RETAIL REIMAGINED

Designing the fashion store 2.0

In the latest instalment of our Retail Reimagined series examining how traditional formats would look if they were redesigned today, **Gemma Goldfingle** explores the fashion store of the future

With footfall on the high street dwindling and pureplays such as Asos, boohoo and Missguided gobbling up market share, there is increasing pressure on fashion retailers to innovate to keep shoppers coming back to stores.

The fashion business is hard. It's seasonal, trends change dramatically and unseasonable weather can leave retailers with a pile of products to discount.

But it doesn't have to be, argues Arcadia design director Guy Smith, who believes that technology such as AI will make fashion design more of a science than an art. "The entire apparel industry is very wasteful as we produce stuff hoping that people will buy it," he says.

"As AI comes into maturity it will help us to better range and design. In the near future, for any single type of apparel you'll be able to run an algorithm for your demographic and it will help you define what style, colours, cuts and features will and won't work for them."

And when analytics have helped determine design, orders will not be in bulk but products will be tested online to gauge reaction, says Smith. That will determine how big the buy is.

Anthropologie managing director for international Peter Ruis says if he were building a fashion store from scratch, it would sell more than just clothing.

"If your brand can take multi-category, you'll be better off. Luxury brands are showing the way on this with beauty and sunglasses," he says.

Ruis adds that selling other categories will stop fashion specialists being so dependent on seasons, weather and age.

"I see it at Anthropologie every day," he says. "We're so good at jewellery and stationery that I'm not as dependent on fashion as I would be in any other business, although it's related to a fashion cycle and fashion brand."
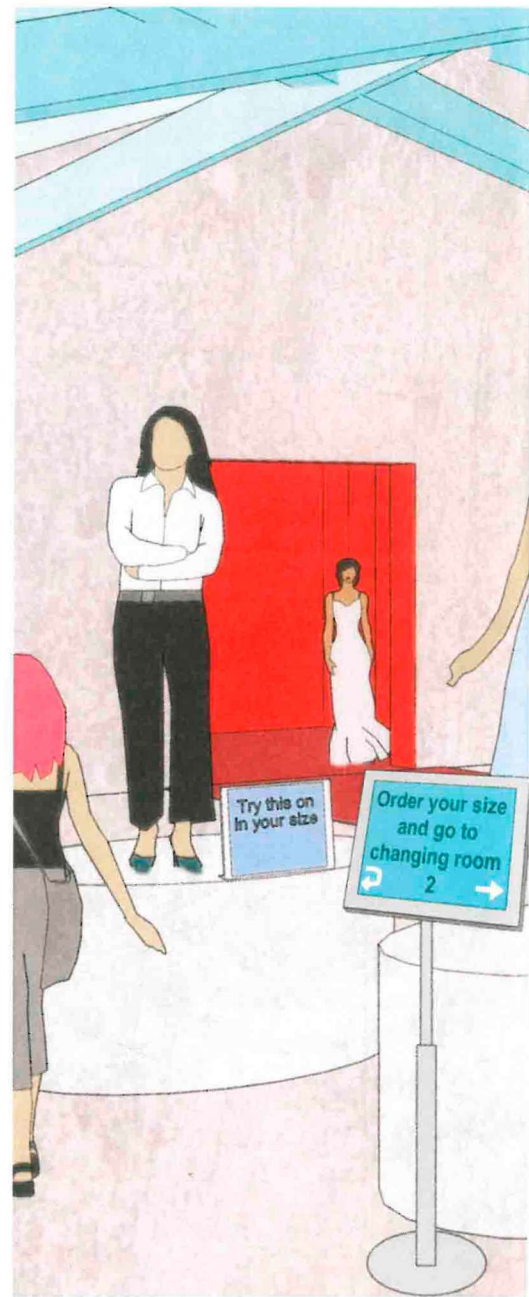
To stock or not?

But would the fashion store 2.0 stock physical product? That is a bone of contention.

For retail guru Bill Grimsey, stock in stores is now superfluous. "I wouldn't be tying money up in stock," he says. "My fashion store would have magic mirrors and people could see themselves in designs and then enter their measurements, order it and have it shipped to them in 24 hours. A bit like in Hong Kong were you can have a suit made to order in 24 hours."

This would involve having clothing manufactured in the UK. "I wouldn't have capital tied up in stock so it would be financially viable to bring back manufacturing to the UK."

Conversely, Smith insists that in fashion, the touch and feel of products is still paramount. However, he says fewer products are required on the shop floor and retailers need to be more inventive in how they are displayed.

"Only one of everything should be displayed but in the most exciting way," he says. "It'd be put into context of where this fits into the

fashion story and the wider context of the change in zeitgeist. We have to get much better at that and not just put out racks of product."

Paul West, strategy director at retail design agency Dalziel & Pow, agrees. Rather than displaying product around categories, retailers should "bring the inventory to life through storytelling", he says. "We should group products according to mindsets and missions."

That might be products that someone who wants to be more successful or healthier may purchase.

We should group products according to mindsets and missions
Paul West, Dalziel & Pow

The AR changing room

Lara Marrero, senior associate and retail leader at design and consulting firm Gensler, agrees that one of each product is sufficient.

She says shoppers should be able to tell the store assistant or in-store tablet the sizes of the items they want to try on, and when they go to the changing room all the products they have chosen should be waiting.

That would save shoppers from traipsing around the store with armfuls of clothing.

"There isn't a hard border between front of house and back of house. Your stock room is full of sizes that are fit for purpose," Marrero explains. "And if a size doesn't fit, we don't have to do that weird thing of getting dressed to pop your head out and ask for a different size, or worse still get it yourself, you just add a new size to your list," she adds.

However, the changing room may well disappear from the fashion store of the future as, like Grimsey, Smith advocates virtual try-on in his revamped fashion store.

He says this would remove friction from the shopping journey. "We've seen great augmented reality in the make-up world already. There's a huge technical challenge in terms of live rendering time of apparel. It's not quite there yet but it will come," he predicts.

Technology isn't the only way customers can visualise themselves in clothing.

Marrero would take an old-school approach to show off clothing and give an idea of fit.

"The retail experience is about understanding how a customer connects with the brand and, in some cases, the store would become a runway," she explains.

"Like retail in the 1940s and 1950s, you turn

up and women are walking around wearing the clothes, but instead of it being people who aren't your size you would have people with similar shapes to you."

Made on demand

Struggling to find the right size would be banished, as product could be made on demand.

Gensler's Marrero predicts there will be an in-store tailor who will measure up customers who can then pick out the style and material they want, with the product then manufactured on-site.

"The product is for them and by them," explains Marrero, who points out that this method of production is both better for the environment and will prevent surplus stock. "The pattern itself is the IP, sizing it up and down should be easy. If people love a style but want it ⟶