



EXCLUSIVITY  
IN ITS PUREST FORM

# RETAIL OF THE PUREST



Personality, exclusivity, variability, individuality: These parameters will determine the future of retail trade. Inspired by the hottest names in the retail world and the most elaborate concepts, we would like to show you where retail businesses are headed. Some of the key figures we are about to mention have already made a name for themselves over the last few decades and proven that they know how to permanently captivate their clientele's attention.

The others – newbies in the biz – are pursuing completely new ideas. Both of these – the seasoned player and the newcomer – are paving the road ahead, taking it into a not-so-distant future where individual retailers, verticalization, and e-commerce confidently converge.

*by ILONA MARX*

We live in a world that offers endless shopping opportunities. These days we have no trouble getting ahold of the things we use daily – and on a 24/7 basis. However, with its unlimited possibilities, consumption also creates a breeding ground for the opposite global trend: In the search for a shopping experience that speaks more to our senses – and that perhaps makes more sense to us – we have seen the use of more specialized and more exclusive store concepts in the past few years.

You can't help but notice that the hottest stores are using concepts that strikingly contrast with the attention-grabbing nature of the internet. There's no way to top the efficiency of online shopping and product diversity on the internet; that's why we turn our attention to different values. For example, stores that offer a tranquil oasis, score points with the fashion crowd. Information is given out in gentle doses and all the commercial buzz remains outside. A high sense of quality matters and so does a comprehensive level of expertise, a well-developed customer service, and the ability to directly connect with the community: These approaches all offer an effective way to tackle the internet and commercialism. After all, no one said it would be easy to keep well-informed customers who get easily bored in a good mood – or to capture their attention for a good long while.

Such a feat is mostly pulled off by stylistically confident individuals: the 'analog' influencers of our time. This isn't really a new recipe for success. In 1925, retail pioneer Gaston-Louis Vuitton already discovered that a store owner needs to have a film director's skills. Harry Gordon Selfridge, the founder of the eponymous department

store, understood how to captivate and entertain his audience like no other.

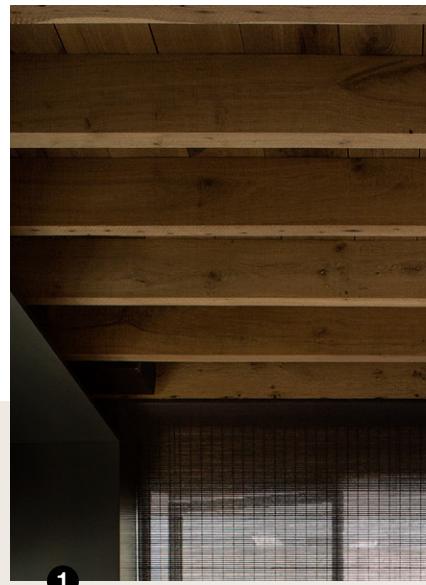
Today, a century later, what's important is once again the person standing behind the counter. The products that are sold need to be part of a curated selection – a term that's almost overused. It still doesn't change the fact that a concept's success is contingent on the products being selected by a single person whose taste and expertise determine its success or failure. The retailer's main task: to select brands that aren't on everyone's lips and that can't immediately be found on the internet – and to present them in the right environment. This might mean using obstacles to lure people into stores, thereby giving them the feeling that they are among the chosen few, those who are connoisseurs and thus get to experience the rare pleasure of being granted access to the store's exquisite world of style.

DARKLANDS in Berlin-Wedding is a good example of a counter-model to products that are available to everyone 24/7. Located on Lindower Straße in the rear building on the 2nd floor, it's about as far away from increasingly commercial Berlin-Mitte as it gets. If you didn't know that the shabby side door off the courtyard entryway leads to one of the hot spots of the Berlin fashion scene, you would never find your way there. This is where a set of very well-informed and fashion-conscious gentlemen stand in line to get in. Designers such as Austria's Carol Christian Poell, Boris Bidjan Saberi, and Maurizio Amadei with his label MA+ are just some of the top dogs strutting their stuff in this shop. Showcasing around 30 designers and their collections, DARKLANDS does not have a single piece of clothing that hangs in the store by chance.

*The Australian cosmetics brand AESOP is leading the way in retail design: With over 150 stores worldwide, no two look alike in any way.*



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The Canadian Campbell McDougall, lord of the courtyard and owner of DARKLANDS, is very enthusiastic about the store. He strokes the fabrics, expertly explains the fabrics' special characteristics, points to hidden details. The selection at DARKLANDS stands for an arty, avant-garde look. Some of the designs even look like something a pop star would wear.

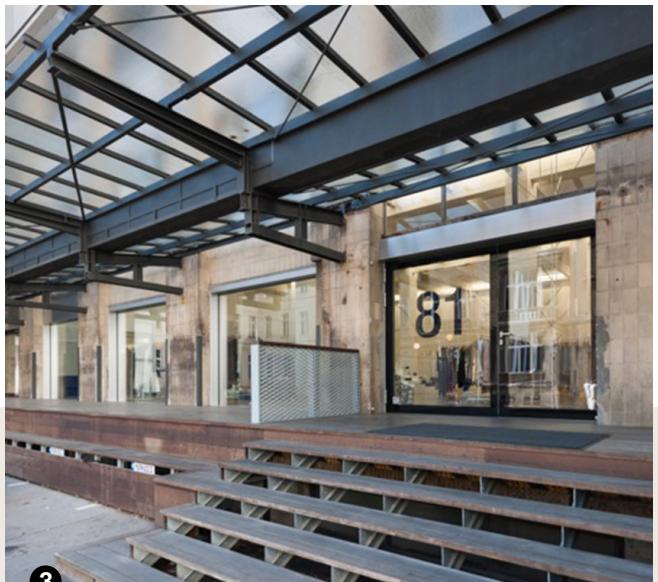
The Canadian isn't afraid of change. "All things have their time and eventually change – that's normal." Consequently, change is firmly integrated into the concept on which DARKLANDS is based. "From the beginning, DARKLANDS was conceived as a nomadic shop," says Campbell. With modest beginnings, the store started with DARKLANDS 1.0. Campbell, a Berliner by choice, never thought it would grow into something as big as DARKLANDS 5.0, which is the store's current fifth version. And nobody knows if the current dark-fashion trend will continue. If not, "it's no problem," shrugs Campbell. One thing is fully out of the question for him: expanding into other fashion styles. "I've been wearing this style myself since I was 17," he says.

Many owner-managed stores don't ban e-commerce, but cleverly incorporate it into an existing concept – this is another recipe for success. Berlin's DARKLANDS isn't the only store to use this concept. Antwerp's GRAANMARKT 13 ① also makes use of it. In actuality a kind of mixed-use symphony, it houses a fashion and interior design store, a restaurant as well as rental apartments. "It's a growing business for us – with a lot of potential," says Ilse Cornelissens, a former lawyer who, together with

her husband, runs GRAANMARKT. "Antwerp is still an underrated city that isn't on everyone's travel route." In fact, she often presents their webshop products here, which makes a charming impression and creates a sense of authenticity and trust. "We wanted to create a place where people could really feel at home," says Cornelissens about the store that opened in 2010. "We actually once lived here for a few years." In the meantime, they've taken over the entire building with its roughly 1,000 square meters of space. In the basement, Seppe Nobels, a chef, does his cooking. He also happens to be one of the world's top five vegetarian chefs, according to 'We're Smart World.' Upstairs, a rental unit awaits style-conscious tourists who are visiting Antwerp. "Our goal isn't to convince customers about the validity of any brands," she says. "We don't want the stress of turning a quick profit – neither for us nor for our customers." Instead, the owners rely on slow fashion – and a lively engagement in the various arts of exchange. Last not least, that of second-hand clothing. "At special weekend events, we actually sell our customers' second-hand clothing," she says. "In return, they get a coupon that can go towards purchasing something new in the shop. These events have become very popular!" It's very helpful for Ilse and her husband because it generates intense contact. "Next weekend we are organizing a lunch at the studio of ceramic artist Pierre Culot – a site otherwise not open to the public." This is a great opportunity for the friends of GRAANMARKT 13 to peruse our products up close. "Limited events like this are always good," says Ilse, speaking



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*Space is a luxury: A generous use of space, light and air can be seen in the approaches taken by GRAANMARKT 13 in Antwerp (left side), SONG in Vienna (top left) and ANDREAS MURKUDIS in Berlin (top right).*

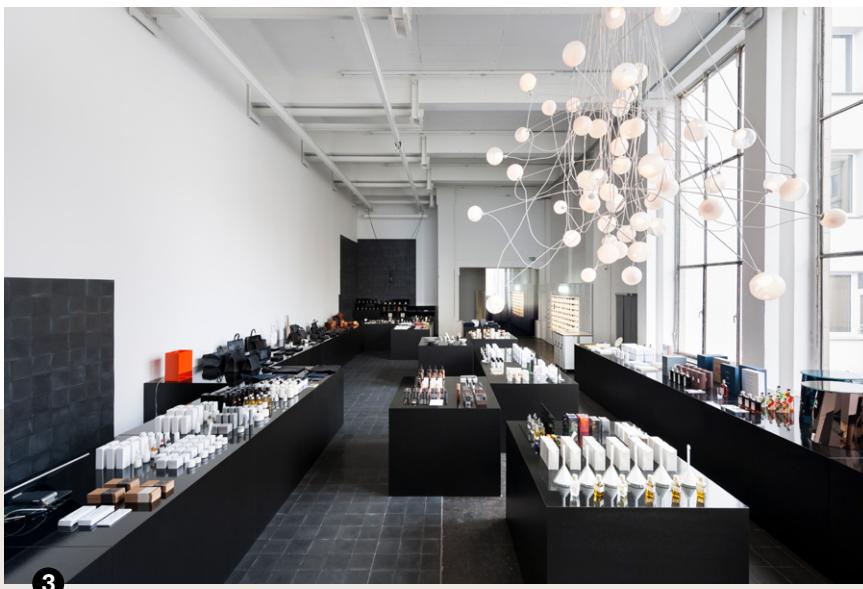
from experience. “When people come by appointment only, they inevitably buy something. If the doors are always open, the incentive isn’t really there.”

Myung-II Song prefers communicating her message to the men and women who visit her shop during regular store hours. “This is not a museum” is written on the cards that Korean-born Myung-II likes to give to her customers – of course, with a wink. The owner of the Vienna store SONG ② has been in business for twenty years and shouldn’t be surprised when many of her customers are overcome by a museum-like sense of awe at the sight of such a well-curated selection of products. Her design universe spans 350 square meters on Praterstraße. In addition to high-quality clothing, her store is known for its unusual interior design. “There are no limits for me,” says Myung-II. “Anything that makes life more beautiful fits in my shop. It wasn’t my intention for people to refer to SONG as some type of concept store. I don’t mind, but there actually isn’t an underlying concept.”

For SONG one thing simply led to another. The former art and graphic design student’s surefire instinct brought her worldwide recognition. She isn’t very interested in media buzz or trends – and e-commerce also has, as she puts it, “zero” influence on her sales. “We offer the best service,” she says. “There’s no way around that and word spreads quickly about things like this.” Moreover, you can’t underestimate the importance of the shop’s atmosphere. It has a raw and seemingly untouched look but was carefully redesigned by Austrian architect Gregor

Eichinger, who filled it with pieces of furniture from the prewar period. It has a warm, inviting and luxurious ambience, where the collections of A.F.Vandevorst, Cédric Charlier, Dries Van Noten and Olympia Le-Tan, the furniture of Piet Hein Eek and Mathis Esterhazy as well as the ceramics of Astier de Villatte come into their own. All exclusively in Vienna: That’s a prerequisite for SONG. Where does she get her inspiration? “In London,” says Myung-II. “That’s also where one of my favorite stores is located: Marianna Kennedy. And in New York, where I stop by De Vera as often as possible.” When asked what she likes best about being a retailer, the native Korean answers: “interpersonal contact and the aesthetic experience.”

Myung-II Song’s soul mate is clearly Berlin’s Andreas Murkudis. With one difference: The man who owns the store that bears his name actually once worked as a museum curator. He supervised the process of collecting the items exhibited in Kreuzberg’s Museum of Things – a hodgepodge and curiosity cabinet of everyday objects, all sorted thematically by color, inviting viewers to embark on a journey through the 20th century. But Murkudis himself transgresses the usual notions of what should be sold in a store and sells a broad diversity of products. Why should he limit himself? He has plenty of space in his two Berlin stores, ANDREAS MURKUDIS STORE 81 ③ and STORE 77. One of the secrets to his success goes to the heart of product presentation: He knows how to awaken desire. Located in a neighborhood



teeming with art galleries and in a space on Potsdamer Straße where the Tagesspiegel newspaper used to be printed, Murkudis creates a landscape of commodities and ideas, builds islands for the eye to collect itself and rest while gazing around. "For me, space is the greatest luxury," he says. "It lets the items fully unfold in front of the viewer."

The generous use of space not only plays an important role in independent retail. Companies have also recognized the signs of the times and know that it's important to present their products in the right environment – with far-reaching consequences. Some companies have experienced immense growth in large part because of their sophisticated retail concepts. Diversity and individualism make you sexy.

A case in point is the Australian cosmetics brand AESOP ④. Founded in 1987, the company's flagship stores have cult status among fans of the products. And indeed: AESOP has over 150 stores and no two look alike. Rather, the most innovative international architectural firms such as Oslo's Snøhetta or Milan's Vincenzo De Cotiis seem to have been competing with AESOP's in-house design department for years to see who can develop the most beautiful store. It's impossible to single out one of the shops as the most special. With its large bricks made of unread and re-purposed editions of the New York Times, is the Nolita shop more interesting? Or the one in Melbourne with its countless layers of industrial-strength cardboard boxes? As an architecture and design fan, it's best to simply visit all the flagships – even if that means taking

a trip around the world and visiting twenty countries.

The question still remains: Where are things headed in the next few years? Judging by the stores that recently opened and made a splash in the media, the stores that will be successful are those that present an entirely new understanding of what it means to be a store. Yes, retailers who run such stores are indeed heeding the rules and offering features such as a curated selection, individuality, a wide range of products, space, and their own strong personal sense of style. However, to increase the shopper's desire even more, the exclusivity factor is driven to the extreme. Recent months have seen two spectacular new additions apply a very logical motto: "By appointment only."

But this model isn't really anything new for Los Angeles' CASA PERFECT, a mid-century residence that was recently transformed into a walk-through dream by the New York interior design institution, The Future Perfect. Elvis, Priscilla and Lisa Marie Presley made this Beverly Hills villa their home from 1967 to 1973. The fact that CASA PERFECT can only be visited by appointment actually keeps excessive fans away from the store. Nevertheless, the new owner, David Alhadeff, obviously uses the previous owners' fame to generate interest in the furniture and products he sells. "We offer a more intimate context in which to peruse our collections," says Alhadeff, explaining his approach. The New Yorker's West Coast store features collections by Lindsey Adelman, De La Espada, Michael Anastassiades, Piet Hein Eek and Dimore Studio. "This is

much more than just a mere retail shop," says Alhadeff proudly, fully aware of the fact that CASA PERFECT is fully in keeping with the latest trends.

In the good old world, a similar phenomenon can also be seen. More precisely, in London's Shoreditch neighborhood, which – although it is older than Beverly Hills – is always in a state of permanent renewal. BLUE MOUNTAIN SCHOOL is written on the façade of the house on the corner, where Redchurch and Chance Streets meet. But it definitely isn't a school and it also isn't a store, as owners James Brown and Christie Fels underscore. They prefer calling it an "interdisciplinary space." It features a series of galleries, a kitchen, a dining and wine area, and a few viewing rooms, in other words, showrooms – all on six floors. The Hostem Archive on the ground floor houses a selection of textiles, garments, ceramics and furniture and still has the strongest retail character.

"Retail as we know it is dead," says Brown. He banned clothing racks from his new project. Brown and Fels don't see themselves as retailers per se, but rather as mediators and hosts who provide access to their space. The third and fourth floors are connected by way of a suspended copper staircase. This is where Valentin Loellmann, a Maastricht designer, presents one-off furniture pieces. Also integrated into the 'school' is Māos, a kitchen and dining area that was created when Brown teamed up with Nuno Mendes, a well-known chef in the city. With some luck (and a reservation) you can enjoy the three-hour tasting menu. But things get even more



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*You can't miss the green tiles of the AESOP store in Berlin-Mitte. In rich shades of green, they leave a lasting impression. This setting showcases the AESOP products beautifully.*

selective: You need a special invitation to visit Grace's, a music listening room on the rooftop with a beautiful terrace. Guests can relax and enjoy their favorite sounds here. The record shop, Low Company, has a really nice, small shop up here.

To date, there hasn't been a lot in the press yet about people's experiences in stores like this, but one thing is certain: This much exclusivity is bound to fuel the grapevine in London and attract lots of attention to everyone involved. And perhaps that's really where the future lies: in only leaving the shop door open a crack – and in leaving the rest to opinion makers, whose influence and credibility will only snowball in time. Clever is the retailer that knows how to take advantage of the signs of the times.