

STORES

The shock of the new

Despite a turbulent trading environment, retailers continue to invest in new stores. **John Ryan** pays Covent Garden a visit

Batten down the hatches' might be the best response to some of the results that have been emerging from the retail sector of late.

Lacklustre sales, falling consumer confidence and decreasing margins would seem to indicate that now is not the moment for heavy investment in stores.

Yet in specific locations this is what's happening, and where this is not the case, the pop-up continues to flourish.

The latter could actually be seen as a sign of nervousness and an unwillingness to commit to permanent stores, but fortune favours the brave and if these stores flourish then it is reasonable to suppose that more permanent shops will follow.

Perhaps even more counter-intuitive, given the cost of operating, is that parts of London's West End have had a major influx of new names and global flagships. Times are hard, but this does not mean that retail is moribund.

Smeg, Regent Street

Opened quietly on the afternoon of September 2, the Smeg store at the lower end of Regent Street is a three-floor tribute to the power of white goods to cut a dash.

This, along with the Milan outpost which opened in March, is a flagship store, which is to say that it is a big shop and the only one of its kind in this country.

From the outside, very large windows afford the curious views into an interior that is all about plain varnished wood and brightly painted fridges.

Before entering, the shopper will probably admire what looks like a line of old-style Fiat 500s that have been turned into fridges, the contents of which are under the bonnet.

At £7,500 a pop, these are for the well-heeled, but this pales into insignificance when set against one of the Dolce & Gabbana Smeg fridges. These are a cool £36,000 and require, apparently, 240 hours of work – each one being a highly decorated one-off.

Although it is quite hard to tear the eyes away from these, the rest of the floor is about

kitchen appliances, big and small, treated more as design museum artefacts than the kind of thing you might drop into John Lewis to pick up.

Downstairs there are more fridges, cooking hobs and suchlike, but it is the Greek theatre-style seating in the middle of the floor, accented by white fluorescent tubes, that dominates the view.

This is a space that will be used for cooking demonstrations and talks, and which marks the Smeg store as a luxury location.

Brands that morph into retailers are rapidly becoming commonplace, and this store shows how conventional electrical retailers may miss a trick when it comes to visual merchandising, albeit their prices will be lower.

Petersham Nurseries, Covent Garden

A plant nursery with what was, until 2015, a Michelin-starred restaurant was the proposition of the original Petersham Nurseries, situated a healthy stone's throw from the Thames in Richmond.

Now rural London/Surrey has arrived in zone one, with the opening of a Petersham Nurseries in Covent Garden that is less nursery and rather more repository of boho home furnishings.

Anybody familiar with Restoration Hardware or Anthropologie in the US will to an extent understand what this one is all about.

Vintage chandeliers rub shoulders with wicker baskets, classical porcelain urns and

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white-painted cast iron furniture, all interspersed with potted plants dotted around the space.

It is an engaging interior, and if faded palazzo is the shopper's thing then this is different from other home furnishing environments in the area – and the deli, a couple of doors along the street, shows others the way when it comes to food porn.

Lush pop-up, Covent Garden

Pop-ups that appear in empty units are fairly workaday stuff these days, and are perhaps a natural response to a market where certain locations may prove tricky to find permanent tenants quickly.

Rather more interesting, however, is a pop-up that appears out of doors, which by its very nature tends to be evanescent.

The Lush pop-up that was in place for just a few days in September, in the heart of Covent Garden, is a case in point.

Claw-foot enamelled baths with chromed taps, white tiles and a vintage/reclaimed timber wooden surround provided an upscale but neutral setting for the retailer's brightly coloured 'bath bombs'.

If pop-ups are about making a mark, this one showed what is possible.

H&M, Covent Garden

Opened at the end of 2016 with a fit-out by Itab, this multi-level H&M store is worthy of comment as much for the surprise of its location as for its interior and exterior.

Located in a former warehouse, this one will probably be happened upon by shoppers when they find their way to the Mercers' Yard – a development that finally saw the light of last year.

With metal plant tendrils stretching upwards either side of the entrance and a discrete beauty store, this store shows how H&M manages to constantly reinvent itself while remaining true to the brand.

It also sits comfortably with other brands from the H&M stable, including a forthcoming Arket, all of which are located around the corner on Long Acre. **RW**

For more pictures of central London's newest stores, go to Retail-Week.com/Covent-Garden



At Smeg's new flagship, these Fiat 500s that have been turned into fridges



Petersham Nurseries



Lush's outdoor pop-up



H&M