

STORES

Experiencing Oxford

John Ryan visits the new John Lewis in Oxford, which focuses on customer experience more than ever before

Experience, we are told, is central to every form of retail these days. Whether it's a garden centre, a fashion interior or a department store.

But how should a retailer set about creating an interior where experience is at the heart of operations, and can experience be designed as part of a store environment?

A labour of love

This week, John Lewis opened a modest new 120,000 sq ft store. It's a big store, but not compared to an outpost that carries all of the retailer's lines.

As the anchor store of Oxford's Westgate shopping centre, it is hard to work out where the main entrance is.

But once inside it is clear that this store is "a labour of love", as Paula Nickolds, John Lewis' managing director, calls it.

"This is our most experience-driven, service-led shop to date," she says. "It's been too often said that shops are dead, that the high street is dead. We don't believe this.

"This is about reinventing the department store. Shops continue to be the place where customers can experience the brand."

The new store is set across three floors, with a large beauty department occupying pride of place on the ground.

Clothing, accessories, women's fashion, gifts, jewellery, stationery and a Benugo café are also on the ground level.

What sets it apart, however, is the visual merchandising. The store is inspired by Oxford as a seat of learning and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Carroll, who's real name was Charles Dodgson, studied and taught at the university and met the real-life 'Alice' in the city.

The Wonderland theme is present in a series of dream-like installations dotted around each floor, with 'Alice' as a mannequin placed alongside the escalator on the ground floor.

There is even a tiny red door in the skirting board of one of the perimeter walls, which is

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meant to remind shoppers of the 'eat me' saga where Alice shrinks radically.

Follow the leader

As with John Lewis' Chelmsford and Birmingham stores, there are also visual merchandising installations around the perimeter and mid-shop, ranging from oversized paper roses to a mobile of silver/grey rubber ducks suspended above an area devoted to bath towels.

Upstairs to the upper-ground floor and there's a homewares and lighting department that combines a winsome display of home illumination with natural daylight from a large window, leading to the 'The Experience Desk'.

The Experience Desk itself is unflashy, and is located in the middle of the floor. This is where customers can book time with a John Lewis partner to go shopping or arrange to attend a technology workshop that is on the top floor, away from the selling area.

Customers can even pencil in a personal styling session with one of the store's Oxford Playhouse-trained experts.

With service being one of John Lewis' core propositions and very much a part of visiting one of its stores, there is nothing pushy about The Experience Desk.

The top floor is home to technology, men's fashion – again, with a partner on hand to help you shop – children's toys, clothing and 'The Place to Eat', which includes the Scandinavian-themed eatery KuPP.

There are views over south Oxford on the top floor, and a faux birch forest as part of its fitout. The technology area shows what's needed to make a smart home.

This is a store that seems to sit well with its location (the mortarboard graphic in the restaurant is a case in point). The interior has been carefully thought through to show a world beyond its own walls.

Given all of that, Oxford will probably welcome this John Lewis with open arms. **RW**

John Lewis Oxford

- The store has experience at its heart, bringing the brand to life
- Staff are theatre-trained, meaning they know how to put on a show
- Oxford-related themes feature heavily, making the store feel appropriately local
- The visual merchandising sets this store apart from others

See more pictures from John Lewis' new Oxford branch at Retail-Week.com/John-Lewis-Oxford



The KuPP eatery (above) and the restaurant (below)

