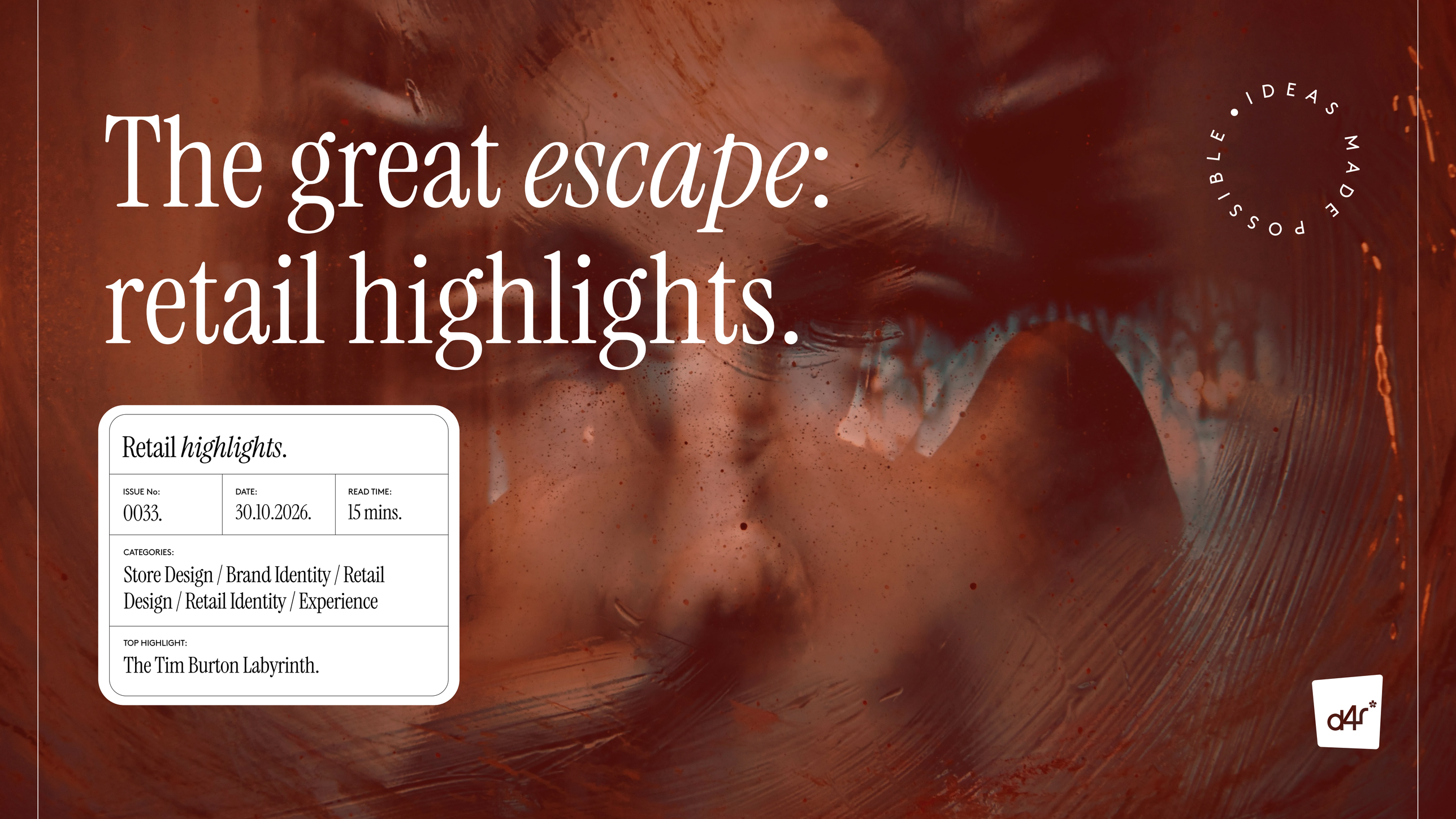


The great *escape*: retail highlights.

IDEAS MADE POSSIBLE

Retail *highlights*.

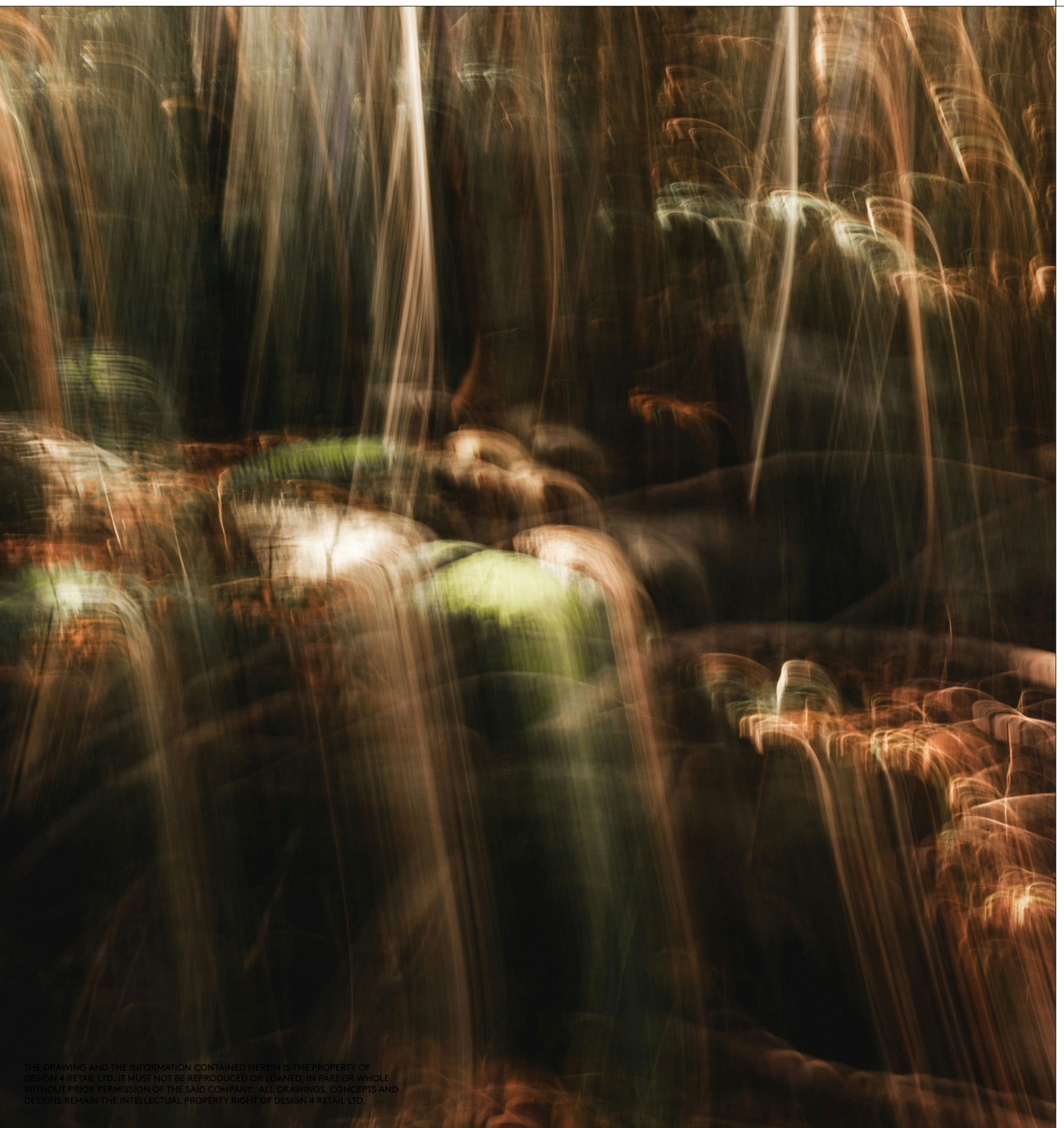
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CATEGORIES:

Store Design / Brand Identity / Retail Design / Retail Identity / Experience

TOP HIGHLIGHT:

The Tim Burton Labyrinth.



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Retail *highlights.*

Discovering *innovation* and *immersion* that stands out in the shifting retail landscape.

This edition of retail highlights examines the emergence of retail spaces designed to transport and captivate. As consumers seek moments of connection and escapism, the boundaries between retail and entertainment are becomming blurred and brands are investing in increasingly imaginative environments that invite consumers to do more than browse and buy.

From dreamlike interiors and unexpected spatial design to interactive installations and multisensory experiences, retailers are increasingly using physical space as a tool for storytelling. In an era of endless digital consumption, these spaces offer something harder to replicate online; a sense of wonder and a temporary escape from the everyday.

In this report we look at:

→ How retailers are using surreal design and world-building to create memorable destinations.

→ The growing role of immersive and experiential spaces in attracting and engaging consumers.

→ How escapist entertainment and retail are merging to reshape the physical shopping experience.

→ The ways retailers are tapping into consumer's desire for novelty and nostalgia.

D4R VIEW

Spaces *beyond* reality.

FROM SURREAL ENVIRONMENTS TO IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES, RETAILERS ARE REIMAGINING THE STORE AS A PLACE OF ESCAPE.

WORLDS WITHIN WALLS

Retail has always been about creating environements that attract attention and shape behaviour. Today, however, many brands are moving beyond functional store design altogether, transforming physical spaces into immersive worlds designed to inspire and transport visitors somewhere else entirely.

This shift reflects a broader cultural appetite for escapism. Against a backdrop of constant connectivity and increasingly screen based experiences, consumers are placing greater value on moments that feel memorable, and allow them to emotionlly engage in a physical apce. The physical store has become one of the few places where brands can create a fully sensory experience that people can truly interact with, offering something impossible to replicate online.

As a result, retailers are embracing theatrical design surreal storytelling with some stores resemble dreamscapes, galleries or fantastical landscapes more than traditional retail environments. Others use interactivity, digital technology, sound, scent and spectacle to blur the boundaries between shopping, entertainment and art. In these spaces, the experience itself becomes part of the product.

At the same time, the rise of experiential retail extends beyond visual impact. Brands are increasingly designing destinations that encourage exploration and longer retail dwell times, creating reasons to visit that go beyond making a purchase.

This edition of retail highlights explores how surreal, immersive, experiential, and escapist concepts are reshaping the futureof physical retail. Together, they reveal a growing demand for spaces that offer more than a transaction and lean into retail environments that invite curiosity and spark imagination, that welcome escape from the everyday.



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01

Beyond the looking glass.

GENTLE MONSTER, SEOUL

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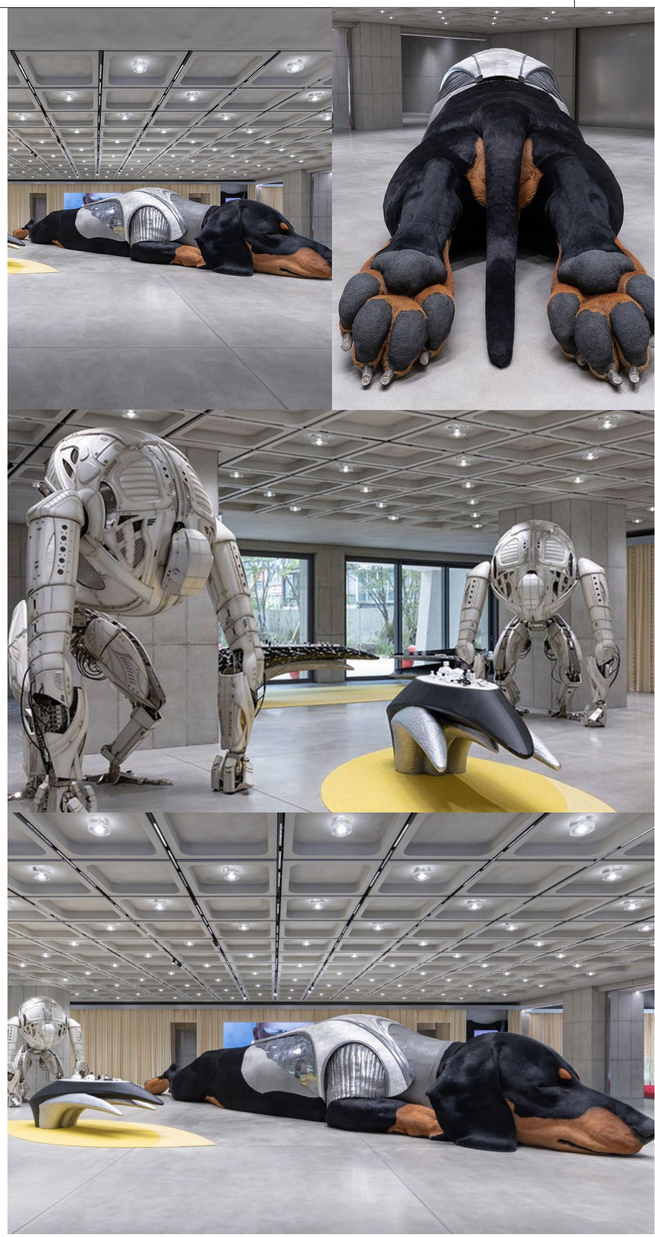
DOG DAYS AREN'T OVER

HAUS NOWHERE is a retail destination in Seoul created by IICOMBINED, the parent company of Gentle Monster, as part of its vision for the future of retail. Conceived as a place "found nowhere", the space brings together art and design with commerce to create an environment centred around exploration and discovery.

Rather than relying on conventional merchandising, the venue uses large-scale installations and immersive storytelling to transform shopping into an experience. At its centre is Sunshine, a giant animatronic dachshund created for Tamburins that appears asleep within a dreamlike landscape, complete with subtle breathing movements and lifelike details. Visitors can continue the narrative through interactive experiences, like the AI-powered photo booth where the character adopts their likeness.

Elsewhere, surreal, kinetic environments and theatrical displays blur the line between entertainment venue and retail space. From Max Siedentopf's installation of inflating black bags to the colour-saturated Nudake Teahouse, each environment is designed to engage multiple senses and encourage curiosity, extending the visit far beyond the act of purchasing.

By combining spectacle storytelling and participation, HAUS NOWHERE demonstrates how retailers are increasingly creating immersive worlds rather than traditional shopping venues, offering consumers a temporary escape from normal reality while turning their retail environment into a reality of its own right.



02

Built *different.*

LEGO, SHANGHAI

The LEGO Group's Bloom Exhibition transformed Shanghai's TANK Art Centre into a large-scale immersive landscape, with more than 380,000 LEGO flowers forming a colourful wave that appeared to spill from a former industrial oil tank across the waterfront.

Rather than showcasing products through traditional retail displays, the installation turned the LEGO Botanicals range into the experience itself. Visitors were invited to wander through a surreal floral environment, where art, play and physical space merged into a single brand world.

The experience extended beyond the physical installation through interactive elements that allowed visitors to build their own LEGO flowers and contribute them to a shared digital landscape, encouraging participation alongside exploration.











"Impressive from afar, but the closer you get, the more interesting it becomes..."

THE LEGO GROUP



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03

Lost by design.

TIM BURTON LABYRINTH, TOKYO

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"ONE PERSON'S CRAZINESS IS ANOTHER PERSON'S REALITY." — TIM BURTON

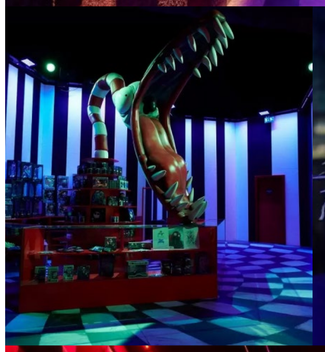
As brands and cultural institutions look to create deeper audience engagement, immersive environments are increasingly transforming passive visitors into active participants. Tim Burton's Labyrinth exemplifies this shift, reimagining the traditional exhibition format as a surreal journey through the filmmaker's imagination rather than a conventional display of artworks and film memorabilia.

Built as a maze of interconnected environments, the experience invites guests to choose their own route through scenes inspired by Burton's most iconic films, including Edward Scissorhands, Beetlejuice and The Nightmare Before Christmas. By combining original artwork with theatrical sets, lighting, sound and interactive spaces, the exhibition blurs the boundaries between storytelling, entertainment and physical exploration.

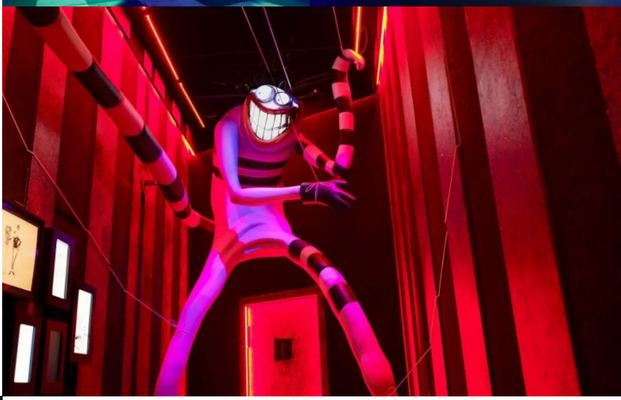
Rather than guiding visitors along a fixed path, the labyrinth encourages curiosity and discovery, with each decision leading to new characters, environments and experiences. This sense of agency turns the visit into a personal adventure, creating a highly memorable and emotionally engaging encounter.

By encouraging visitors to navigate a fantastical universe, Tim Burton's Labyrinth highlights the growing appeal of immersive experiences designed to be explored, not just observed.













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“

The limbo that emerges between these perspectives has always been fertile ground for creativity. The most twisted and visionary — even marginalized — minds find inspiration in that in-between space and the ethereal themes surrounding it.

”

LETSGO ENTERTAINMENT,
THE TIM BURTON LABYRINTH

NOW BOARDING: DEPARTING FROM REALITY

As retail spaces compete to offer more than products alone, brands are increasingly turning to immersive environments that transport visitors into entirely different worlds. China Duty Free International's Surreal Island demonstrates how physical retail can become a destination in its own right, using fantasy and story telling to transform the act of shopping into a full experience.

Created for the brand's flagship location at Grand Lisboa Palace in Macau, the concept centres around a series of large-scale digital installations woven throughout the space. The screens present a dreamlike universe where familiar objects are reimagined in unexpected ways, drawing inspiration from the visual language of surrealist art, rather than simply displaying product.

Developed in collaboration with surrealist illustrator Paolo Torres, the experience introduces visitors to a fantastical landscape. The result is a setting that feels closer to stepping inside a story than entering a traditional luxury store.

The project reflects a wider shift in retail design towards environments that prioritise emotional engagement and escapism. As consumers seek memorable experiences with purchases, brands are finding value in creating spaces that captivate and encourage exploration. By smudging the boundaries between art and commerce, these immersive concepts give visitors a reason to stay longer and keep coming back.





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05

All *aboard.*

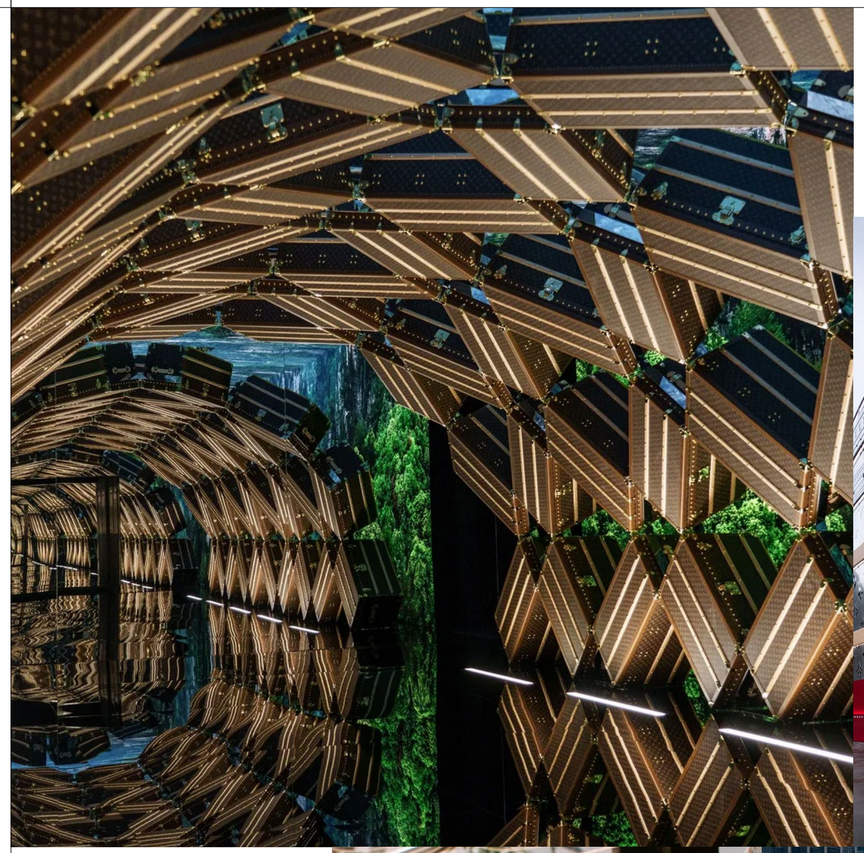
LOUIS VUITTON, 'THE LOUIS', SHANGHAI

SAILING INTO WONDERLAND

As brands look beyond the traditional store format, retail spaces are increasingly being designed as destinations that offer vistiors a sense of escape. Louis Vuitton's 'The Louis' in Shanghai exemplifies this shift, transforming a flagship store into an immersive voyage inspired by travel, culture and imagination.

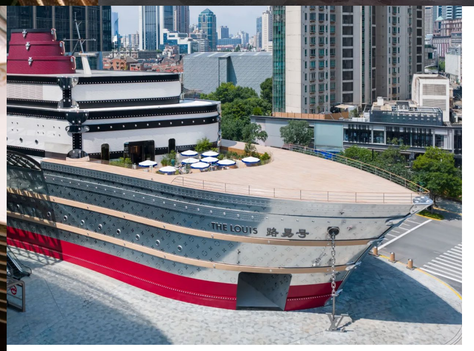
Taking the form of a monumental ocean liner, the structure pays tribute to the house's heritage as a trunk maker while also referencing Shanghai's history as a global port city. Rather than serving as a backdrop for products, the ship itself becomes part of the experience, inviting visitors to step into a world shaped by adventure and discovery.

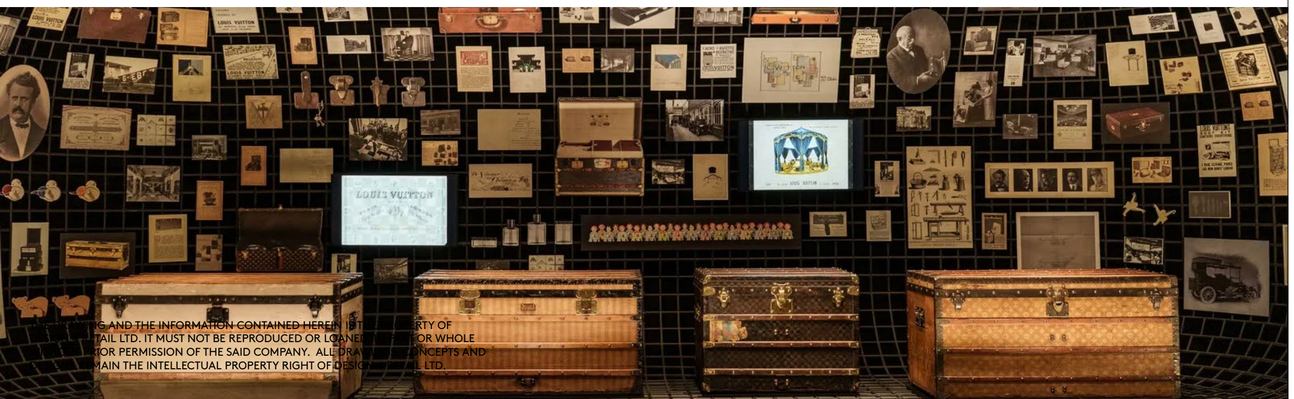
Inside, retail is layered with exhibition spaces, immersive installations and hospitality, creating a journey that unfolds across multiple decks. At its heart is the Louis Vuitton Visionary Journeys exhibition, which explores the brand's relationship with travel through theatrical environments and large-scale scenography. From tunnels formed by floating trunks to spaces dedicated to craftsmanship and exploration, the experience blurs the boundary between gallery and store.











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06

Out of this *world.*

ADERERROR, SHIBUYA, TOKYO

Rather than treating the store as a backdrop for products, a growing number of brands are turning retail into something closer to a stage set. Spaces are being designed to transport visitors beyond the everyday, inviting them into imagined worlds where discovery becomes part of the experience itself. Adererror is one brand embracing this approach, using large scale installations and unexpected spatial interventions bring together the shopping and exhibition.

Across these environments, merchandise sits within surreal scenes that encourage exploration. Unusual structures, dramatic visual moments and immersive settings shift attention away from the transaction, creating spaces that reward curiosity and invite people to linger. Retail becomes less about browsing shelves and more about stepping into a narrative.

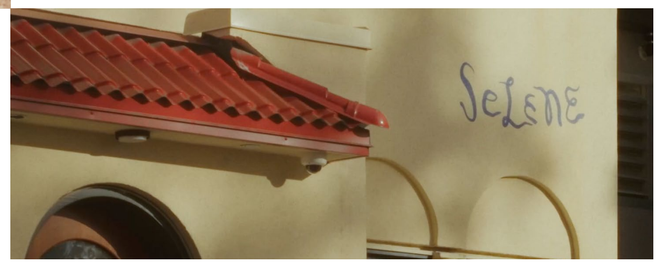
As consumers increasingly seek experiences that offer escape from the familiar, brands are recognising the value of creating places that spark emotion and imagination.





> "It's a reminder that even the most understated gestures and details can become powerful symbols."

PHOEBE GLASFORD< CREATIVE DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER OF GLASFURD & WALKER



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07

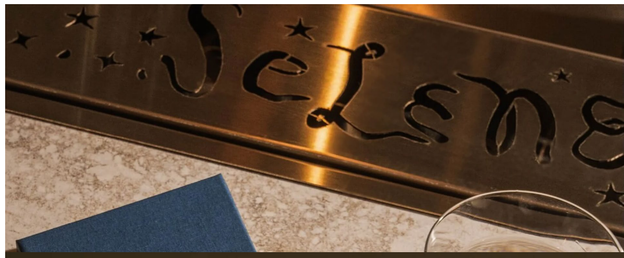
Moonstruck moments.

SELENE, GLASFURD & WALKER

Drawing on a growing appetite for retail that transports visitors beyond the everyday, brands are creating spaces that feel closer to imagined worlds than conventional stores. One example is Selene, a hospitality concept inspired by mythology, where Glasfurd & Walker translated stories of the moon into a visual identity rich with symbolism and atmosphere.

Rather than relying on straightforward branding cues, the project builds a sense of discovery through celestial references, layered graphics and an otherworldly visual language. The result feels less like a brand system and more like an invitation into a parallel realm, encouraging visitors to engage with the narrative as they move through the experience.

This approach reflects a wider shift across retail, where immersive environments are becoming destinations in their own right. From dreamlike installations to fictional worlds brought into the physical space, brands are using storytelling to create moments of escape that extend far beyond the transaction.







08

Read *all about* it.

THOM BROWNE X ROBBIE LAWRENCE, LONDON

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EXTRA, EXTRA!

As brands look to create deeper connections with audiences, physical retail and brand experiences are increasingly becoming tools for storytelling. Rather than just presenting products, spaces are being designed to immerse visitors in carefully constructed worlds that blur the line between exhibition, installation and commerce. Recent projects demonstrate how even modest formats can become portals into an imagined reality.

Created for the launch of The Working Hour, a zine produced for the collaboration between Thom Browne and Robbie Lawrence, a temporary newsstand installation transformed London's ICA into a fragment of Tokyo's streetscape. Inspired by the city's ubiquitous kiosks, the structure was accompanied by details including a phone booth, lamppost airconditioning units weathered graphics, extending the visual narrative of the publication beyond its pages and into a fully realised environment.









What makes the project compelling is its focus on transportation rather than transaction. By recreating elements of a familiar urban setting within an unexpected context, visitors were invited to step into the world depicted in Lawrence's photography, creating a stronger emotional connection with the work.

The installation reflects a wider shift towards experiential environments that prioritise immersion and world-building. In an era dominated by digital content, spaces such as this demonstrate how physical design can create moments of escapism, encouraging audiences to engage more deeply with a brand's narrative and remember the experience long after they leave.





DESIGNED TO DISCOVERED

As consumers increasingly seek experiences that offer an escape from the everyday, brands are turning to illusion and spectacle to transform how people engage with physical retail. Rather than treating storefronts as simple product displays, they are becoming stages for unexpected interventions that capture attention and invite a sense of wonder.

For Christian Dior, artist Alex Chinneck reimagined the luxury house's shop windows through a series of optical illusions that appear to bend, twist and unravel the architecture itself. Familiar retail elements are distorted in impossible ways, creating scenes that feel suspended somewhere between reality and fantasy.

The displays encourage passers-by to pause, question what they are seeing and engage with the space beyond its commercial function.

This project has created immersion without requiring visitors to step inside.
By disrupting expectations and challenging perceptions of the built environment, the windows turn a routine retail encounter into a moment of escapism. The storefront becomes more than a backdrop for products, acting instead as an experience in its own right.

As brands embrace world-building, projects like this show how retail can offer moments of escapism beyond the purchase.

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09

House of *wonder.*

DIOR X ALEX CHINNECK, NYC & LA



10

A *Biba* dream.

BIG BIBA DEPARTMENT STORE, LONDON, 1973-1975

A WORLD OF ITS OWN

When experiential retail is discussed today, it's often framed as a modern design choice. Yet decades before immersive environments became a retail buzzword, Biba transformed shopping into a form of escapism, building a retail experience that felt closer to a fantasy than a department store.

Opening in Kensington in 1973, Big Biba occupied a former department store and invited visitors into a carefully choreographed world inspired by Hollywood glamour and Art Deco architecture. Rather than presenting products in a conventional retail environment, every floor was designed to encourage discovery, from lavish interiors and dimly lit spaces to unexpected attractions including a rooftop garden, food hall and live flamingos.

The most impressive aspect is how the store's atmosphere became the main attraction. Shopping was only one part of the experience, visitors came to explore and lose themselves in an environment that felt detached from everyday life, turning a trip to the store into an event in itself.

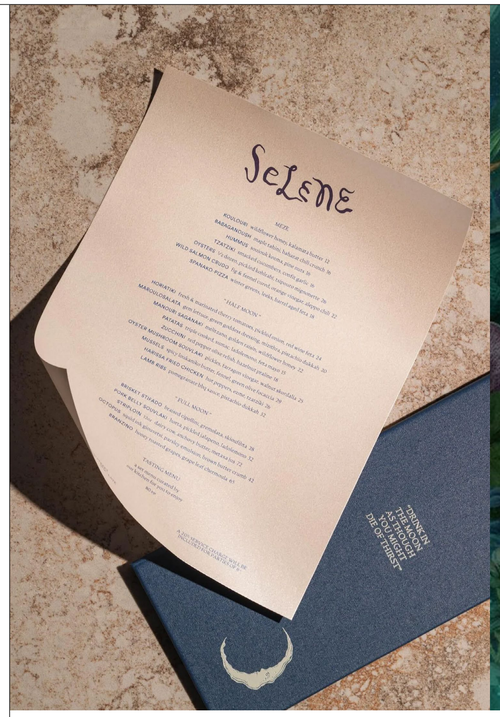
More than fifty years later, Big Biba remains a powerful example of retail as world-building. Long before brands began talking about immersion, they demonstrated how a strong sense of fantasy could transform a commercial space into a destination people wanted to experience.

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FORESIGHT

Down the rabbit hole.

IMMERSIVE WORLDS AWAIT







RESPONDING TO CULTURAL SHIFTS

As daily life becomes increasingly fast-paced and demanding, many consumers are seeking moments of wonder, play and escapism within the physical world. In response, brands are creating retail environments that move beyond functionality, transforming stores into imaginative destinations where reality is stretched, unexpected narratives unfold and visitors are invited to step intoentirely different worlds.

The most compelling spaces are those that blur the boundaries between retail, entertainment, community and art. Through surreal design & storytelling and interactive experiences, these environments encourage exploration rather than transaction. Shopping becomes just one part of a broader journey, with the atmosphere, emotion and sense of discovery often leaving a stronger impression than the products themselves.

For brands, this shift presents an opportunity to create deeper and more memorable connections with audiences. As consumers increasingly value experiences over possessions, retail spaces that spark curiosity, inspire participation and offer a temporary escape from everyday routines are becoming powerful tools for engagement. The result is a new generation of environments designed not simply to sell, but to surprise and immerse.

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→ Customer experience
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→ Retail identity
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