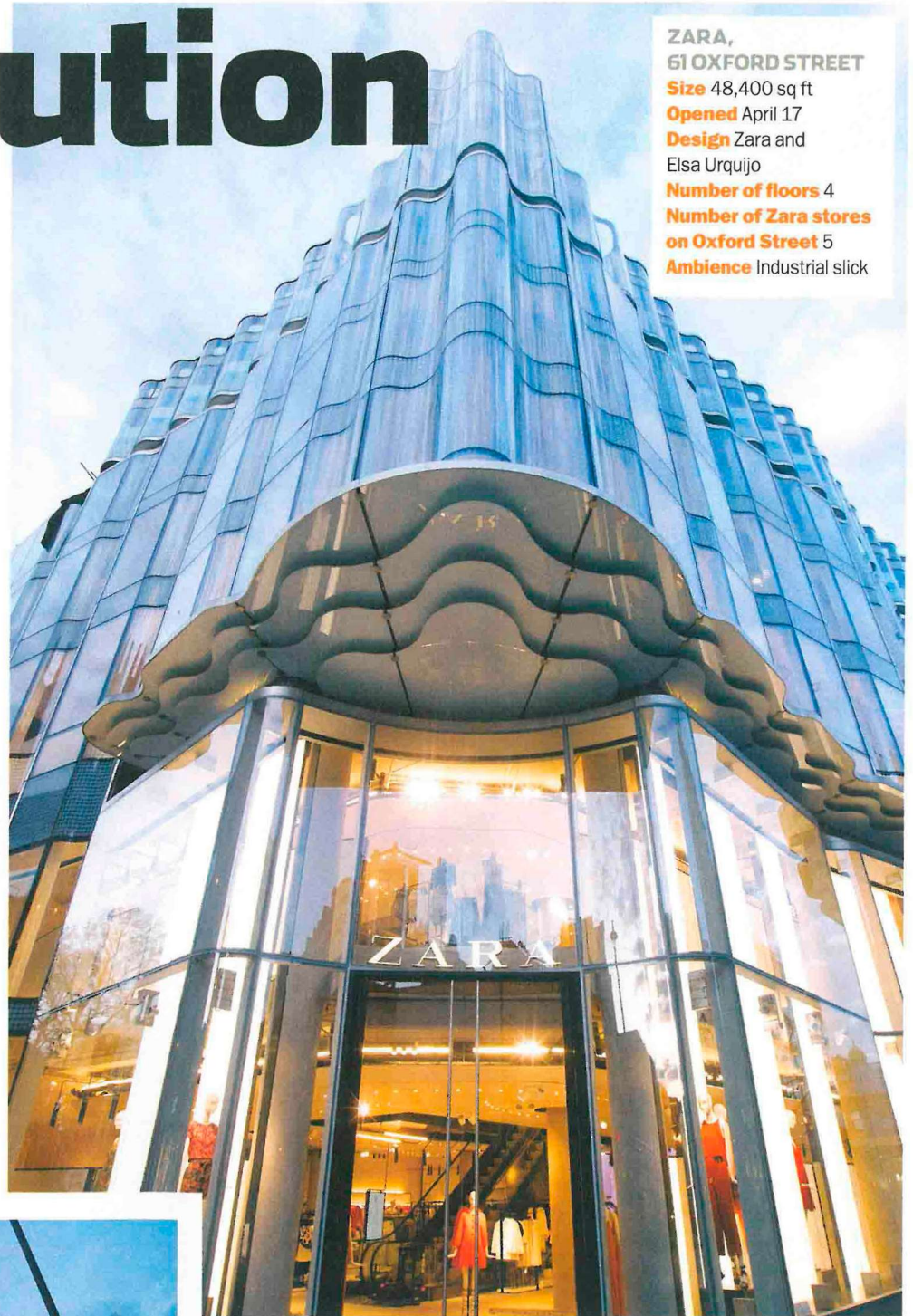
Whatever the case, from the outside this is a fine glass and steel addition to the area. The retailer has labelled the building its "Soho flagship". Maria Veiga, part of the team from Spanish architects Elsa Urquijo that has worked on this Zara project and others, points out that the underlying intention is that this should feel

More pictures of Zara's new Oxford Street store on Retail-week.com/Zaraoxst



revolution

ZARA,
61 OXFORD STREET
Size 48,400 sq ft
Opened April 17
Design Zara and
 Elsa Urquijo
Number of floors 4
Number of Zara stores
on Oxford Street 5
Ambience Industrial slick



“industrial” or at least make a passing nod at an industrial palette.

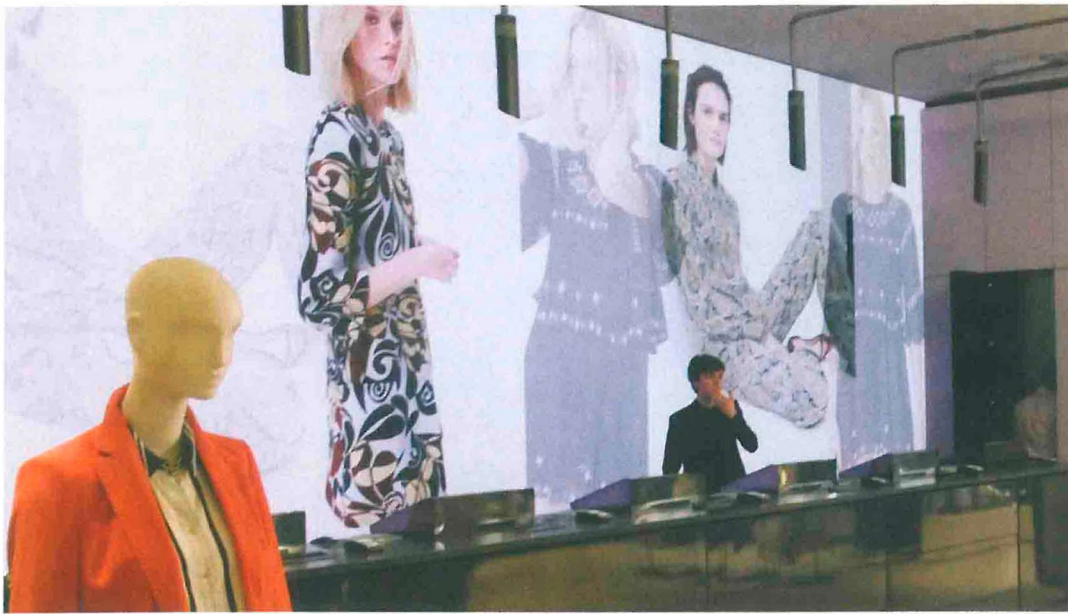
From the outside the store resembles a steep-sided glazed ziggurat and it is hard not to be impressed. It also has the ability to let in large amounts of natural daylight, as well as being a highly effective vehicle for the many mannequins that are posed at ground level along the length of its two-sided external perimeter.

Inside the view is as hi-tech and minimalist as the promise of the

exterior leads shoppers to expect. Veiga says: “The site was totally empty with just the bare concrete pillars. It’s really a brutalist piece of architecture.”

Pains have been taken to keep the building’s internal structure on view. The ground floor and first floors are set aside for womenswear and, owing to the open nature of the layout, the high level of daylight and the low level of the mid-shop display equipment, it is easy to see from front to back.

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► That said, the eye automatically travels through the space, principally owing to the large video screens that fill the wall behind the cash desk, which stretches across much of the rear of this floor. There is a strong sense of a modern art gallery about the cash desk, with black metal lights descending from the ceiling and the counter itself being faced with shiny steel, giving a high gloss to the area.

The other point about this and the store generally are the hard, seamless floors and the escalators.

In many of Oxford Street's larger fashion shops the escalators tend to be located along the left- or right-hand walls because otherwise they have a tendency to become obstacle-like and use up highly priced selling space. In Zara they have been made a striking mid-shop feature and in some ways the combination of black

The best retailers tailor their act according to the location in which they set up shop

handrails, shiny steel of the kind used on the cash desks and white neon strip lighting overhead, make ascending feel a little like emerging from the Tube. This feature ticks the 'industrial' box.

Merchandising action

All of the floors follow a similar pattern. Merchandising takes place in the mid-shop for the most part, where the equipment is designed to allow complete merchandise lifestyle 'stories', rather than any kind of commodity presentation.

The display fixturing is a mix of black metal rails in a variety of

sizes and low tables that can be placed underneath or next to them in order to allow related stock to be added to the mix. It's simple stuff, but it is well done and very flexible.

Things do change a little in the basement where there is no natural daylight and a greater reliance on the LED light package that has been used across the store – the first time that Zara has lit one of its stores entirely using this light source. The main difference in this part of the store is a plain wood display structure that dominates the mid-floor and which resembles a rustic children's climbing frame.

Menswear is on the top floor and looks little different from the levels beneath it – no compromise is made to incorporate gender differences.

Overall, the branch has a harder edge than its Park House cousin about three quarters of a mile along the street and perhaps it is more appropriate to the immediate neighbourhood.

The best retailers manage to tailor their act according to the location in which they set up shop. In this store Zara has done that, in terms of the internal and external architecture at least.

As far as providing a new shopping axis to this long-neglected part of the West End, it does appear that Inditex may have joined the party. Later than Primark certainly, but there is still everything to play for. ■