

The designer as brand

'I don't follow trends. It's my job to create trends.'

A particularly well-dressed Parisian crowd packs the Fondation Cartier, a giant glass and steel art gallery designed by Jean Nouvel and created 20 years ago by Alain-Dominique Perrin, the former CEO of Cartier. That's a lot of names in a single sentence – but the star of the show is still to come. Addressing journalists in the middle of the room is a familiar figure with peroxide blond hair and a stripy sailor's sweater.

He makes playful, self-deprecating pronouncements and booms with laughter. Even somebody with a limited interest in fashion would immediately recognize Jean-Paul Gaultier.

We're standing in the French designer's first retrospective. But, this being a Gaultier show, something is out of kilter. The delicate aroma in the air gives it away: every dress on show is made out of bread. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that the designer has used basketwork, dough and armfuls of baguettes to make pastiches of dresses for a show called 'Pain Couture'.

Gaultier tells the press that he shied away from the original suggestion of a straightforward retrospective, featuring real dresses on static mannequins, because 'clothes are only interesting when they are on a body in motion'. He came up with the bread idea while recalling his childhood, when he used to go to the *boulangerie* and yearn to work

behind the counter. ‘There are a lot of similarities between the act of sewing and the act of baking.’

Around us, willowy girls in space-age pinafores *à la* Gaultier proffer phallic baguettes. Downstairs, an oven installed for the duration of the exhibition turns out ‘designer’ pastries that can be consumed on the premises – a handy metaphor for the ephemeral nature of fashion. As JPG says, ‘You know, when you see a girl in a beautiful dress, you just want to eat her!’

The journalists seem to be taking the whole thing a lot more seriously than Jean-Paul himself. This is not entirely surprising, as his creativity goes hand-in-hand with a surreal sense of humour. His appearances on the vulgar-but-ironic television show *Eurotrash* endeared him to millions of British viewers – and, some say, upset the French fashion establishment.

But while ‘Pain Couture’ is a great deal of fun, it also does no harm to Gaultier’s image. It garners plenty of press coverage and fits right in with his brand profile, which is off-the-wall but pure Parisian. And what could be more French than a baguette?

THE NEW IDOLS

Jean-Paul Gaultier was one of the first fashion designers to cross over into the realm of the pop star. Indeed, back in 1989, he actually made a record – *How To Do That* (‘Ow To Do Zat’). His boundless energy and inventiveness have always appealed to the media and the public alike. The press has only just managed to stop calling him an *enfant terrible* (it had become a tradition to use the term in every article about him). But Gaultier is also a businessman, having created an array of sub-brands, fragrances and – in his latest *coup de théâtre* – a range of cosmetics for men. His company employs around 175 people and Hermès has a 35 per cent stake in it. In 2003 it announced its first loss for 12 years – blamed on the economic downturn and Gaultier’s costly move into haute couture – but it expected to break even in 2005 after a restructure. (‘Gaultier fashion house plans restructuring’, Agence France Presse, 2 November 2004.)

All successful designers, from an icon like Gaultier to a young tyro emerging from the backstreets of New York, understand that they are running a business. Tom Ford, when he was at Gucci, took pride in it.

'I don't understand people who say that business and creativity aren't compatible,' he says in the (2001) book *Visionaries*, a collection of profiles by *Guardian* fashion writer Susannah Frankel. Ford points out that he started working in New York, where 'if the collection you designed didn't sell, you were fired the next day'. He goes on to explain, 'What some fashion designers do is art and I have an incredible respect for it, but I don't pretend to be anything other than a commercial designer and I am proud of that.'

Others have a more conflicted attitude. Miuccia Prada told the French edition of *Vogue* (not without a hint of irony), 'I want to rule the world . . . I want the name Prada to be immense. But I also want to be free to create.' Later in the piece, she explained her feelings, that '[the clothes] need to be fashionable. . . but also commercial. It's there that I really suffer. Because there are three fundamental questions I must ask myself: Do I like these clothes? Will they sell? And are they original? . . . If I try to transform [a garment] into something that's perhaps easy to wear, it becomes banal. . . And that's my problem. Do I make clothes that people want or clothes that I think they should wear?' (*Drôle de Dame*, September 2004.)

The big difference between Prada and Ford is that, by and large, Miuccia stays in the background and lets her clothes do the talking. On the other hand, during much of the time he worked at Gucci, Ford had a very public image that could not be divorced from his designs. He became fused with the Gucci brand – very successfully so. As an article in *Le Figaro* notes breathlessly, 'The standard-bearer of Gucci. . . [was] Ford himself. . . The three-day beard, the impeccable suits, the white shirt open at the chest, the burning gaze: Tom Ford inspired desire in men as much as he did in women.' (*Quand les créateurs incarnent les marques*, 4 August 2004.)

Ford joined Gaultier on the list of designers whose fame transcends the close-knit world of fashion. Also on the roster are Alexander McQueen, Stella McCartney, Paul Smith, Marc Jacobs, Karl Lagerfeld and, of course, John Galliano; that great showman whose runway shows are renowned for their entertainment value. Galliano's clothes are flamboyant – and so is the designer, who resembles a swashbuckling Salvador Dali.

Galliano and Ford are perfect examples of designers whose personal image has helped to transform brands. A dead or dormant brand, whose founder has passed on or ceased to be involved, often needs

an identifiable figurehead to incarnate it in the eyes of consumers. The designs must be compelling, of course, but that's only part of the job. Just as Ford became linked with Gucci, Galliano breathed new excitement into Dior when he was installed as its womenswear designer in 1996. Over a decade earlier, Lagerfeld had achieved much the same transformation at Chanel. Until certain chain stores began adopting the same strategy, a glamorous star designer – parachuted in for a huge fee, like a successful soccer player – was the main factor that separated a luxury brand from a high-street one.

These days, the process has become so familiar that it is beginning to sound formulaic. With each new appointment, we read that the incoming designer has foraged in the archives of the brand, uncovering a system of codes and values that they can use to inform their own vision. In this way they don't reproduce the original designs, but reinterpret and remix them in order to arrive at something entirely new – while at the same time giving a respectful nod to the owner of the name they are about to inherit.

British designer Ozwald Boateng arrived in Paris to design Givenchy's menswear collections in 2003: 'I looked in the archives. I took inspiration from the elegance of Hubert de Givenchy. . . That's how I discovered the emblem of the tulip, a flower that could often be seen in a vase on his desk. The polka dots that you can see in the linings of suits and hats or on pocket handkerchiefs recall the motif of his favourite ties.' (*Ozwald Boateng: Paris-Londres*, *Le Monde*, 8 October 2004.)

After being named artistic director of Kenzo Woman in September 2003, Antonio Marras 'immersed himself in the archives of the House, discovering points of similarity with his creations, notably the taste for a *métissage* of cultures and styles'. (LVMH.com article, 23 February 2004.)

When Nicolas Ghesquière became head designer at Balenciaga in 1997, he was forbidden access to the archives by their imposing-sounding guardian, Madame Jouve. As he recounts, 'They must have thought I'd make poor use of them. I discovered [Cristobal Balenciaga's collections] by another means, in the museums of the United States and in Irving Penn's images, which at the same time meant that I was not overloaded with references, didn't end up making reproductions.' (*Nicolas Ghesquière sort de l'ombre*, *Le Figaro*, 28 September 2004.)

Ghesquière has since become one of the most fêted designers in Paris, praised for having turned Balenciaga back into a mega-brand by combining his own 1980s influences – the high-tech experimentation of Issey Miyake, the glamour of Versace, the daring of Gaultier – with the Spanish designer's architectural sensibilities. It doesn't hurt, either, that Ghesquière's clothes have been enthusiastically adopted by French actress and fashion icon Charlotte Gainsbourg. In 2006, Ghesquière was the only French designer to feature in *Time* magazine's annual list of the world's 100 most influential people.

When a brand decides to make the most of its designer, the media is only too happy to play along with the game. After all, in the fashion press as well as in the newspapers, a people story is a good story. When the talented Antonio Marras took over at Kenzo Woman, articles appeared establishing him as the perfect embodiment of the brand's vagabond deluxe positioning. French *Vogue* (November 2004) waxed lyrical, telling its readers that Marras has 'never imagined living anywhere but Alghero, in Sardinia, where the faces of his childhood, the smile of the sea, the colours of stone, the grace of the olive trees and the games of his sons mean real life'. We heard how the designer started out working in the family fabric store. We learned that his sources of inspiration range from the Far East to South America, embracing Japan along the way. He loves art, museum and movies, particularly Visconti, Pasolini, Kubrick and Truffaut. In short, the press office of LVMH (the group that owns the Kenzo brand) could hardly have done a better job.

However, on 3 March 2004, something happened that may call into question the wisdom of associating a designer too closely with a brand. The story in *The Wall Street Journal Europe* was headlined 'Gucci launches makeover of its designer strategy'. Underneath, in smaller type, the sub-head read 'No-name team to succeed fashion celebrity Tom Ford: can the brand alone sell?'

Can it indeed? At the time of writing Gucci remains successful, but the brand seems to lack a coherent media profile. Yves Saint Laurent, Ford's other responsibility at Gucci Group, has fared rather better. The prestigious French label never took quite as well to Ford's hard, dark and coruscating aesthetic; its elegant new designer Stefano Pilati – who worked quietly behind the scenes during Ford's tenure – has more convincingly captured the refined yet oddly provocative quality of the brand. And the lanky, bearded Pilati, with his bohemian scarves and leopard-skin loafers, knows how to play designer for the media. It all

suggests that a brand can be resuscitated if the right personality comes along.

But what might happen if Galliano were to leave Dior? He's such a thorough incarnation of the brand. And what will happen to Paul Smith, the brand, when Paul Smith, the designer, decides to retire? Mulling over this question recently, Smith said, 'I always have a hard time thinking of myself as a brand, even though I occasionally talk about this entity called "Paul Smith", as if it's not my own name. I got into this business because I loved it, then woke up one day and realized I was locked into this system of marketing. I suppose we'll just have to wait and see. The business is structured so that everything is taken care of, except my own personality.'

Valentino faced this challenge in 2007 when its founder – the great Italian couturier Valentino Garavani – retired shortly after the brand's 45th anniversary. The label's new owner, a private equity fund called Permira, had to work out a way of retaining the brand's mystique without the presence of its charismatic figurehead. It was partly aided in this task by the presence of Alessandra Facchinetti, a former Gucci designer, to succeed Valentino. But Facchinetti – while an excellent designer who sustained Gucci following the departure of Tom Ford – hardly has the household name status of her predecessor. It seems that Permira will instead take the brand more mainstream with new branded stores and a closer focus on accessories.

The star status of designers has had an unexpected corollary. When, in July 2004, the US magazine *Elle Girl* asked more than 1,000 adolescent readers what they thought was the coolest profession, 'fashion designer' came out on top – ahead of film star or musician. 'For teenagers, fashion designers are the new rock stars,' said the magazine's editor, Brandon Holley. ('The coolest profession in teen dreams: designer', *International Herald Tribune*, 13 September 2004.) Adolescents are also inspired by genuine pop stars' forays into fashion: Beyoncé and Gwen Stefani both have clothing lines, and Kylie has her own brand of lingerie, Love Kylie (see Chapter 10: Celebrity sells).

But the showmanship of a Galliano and the insouciant elegance of a Ford put a smooth façade on an abrasive industry. As a choice of career, fashion designer makes even freelance journalist seem a responsible and financially secure way of earning a living. Despite Galliano's acclaimed degree collection at Central Saint Martin's College of Art, he struggled to obtain financial backing in London. Arriving in Paris, he was forced

to sleep on friends' floors while he created his next collection. It was only when Anna Wintour, the editor of US *Vogue*, helped him to secure backing that his career began to take off. Ford, meanwhile, worked as an assistant to two designers in New York before moving to Gucci in 1990 – where his clothes were barely noticed until a breakthrough collection in 1995.

In the same issue of the *IHT* that mentioned the aspiring teenagers, an article by Suzy Menkes compared two very different designers: up-and-coming Zac Posen, whose backers include Cartier and music mogul Sean 'P. Diddy' Combs; and Miguel Androver, a thoughtful, multicultural designer who bounded on to the stage at the end of his New York show in a T-shirt bearing the question 'Has anyone seen a backer?'

As well as being talented, you have to be lucky, on a mission, and skilled at the art of self-promotion. Only a few have it all.

HOW TO BE A DESIGNER BRAND

A few weeks after my encounter with Jean-Paul Gaultier, I am hurrying down a street in the centre of an unexpectedly hot London, perspiring heavily and late for an exclusive interview with one of the city's favourite designers. The Gaultier event was a crowded affair, where I was one of dozens of journalists. But Matthew Williamson and his business partner Joseph Velosa have agreed to put some time aside specifically for me and my book.

Williamson burst on to the scene, as they say, during London Fashion Week in 1997. His debut collection was modelled by, among others, Kate Moss, Helena Christensen and Jade Jagger. Not bad for a start, and the press couldn't fail to notice. The show made front pages in the UK and Williamson was soon being fêted not only by the UK edition of *Vogue* – which had known about him for some time, as we'll see later – but by glossies all over the world.

These days Williamson shows in New York. His clothes are stocked in more than 100 stores worldwide, and he has his own shop in London's Mayfair, with another to come in Manhattan. A celebrity magnet, his designs have been worn by Madonna, Sarah Jessica Parker, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kirsten Dunst and Nicole Kidman. He is, perhaps, Britain's most unashamedly commercial designer. In October 2005 he

added an additional, iridescent feather to his cap by being appointed as the designer at Emilio Pucci. And to top it all, at the end of 2007 the Design Museum in London staged a special exhibition celebrating his 20th year in fashion.

At the time of our meeting, Williamson's business is located in a beautiful townhouse in a street off Tottenham Court Road. It is colourful and cluttered and very neo-Bloomsbury; and the first thing I do on entering is almost trip over a small dog. 'You've met Coco, then?' says the receptionist, when the shiny-eyed spaniel follows me into her office. A few moments later, I climb the stairs to what seems like the top of the house, getting glimpses of people working in warren-like spaces; a PC here, a pile of drawings there. The walls are painted in warm, rich shades that recall Morocco or India – locations that have inspired Williamson's designs. Joseph Velosa – a dark-haired young man with a calm, measured voice – shows me into a bright and spacious office. My eye is drawn to the colourful illustrations tacked to the far wall – Williamson's next collection, which he'll be showing in New York in September. This would have started life as a 'mood board': colourful pages torn from books and magazines, images and objects, scraps of fabric... a magpie collection that defines the tone and feel of the resulting show.

Velosa and Williamson met when the designer was still at Saint Martin's. At the time Velosa was doing a philosophy degree – something that sits oddly with his obvious talent for marketing. Mutual attraction evolved naturally into a partnership, with Velosa taking care of the strategic side while Williamson concentrated on designing and giving the brand a public face. But the delineation between the two is much less strict than it appears, as Williamson is quick to point out. 'It's always presented as though [Joseph] is poring over bank statements while I'm mincing around with a pencil,' jokes the designer, whose faint Manchester accent gives him a sardonic, self-deprecating air. 'In fact I love the business side – and Joseph is very creative.'

The arrangement is not without precedents. Perhaps the most obvious comparison is the partnership between Pierre Bergé and Yves Saint Laurent. Partners in life as well as in business, they founded their company in 1961, with Bergé as managing director – the same position occupied by Velosa. The museum in Paris devoted to Saint Laurent's work is called the Fondation Pierre Bergé/Yves Saint Laurent.

Williamson is slight and energetic, and the rakish beard he has adopted can't conceal a certain boyish quality. This should not be confused with lack of seriousness or ambition, however. He is one of those rare people with a vocation: 'I always knew what I wanted to do. Even at the age of 11 or 12 I knew that I wanted to be involved in art or design, and shortly after that I realized it was fashion I was really interested in. It was instinctive, somehow. I'd been good at art all the way through school, and I was interested in clothes. I was always sketching. By the time I applied for a foundation course at Manchester Polytechnic, the woman there took one look at my portfolio and told me it would be a waste of time: I should apply directly to Central Saint Martin's.'

He did so – and was accepted after his first interview. 'I didn't think I had the slightest chance of getting in, so I must have come over as rather blasé,' he recalls, smiling. 'They misconstrued what was actually nervousness as coolness and confidence.'

He studied fashion design for four years, specializing in textiles and print. But life at the famous college – whose alumni include John Galliano, Alexander McQueen and Stella McCartney – was not to Williamson's liking. In fact, he's one of the few designers to have spoken out against the school: 'It has a phenomenal reputation, but I didn't really fit in there. They're not interested in the business side of fashion. I had the feeling you were left to sink or swim. And either you flourish and become fabulous, or you don't. I was a bit of a black sheep because I was the antithesis of what they try to promote. They're interested in fashion as art. So while I was trying to design clothes that somebody might actually want to wear, my fellow students were doing things like going to mental institutions to seek inspiration. It wasn't the greatest period of my life.'

During his third year at the school, in 1993, Williamson got a placement working for the legendary British designer Zandra Rhodes. 'I loved working in her design studio and watching the pattern cutters bring her designs to life,' he recounts, in one of the notes accompanying the Design Museum exhibition. At the end of the day he would sweep up the unused scraps of material, which he assiduously set aside for himself. A patchwork fabric made from these scraps eventually became a shift dress that appeared in his triumphant graduate collection.

After leaving Saint Martin's, Williamson went to work at Monsoon, the ethnically inspired chain store. He was there for two years as a

freelance designer, dealing largely with the accessories division. ‘After Saint Martin’s it was an incredible release. I was doing my own thing, I was gaining experience. . . Part of my job was to go to India at least twice a year, but usually three or four times. I learned a lot through, firstly, working for a massive company – because even though it’s high street, the same principles apply – and, secondly, the travelling. The trips to India were inspirational, but they also provided the first sign of a resource. Before that, I had no idea how to go about sourcing fabric.’

After two years at Monsoon, Williamson associated with two suppliers in India and started his own label. ‘At first I just made scarves, because I was still too scared to make clothes. I wanted to get some publicity, so I opened a copy of British *Vogue* and scanned the editorial page. I thought going straight for the editor might be a bit over-ambitious, so I chose a writer called Plum Sykes, because I liked her name.’ He laughs at the naivety, which, at the beginning of his career, turned out to be his greatest asset. ‘I sent her a letter with a scarf. She was impressed by that and invited me in to the *Vogue* offices. So I took a box full of scarves and swatches and a few trinkets, and suddenly I had about 20 women around me, all *screaming*, telling me that they loved this stuff and that I had to make dresses for them all. That was my first order. I went home to Joseph in a state of shock – and told him I’d have to make some clothes. Joseph became involved organically from that moment on.’

Sykes recalls the meeting for the Design Museum show: ‘I can remember a heavenly package of exotic silk scarves landing on my desk. . . There was a note inside saying something like, “I thought you would love these, can we meet?”.’ Both Sykes and Williamson postponed the meeting several times – the designer was often in India – and when the day finally came, Sykes was ‘not especially excited’. She explains: ‘I meet so many disappointing young designers that I was wary. I was at least ten minutes late back from lunch. But as I sauntered back into *Vogue* House, I noticed a beautifully tanned, blue-eyed boy wearing an emerald green silk scarf twisted around his neck. I’ll admit I was mesmerized. Matthew had amazing personal style. He dressed like a glam, rock’n’roll gypsy. Not only did I want everything he was wearing, I wanted everything he pulled out of his bag and scattered all over my desk upstairs.’

Vogue told Williamson that if he could come up with some clothes and sell them to a boutique, they'd run a full-page piece on him.

Velosa recalls, 'He came home saying something like "I've got what I wanted – now what do I do?" So we sat down and worked out how much it was going to cost to produce the garments, what the mark-up needed to be in order to make it worth our while. . . and before we knew it we'd created this cottage industry.'

On *Vogue's* advice, the pair trotted along to a Knightsbridge store called A La Mode. Although at that point Williamson had made only two dresses, the buyer immediately placed an order for several dozen pieces. Williamson says, 'I was overwhelmed, but Joseph reckoned that if we could get into A La Mode, we could get into [the temple to style on London's South Molton Street] Brown's. So we went around the corner to Brown's and got another order for 50 to 100 pieces. By then we were getting very excited with ourselves, so we started thinking about Barney's in New York and Colette in Paris.'

Fired up with enthusiasm, they got on a plane to India and started the production process. Velosa says the anecdote is illustrative of fashion's insatiable hunger for novelty: 'It shows you how little you really need to do in order to impregnate the market. As it's based on change, fashion is inevitably attracted to anything new. Clearly, Plum [Sykes] saw something in Matthew's work that appealed to her, but I don't think there is any other industry that is so accepting of this kind of approach. As you go on, of course, you realize that, while there's a certain amount of tolerance for new talent, it's actually quite a conservative industry, with almost scientifically defined parameters.'

In this respect, Williamson's overnight success has a perfectly logical explanation. Velosa elucidates: 'It's known as "confetti buying" or "confetti press". Whether you are a buyer at Barney's or the editor of a fashion magazine, it's the same principle. You have to dedicate 80 per cent of your floor space to your mega-brands, or 80 per cent of your editorial to your biggest advertisers. So you're left with 20 per cent of what's called "confetti" – the fun, new and innovative stuff that you sprinkle around to make your store or your magazine look fresh and interesting.'

The problems start when you want to hang around for a while. Velosa says that the British fashion scene, in particular, is extremely fickle; the latest big thing can turn into yesterday's news in the blink of an eye. 'Sooner or later you realize that, like any other industry, fashion is

controlled by money. If you have money, you have advertising muscle, so you can control your editorial presence, which then affects how the customer perceives you, which in turn maintains the buyers' interest in your label.'

For the same reason, the label no longer shows during London Fashion Week. Velosa explains that New York was chosen because the Paris and Milan collections are dominated 'by huge advertising brands and heritage brands'. 'With the heavyweights controlling everything, it's almost impossible to get a good slot in the schedule – and if you don't, you're immediately regarded as b-list. New York is less crowded, so you can get a decent slot, yet everyone goes there. London Fashion Week is known as exciting and innovative, but it's also seen as a distraction. Because young designers receive little support in the UK beyond an initial burst of enthusiasm, few of them make it to an international level. So London has come to be seen as interesting, but not serious.'

Matthew Williamson has survived by adopting smart marketing tactics that have not, by and large, required a great deal of outlay. Most importantly, he has used his natural charm and his ability to attract supporters, mainly in the shape of beautiful young women. The first in a long line was Jade Jagger, whose papa is a Rolling Stone but who, as a jewellery designer, is these days better known for gemstones. After modelling a neon-pink Matthew Williamson dress for society mag *Tatler*, she contacted him to find out where she could get her hands on another one. Velosa, who answered the phone, told her very innocently how much it would cost her. He recalls his partner's reaction: 'When I told Matthew, he said, "Are you crazy? She needs to be wearing it! And we should give her some others too."' So he arranged to see her and they had what I can only describe as a meeting of minds.'

Williamson admits that he saw the potential of the relationship – but he stresses that all his celebrity links are driven by genuine admiration. 'I am inspired by people who have a certain sense of style and way of life. So I've built this little. . . collective, if you like. But it's always a creative relationship. When I met Jade there was a spark creatively – we loved each other's work and we were drawn to the same things.'

By the time Helena Christensen, who had seen the same dress in *Tatler*, called up, Velosa had got wise to the strategy: 'I asked her whether, in exchange for a few free frocks, she'd agree to model them for us.'

Another key member of the coterie is Bay Garnett, who styles Williamson's shows. Actress Sienna Miller is also a fan. Williamson adds, 'Socializing with these girls and delving into what they're thinking has been crucial, because obviously as a guy doing womenswear you need to get some insight and feedback. But it doesn't have to be famous women – it can just as easily be my mum or my sister.'

Away from his limelight-grabbing celebrity links, Williamson has embarked on a number of business collaborations designed to raise sponsorship cash and generate PR coverage. These have included a limited-edition bottle design for Coca-Cola, a range of rugs for The Rug Company and exclusive stationery for Smythson of Bond Street, as well as a line of Williamson-designed clothes for department store Debenhams.

Williamson and Velosa maintain strict control of the brand's image, and have no desire to go on a Cardin-style licensing spree – but, at the same time, they clearly envisage a future filled with Matthew Williamson sunglasses, shoes, bags and other accessories. The store already sells scented candles, and the launch of a fragrance in 2005 – backed by an international advertising campaign – indicated that the brand was moving to the next level.

Years after that initial meeting at *Vogue*, Williamson still regularly meets up with Plum Sykes, and he works with the same two factories in India. But these days his company employs 25 people and his clothes are sold all over the world. 'On the surface it's still about me, but increasingly I'm a cog in the wheel,' he says, almost apologetically. 'Joseph always says the things we produce are at their best and most pure when they come directly from me, so I realize that I have to remain heavily involved in the design process. But as the business grows, my job becomes more fractured and I have to deal with a number of other things. It's overly romantic to think that I sit around designing 24/7. And I'm not sure I'd want to, because developing the business is important to me. I'm a businessman.'

He's certainly down-to-earth (although he claims to have a more exaggerated 'fashion' persona that he can wheel out when required). Williamson says he's not an intellectual designer 'intent on changing the way we dress'. He designs for women who want to look sexy and of the moment – and that's it. 'I don't think fashion is theatre, so my clothes aren't costume or avant-garde. A critic might say that they don't have any content other than being whimsical, feminine and decorative.'

But I don't have an issue with that. I think you have to find out what you're good at and then do it to the best of your ability.'

Nor does he pay much attention to the vagaries of fashion. Like most designers at his level, Williamson is intent on creating his own style: 'I don't follow trends. If anything, I think it's my job to create trends.'

So how big could the Matthew Williamson brand be? Does he want to be a Gucci, or a Prada? He shakes his head. 'I think we're niche. But you can be niche and global at the same time. I'm particularly thinking of Missoni, Chloé, Pucci and Marni. Those four labels are international fashion brands, but they're not necessarily household names. And that's where I think our future lies, when I'm at my most optimistic.'

For now there's the shop, and the perfume. The store in Bruton Street is a strutting peacock of an establishment, embracing all the elements of the Williamson brand: colour, glamour, ethnicity, and even an unexpected Arts and Crafts sensibility. Needless to say, it sent interiors magazines into ecstasies of delight. 'Matthew Williamson's Mayfair jungle,' blazed the cover of *World of Interiors* in July 2004.

According to Velosa, 'The store is the cornerstone of why we're here today – how we can even discuss the future. We weren't an advertising brand; we were a small British designer brand struggling to break through to an international market. We thought about ways that we could stand out, and we realized we had to compete with the likes of Stella McCartney and Alexander McQueen. Even though their stores are backed by the Gucci organization, we knew we had to come in at the same level, at least in terms of perception. It was no good fading into the background with a little boutique in Notting Hill. So we raised the money through the Debenhams venture, and by re-mortgaging our own properties.'

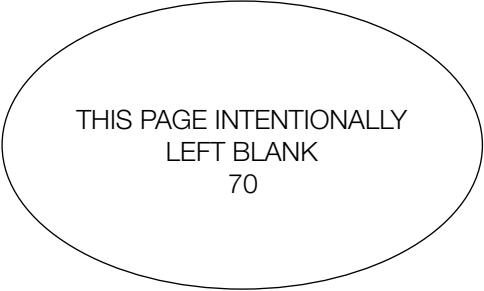
It was a risky venture that appears to have paid off – at the time of our interview, Velosa says takings are six times higher than predicted. The formula will shortly be replicated in New York. 'It's unprecedented in that we've been able to open a retail operation without the backing of a major conglomerate, and yet be seen as almost as powerful as our neighbours. [Stella McCartney's store is two doors down on Bruton Street.] It also provides a fantastic expression of the brand and an invaluable contact with consumers.'

He points out that the fragrance works on a similar, but micro, level. 'You literally have to condense everything you stand for into a box. I think you've got a very successful brand if you can do that.'

Williamson describes creating his fragrance as ‘one of the most satisfying projects I’ve ever worked on’. ‘The man who was responsible for the bottle design was a very chic, elegant character from Paris. He sat opposite me and said almost nothing as I struggled to explain my point of view and where I was coming from. I’d cobbled together a few. . . odds and ends, for want of a better expression: a tea-cup; a Venetian mirror; various objects that had inspired me over the years. And he nodded and went away, and I said to Joseph, “That was probably the worst meeting of my life.”’

Three months later, the bottle designer reappeared. This time he donned white gloves and placed eight black velvet pouches on the table. ‘I opened the first one, and it was, “Oh my God!” The next one was the same. In the end, I loved all of them. The guy had not only listened to every word I’d said, but he’d perfectly interpreted my ideas.’

The fragrance launch was supported by the brand’s first print advertising campaign, created by the agency M&C Saatchi. But Williamson is keen to emphasize that his approach has not changed. As he underlines, ‘I’ve overseen every detail, from start to finish. I wouldn’t do it otherwise. After all, with each product area you go into, you’re still trying to express your personal vision. However big your company ultimately becomes, it’s vital you keep control over that.’



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The store is the star

‘Customers today expect shopping to be a brand experience.’

In London’s New Bond Street, on a chilly November afternoon, the Asprey store is dressed for Christmas. Thousands of fairy-lights twinkle enticingly around its windows, and in the central atrium a splendid Christmas tree (could it actually be in British Racing Green?) soars almost to the ceiling. But there is nothing tacky about the festive décor, because, along with the aromas of pine and scented candles, Asprey exudes class.

‘Good afternoon, sir, can I help you?’ enquires a smartly suited doorman, seconds after I’ve stepped into the fragrant trap. I reply that I am just browsing, thank you, and he discreetly retires with a faint sketch of a bow, as if he is my brand-new butler.

Asprey has been selling luxury goods and jewellery from these premises since 1847, but in past decades it is unlikely that anybody with an eye for fashion would have paid it a visit. All that changed in May 2004, when Asprey’s new owners, investors Laurence Stroll and Silas Chou, re-opened the store after a two-year, £50-million refit. The pair had acquired Asprey & Garrard from Brunei royalty in 2000. Asprey was known for selling prestigious but hardly pulse-quickening items such as silver and leather goods, watches, porcelain, crystal, rare books

and gems. But Stroll and Chou promised to turn it into ‘the ultimate British luxury lifestyle house’ – Louis Vuitton with an English accent. When the refurbished Asprey threw open its doors, it was backed by an advertising campaign featuring the British actress Keira Knightley and styled by New York-based art director Fabien Baron. On display in the store, alongside an extravagant array of baubles and accessories, there was a line of ready-to-wear designed by Hussein Chalayan.

Once Asprey had had a chance to settle in to its spiffy new image, it became clear that the space itself was the star of the show. Before the revamp, the store was a stuffy warren formed by five 18th-century townhouses clustered around a concealed courtyard. Architect Norman Foster – whose previous, rather larger, refurbishment projects include the Reichstag and the British Museum – uncovered the courtyard, sheltered it with glass, and added a grand sweeping staircase reminiscent of a luxury liner. Interior designer David Mlinari – who refurbished Spencer House, the former home of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1990 – retained and recovered historic elements such as decorative pillars and an 18th-century fireplace, without undermining Foster’s modernity.

The 6,000-square-metre retail space feels even bigger, thanks to a mirrored wall alongside the staircase. There is an air of understated elegance that invites shoppers to linger, to wallow in the luxury. The carpets are plush underfoot; cream leather sofas beckon here and there. Various touches indicate that this is a branding concept as well as a retail one: the subtle references to the 1920s, the last period when Asprey was remotely fashionable; and, more obviously, the use of a signature hue. This colour, a purple so deep that it is almost aubergine, is seen on the banner outside the store, in the suits sported by Asprey’s doormen, and in a branded fragrance called Purple Water.

‘The store is absolutely the key to the brand,’ confirms Gianluca Brozzetti, the CEO of Asprey & Garrard Group, and former president of Louis Vuitton in Paris. ‘Customers today expect shopping to be a brand experience. As they move from store to store, they move from atmosphere to atmosphere. And Asprey has an atmosphere that is absolutely unique. Where else in London can you have a bespoke item created for you by a team of craftsmen based under the roof of the same building? It is the perfect combination of ancient and modern. Many brands today try to create a patina of history. But such a patina is not made – it is acquired.’

Asprey has since been sold once again, to a group of investors, suggesting that the revamp has not been as successful as originally hoped. But at the time of writing, its glorious flagship remains: perhaps even more seductive now it has a touch of hubris. Surveyed from the staircase, the store has a nostalgic, other-worldly atmosphere. Perhaps, long ago, all department stores were like this.

RETAIL CATHEDRALS

Buying clothes has never been a simple pleasure. In recent times we've grown familiar with the concept of the 'brand experience' – but more than a century ago retailers understood that they had to make shopping an adventure. In his book *Au Bonheur des Dames (The Ladies' Paradise)* Emile Zola presents a lightly fictionalized version of the Bon Marché department store in Paris, which he describes as 'devoted to consumerism'. The store's roguish manager, Octave Mouret, unhesitatingly equates shopping with lust. The sight of women scrabbling to get a look at the latest silks leaves him breathless: '[They] paled with desire and leaned over as if to see themselves, secretly fearing they would be captivated by such overwhelming luxury and unable to resist the urge to throw themselves in.' In another scene, he catches one of his salesmen laying out swatches of silk in harmonious gradations of colour, blue next to grey. Mouret pounces on the man, exhorting him to 'blind them!' with red, green and yellow. Zola portrays his hero as the best *étalagiste* – display artist – in the whole of Paris. The year is 1888.

Many of the earliest department stores are still open for business today. The Bon Marché, which opened in 1853, is generally accepted to have been the first. Its owner, Aristide Boucicaut – the model for Zola's central character – was a retail pioneer and marketing visionary. At the beginning of the 19th century, French shopkeepers were still mired in a positively medieval system. Historically, access to trades and professions had been regulated by a system of unions. Traders were required to specialize in a single product or service and could not, legally, branch out into other markets. Firms were passed from father to son, and business was done with regular customers on a one-to-one basis, often by appointment. Clients rarely ventured beyond their local vendors. Prices were not displayed, and bargaining was expected. This

meant there was little need for advertising, window displays, or any other form of visual merchandizing.

The system was scrapped in 1790, but for more than 30 years traders stuck tenaciously to the traditional structure. It was only in the 1820s that a new type of boutique, called a *magasin des nouveautés*, began to appear. Grouping textiles, parasols and other items under one roof, these small shops developed revolutionary techniques like tempting window displays, clearly marked prices and the division of merchandise into aisles. It was in one of these stores that Aristide Boucicaut started his career in 1830. Some 20 years later, he formed a partnership with one Paul Videau to run a more prestigious concern. Located at the corner of Rue de Sèvres and Rue du Bac, it was called Le Bon Marché, or 'The Good Deal'. Thanks to Boucicaut's innovations, notably discounting and the rapid rotation of stock, in a few years its profits rose from 450,000 French francs to more than 7 million. At that point, Boucicaut bought out his partner and embarked on an ambitious expansion plan.

Boucicaut's idea was to create not merely a 'shop of novelties', but a shopping emporium. He brought in none other than Gustave Eiffel to help him build his dream. Eiffel was an expert in manipulating iron and glass, which meant he could construct the huge display windows and open shopping spaces that Boucicaut had in mind. The new, improved Bon Marché store opened in 1870. It was a veritable cathedral of commerce, with light pouring through lofty skylights and departments accessed by swirling staircases. The structure covered 52,800 square metres and eventually employed 3,000 people. The techniques that Boucicaut used to ensnare customers were astonishing in their modernity: home delivery, reimbursement, seasonal sales, illustrated catalogues and commission for sales staff were just some of the advances he brought to the retail business.

Of course, Le Bon Marché was not alone. In the cities of Europe and America, economic growth driven by industrialization was creating an eager market of consumers, and giant stores were springing up to serve them. In 1862, AT Stewart opened New York's first department store, straddling an entire city block at Ninth Street and Broadway. Macy's – originally a smallish haberdashery – expanded in the 1900s to become the world's largest department store. In 1851 William Whiteley opened a small shop in the unfashionable Bayswater quarter of London. As his business grew, he acquired the shops around it, becoming one of the city's most successful entrepreneurs. Whiteley was murdered in

1907 by a man who claimed to be his illegitimate son. The department store that bore his name – today a shopping mall – opened in 1912. Six years earlier, an American entrepreneur called Harry Gordon Selfridge had opened his eponymous store in London. Just around the corner, in Regent Street, Liberty was closer in ambience and clientele to today's Asprey; opened by Arthur Lasenby Liberty in 1875, it catered to a craze for fabric and *objets d'art* from the Orient. Like Whiteley, Liberty gradually acquired neighbouring properties, and his emporium soon became London's most fashionable shopping venue.

For decades, the department store remained an appealing 'destination', reflecting Gordon Selfridge's foresighted philosophy that shopping should be a form of entertainment. Unfortunately, though, the stream of innovations that had originally lured customers into the stores began to dry up, and eventually trickled into nothingness. A century after their creation, the giants began to seem more like dinosaurs. Certainly, they would have looked familiar to Boucicaut and Selfridge. While bright, spirited chain stores such as Topshop began taking cues from high fashion, department stores were bogged down with dull own-brands and risk-averse buying.

Selfridges was one of the first to break out of the time bubble. It commenced a five-year overhaul in 1994, pulling in a host of cutting-edge brands and refiguring the store to target young, upmarket shoppers. Now it is described as 'creating lifestyle trends and offering a rather fun and slightly bonkers experience to its consumers'. ('The Cool Guide', *The Independent*, 30 October 2004.) At the time of writing, Harrods – one of the dustiest of the lot – had just hired Susanne Tide-Frater, who previously helped to transform Selfridges, as its creative director, and engaged advertising agency M&C Saatchi to brush the cobwebs from its image. It was pipped at the post by the John Lewis Group, which recently unveiled a £100 million renovation of its flagship Peter Jones store in Sloane Square. On the other side of the Channel, the venerable Galleries Lafayette has opened a far-from-bargain basement space targeting 12-to-25-year-olds. Called Version Originale, it features graffiti-covered walls, live DJ sessions, a nail bar, a vintage section and a café. The young, good-looking sales assistants present a sharp contrast to the stern *femmes d'un certain age* who still preside over the tills upstairs.

One UK name that has been linked with fashion since the 1990s is Harvey Nichols, which as well as its Knightsbridge flagship has stores in

Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Edinburgh. Affectionately known as 'Harvey Nicks', championed by the shopping- and Champagne-addicted Edwina and Patsy in the cult sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*, the store, notes *The Independent*, 'doesn't sell washing machines or have a self-service cafeteria; 80 per cent of its stock consists of the best fashion from the best designers the world has to offer'. It is also one of the few department stores to back up its positioning with a genuinely striking print advertising campaign, which in recent seasons has resembled a collision between a model's tear-sheet and a Hieronymous Bosch painting.

Benjamin Harvey opened his linen shop in a terraced house on the corner of London's Knightsbridge and Sloane Street in 1813. In 1820, the business passed into the hands of his daughter, who went into partnership with a certain Colonel Nichols to sell oriental carpets, silks and luxury goods. The existing Knightsbridge store was opened in the 1880s. Today, the group is owned by Hong Kong-based retail entrepreneur Dickson Poon (www.harveynichols.com).

With its award-winning window displays and tempting array of designer brands, Harvey Nichols is an ideal place to examine the interplay between a department store and its customers.

CREATIVITY DRIVES CONSUMPTION

April Glassborow, senior buyer for international designer collections at Harvey Nichols, drifted into her career by accident. 'I'd left university having done a French degree and took a temporary job at Liberty, working in the jewellery department,' she recalls. 'At one point the buyer fell ill, so I took over her job for a while. Later, when she moved departments, I took over full-time. Subsequently I bought accessories; then I moved to Harvey Nichols to buy jewellery and womenswear.'

Glassborow says buying for Harvey Nichols involves something of a balancing act: 'We're expected to be a step ahead, so we are constantly looking for new labels. We take risks with young designers who may not sell a great deal for three or four seasons, until a buzz generates around them. But at the same time, we want to reflect the demands of our customers, so we stock the more commercial designers too. In general, though, I don't think our type of customer is content to blindly follow the herd.'

As well as monitoring all the usual sources – magazines, the web, mutterings on the fashion grapevine – Glassborow receives intelligence from the store’s representatives around the world, who are often its first point of contact with young designers, forwarding photographs and background information. Crucially, she decides where each brand will be located in the store.

‘The amount of space you are going to give to each designer clearly dictates the buying, so it’s impossible to separate the two. Once again, you have to evaluate the “hot” aspect of a designer compared with the commercial reality: just how well is this label going to sell? And then, of course, the decisions you make about placing the clothes affect sales. You are aware that a certain type of customer goes for a certain type of designer, so the idea is to keep them flowing from one boutique to another, almost unconsciously, because they keep seeing things that catch their eye. I can’t tell you how I do that – it becomes instinctive.’

Instinct also drives the work of Janet Wardley, the store’s visual merchandizing controller, who handles window displays as well as interior mannequins and display points. ‘I’m lucky because, at Harvey Nichols, the display function is separated from the marketing department, which is not the case in many places. It means there is no pressure on me to favour certain brands, or to give the entire window display over to one brand because a deal has been struck. We ensure that the Harvey Nichols brand comes out on top. That situation gives me a lot of freedom.’

To celebrate one London Fashion Week, Wardley filled the windows with 15 archive pieces from previous Alexander McQueen collections – in other words, the windows were displaying items that were not even on sale inside the store. ‘Fashion students came and took pictures of it,’ she recalls.

In more usual circumstances, she endeavours to evoke an atmosphere that enhances the clothes, rather than being led by them. At the time I interview her, she’s just created a dark, autumnal theme with Halloween overtones, featuring giant metal insects. ‘For spring I’m picking up on blue, which is going to be big next season. You have to be on-trend, not just in terms of fashion magazines and runaway shows – which of course I study – but also in terms of the general feel of the times. You’re reading newspapers and listening to the radio, soaking up influences. One of the interesting things about Harvey Nichols is that

it is considered a trendsetter, so we can't really get it "wrong", so to speak.'

Interestingly, Wardley never receives official feedback about whether her displays have driven sales inside the store. 'It's considered one of the last artistic professions, so to be monitored in that way would take away our freedom and the ability to take risks. It's precisely because we don't have to answer to commercial concerns that we can do something entirely different. After all, we're supposed to be the leaders in our field.'

Wardley heads a team of ten, including five prop builders and two graphic designers (who take care of signage). Harvey Nichols has its own workshop and, on the rare occasions it sources materials from outside the company, it tends to use the same trusted suppliers. Mannequins get to travel, as they are rotated around the group's stores. Occasionally they are renovated. Wardley – who rarely looks at the windows of rival stores in case she is 'inspired by someone else without realizing it' – has none the less noticed the return of the mannequin, the humble shop-window dummy, as a display device.

'There was a time when all the chain stores were using posters and bust forms in their windows. I imagine it was because they'd spent so much money on their advertising that they wanted to squeeze maximum value out of it, so they put the posters in the window, too. It was a classic case of what happens when the marketing department drives the display side. Now it seems to be swinging back the other way – you're seeing mannequins again and more creative displays.'

Of all the marketing tricks in the retail book, window displays are the oldest and, still, the most alluring. Every year in the run-up to Christmas, crowds jostle in front of breath-fogged windows in Regent Street, Boulevard Haussmann and Fifth Avenue. 'Brightly lit, they. . . exercise their powers of attraction even at night,' writes Gérard Laizé, in *Repères Mode 2003*. He adds that, historically, French fashion houses were judged by the sophistication of their window displays. In Paris, the house of Hermès on the Rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré has long been famed for its enchanting fairy-tale displays created by Leïla Menchari – who has been with Hermès since 1977 – which combine silk and leather goods with jewellery, flowers, sculptures, and even leaves and seashells. And all this from a company that claims with a straight face that it does not do 'marketing'.

But in a world where luxury is big business, even the most exclusive brands rely on marketing – and their stores are the most spectacular manifestations of their ambition.

LUXURY THEME PARKS AND URBAN BAZAARS

‘Maison Hermès understands that the shop window is more than a platform for showcasing the latest bag or belt. The window... communicates what the brand represents,’ writes Kanae Hasagawa in the interior design magazine *Frame* (May/June 2004). ‘At the big Maison Hermès outlet in Ginza, Tokyo, the retailer has worked with no fewer than ten international artists and designers on a series of rotating displays since the store opened in 2001. Designed by Renzo Piano, Maison Hermès is a serene ten-storey edifice wrapped almost entirely in blank façades of glass block.’

As Hasagawa suggests, the communications potential of a store goes way deeper than the window. In keeping with their new status as the outriders of multinational empires, luxury brands are in competition to see which of them can open the most immense, sense-scrambling spaces. In 2005, to mark its 150th anniversary, Louis Vuitton took the wraps off its biggest store so far: more than 1,500 square metres on Paris’s Champs-Élysées, previously hidden behind a colossal monogrammed suitcase while the work was being completed. This followed similarly grandiose projects in Tokyo and New York. The outlets display the entire range of Louis Vuitton products, from handbags to fashion; they are single-brand department stores.

Dior is following a similar route – its store on Rue Royale, Paris, for example, brings together its various lines on four floors. In Milan, visitors to the bleached, minimalist Espace Armani in Via Manzoni can stroll through the entire price range, from suits to jeans, while pausing at a café, a bookshop, an exhibition space or Nobu, the latest branch of a restaurant venture between Armani, Hollywood actor Robert de Niro and the chef Nobuyuki Matsuhisa.

‘Stores are the face of a brand,’ confirms Robert Triefus, executive vice-president of worldwide communications at Armani. ‘It is the entire image as we would want it to be seen. Architecture is a very important part of brand communication. When you arrive [at a store] it should conform to your expectations of the brand.’

All these stores are nothing less than brand theme parks. 'The height of the ceiling, the size of the changing rooms, the smile (or its absence) of the sales staff, the design of the columns and the name of the architect all trace the contours of the brand,' notes the French edition of *Elle* magazine. ('*Le temps des cathédrales*', 6 September 2004.)

But the most powerful expression of architecture-as-branding comes from Prada, whose Epicentre stores perfectly express its intellectual image. The locations are designed by the hippest architects: Herzog & de Meuron (best known in the UK for the Tate Modern art gallery) in Tokyo; Rem Koolhaas in New York and then Los Angeles. Exteriors provide no trace of the Prada name – smart Prada consumers, undoubtedly up to their ears in newspapers and architecture magazines, are expected to know where they are headed. This concept is taken to the ultimate degree in Los Angeles, where the entire front of the store is open to Rodeo Drive, taking advantage of the clement weather and tempting passers-by to drop in. A subtle wall of air keeps breezes and raindrops at bay when needs be – and at night an aluminium screen rises from the ground to seal off the space. Shop 'windows' are giant reinforced portholes set into the floor, so customers trot over the mannequins. The interior is pure science fiction. Plasma screens blink fragmentary images and clips of the day's news, and glass changing rooms turn opaque at the touch of a floor-switch. Lighting controls enable customers to see their desired garment at various times of the day. Elsewhere, laminated screens change in tone and hue depending on how many bodies are present. At the press launch, Koolhaas told journalists, 'We give people the freedom not to shop... by devising alternative sources of interest.' ('Down with shopping', *The Guardian*, 20 July 2004.)

There can be no doubt, however, that the final goal is to sell stuff. One of Prada's most important experiments is the use of interactive RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) clothing tags. The tags themselves are transparent, revealing a tiny chip inside. Their most basic function is to allow staff to keep electronic track of stock, enabling them to tell customers instantly whether a certain size or colour is available. But they offer more – oh, so much more. When used in conjunction with one of the display screens – and a scanner brandished by a member of staff – the tags can call up catwalk video clips in front of the customer, or provide information about the colour, cut and fabric used to create the garment. In the changing rooms, garments are automatically scanned by an RF detector. An interactive touch screen then allows customers

to find out whether the store has alternative sizes or colours. The next step is RFID loyalty cards: when these are scanned, they will reveal an entire record of the customer's purchases, allowing sales assistants to suggest additional items that may be of interest, based on the profile in front of them.

Being 'tagged' by your favourite store is perhaps the most dramatic admission of brand loyalty. There are suggestions, however, that many consumers are veering away from one-brand shopping destinations. If clothing is an expression of identity, then shoppers require a range of brands to choose from, mixing and sampling like DJs until they've transformed their selection into something entirely personal. Such consumers wish to peruse items of the highest quality, however, so a vast department store will not do. Instead, they turn to pre-edited collections of brands, chosen for them by one-off stores such as Colette in Paris, 10 Corso Como in Milan and the more recent Microzine in London. These destinations typically also contain gadgets, furniture, CDs, books and art – the keys to a fashionable lifestyle. 'Such stores are not created, they are curated,' says Genevieve Flaven of trend-tracking agency Style-Vision.

Carla Sozzani, the founder in 1991 of Milan's 10 Corso Como, prefers to think of her operation as a contemporary European take on an oriental bazaar. Sozzani's 4,000-square-metre space fringes a shaded courtyard restaurant, and incorporates a photographic and design gallery, a bookshop, a music outlet, and boutiques selling clothing and accessories.

The ancient concept of the bazaar, or quite simply the market, is exercising the imagination of retailers at the moment. 'I have always loved the energy and anarchy of good markets,' Rei Kawakubo, the designer behind Comme des Garçons, told the *International Herald Tribune* ('Kawakubo's commune: a retail rebellion', 7 September 2004). Kawakubo was speaking at the opening of The Dover Street Market, her eclectic retail concept housed in a six-storey Georgian building in London. Along with clothing created by Kawakubo and fellow designer Junya Watanabe, there were contributions from various 'guests': furniture designed by Hedi Slimane; a white collection from Lanvin's Alber Elbaz; jewellery by Judy Blame; unique pieces from Azzedine Alaïa; the labels Boudicca and Anne Valery Hash; a vintage stand that is an outpost of cult Los Angeles store Decades.

The design of the store resembles a stage set, with boutiques housed in battered wooden huts, screened by silk curtains or standing before theatrical backdrops. There is art inspired by Picasso, and even a recreation of a French bakery. 'Shops are clothes just put in a gorgeous box. But for me, the box itself is as important as the clothes,' Kawakubo has pointed out.

It has to be said that she is more innovative than most when it comes to creating retail experiences. Running in tandem with the Dover Street venture, she has also introduced the concept of Guerrilla Stores. These hit-and-run outlets will open for only 12 months at a time, taking over semi-derelict buildings in the edgiest districts of cities. After all, if fashion is ephemeral, why shouldn't stores be equally transient? Advertised by posters pasted roughly to walls in selected areas, the stores are designed to be discovered by word-of-mouth, as their target market chatters about them in clubs and on the web. The strategy acknowledges that, being naturally suspicious of anything 'corporate', the new generation of consumers prefers to mine its information from underground seams.

Comme des Garçons' first Guerrilla Store opened in the Mitte district of Berlin in early 2004. The designer paid around €2,000 to use the site – a former bookshop with the sign still visible outside – and rent of €400 a month. There was little in the way of redecoration, and the place was run by an architecture student. It was followed by similar stores in Barcelona, Singapore, Warsaw, Helsinki and Ljubljana – all selling exclusive new pieces as well as items from previous seasons and unsold stock. As well as aiding the designer's avant-garde, art-punk image, the stores flatter consumers who take pride in discovering and inventing trends. Fatigued by the infinite buying opportunities around them, they look for the eccentric and the rare.

Whether fashion retail spaces resemble markets, art galleries or palaces, they are being forced to work harder to engage the attention of consumers. This is an era of mix and match, of experiment and personalization, not to mention web shopping. Today's shoppers don't like to stay in a box for long, no matter how gorgeous it is.

Anatomy of a trend

‘Trends have expanded beyond fashion. What colour is your mobile phone this season?’

When a fashion-conscious friend of mine saw a poster of Uma Thurman decked out in a bright yellow motorcycle jacket and matching trousers for the movie *Kill Bill*, she turned to me and hissed, ‘Shit – that means we’re going to look like bananas all summer.’ Actually, Uma’s violent yellow outfit never quite caught on – although her sneakers, made by the Japanese brand Asics, did. Movies, particularly when they become popular culture phenomena, clearly have an impact on fashion trends, along with the music industry (see Chapter 10: Celebrity sells).

Apart from these obvious sources, though, where do trends come from? Why are the stores full of pink one season, green the next, blue the season after that? Why does cowgirl follow flapper; 1940s take the place of 1970s? Is it some kind of conspiracy? Do the fashion companies get together in a top-secret location every autumn and decide what they’re going to foist on us the following year? Not quite – but almost.

‘I’m not always entirely sure where trends come from,’ admits April Glassborow, senior buyer for international designer collections at Harvey Nichols. ‘But I tend to think they’re started by the fabric mills.’

Fabric suppliers are indeed among the first links in the fashion chain. One of the most influential events of the year is *Première Vision*, the fabric trade show held in Paris at the end of September. As many as 800 fabric manufacturers from all over the world – Italy, France, Japan, Portugal, Switzerland and the UK are some of the most influential markets – display their wares to design teams and buyers. It's one of the few trade shows where you can spot designers like Christian Lacroix and Dries Van Noten stalking the aisles.

The fabric merchants are armed with formidable marketing skills. They have regular clients, and new wefts and weaves to sell them. Occasionally they'll be asked to come up with a specialized fabric for a designer; but they may let slip details of the product to a rival. Similarly, if an influential designer has picked up on a certain fabric, clients who arrive at the stand later may be tactfully encouraged to follow suit. Technology naturally affects trends, too: the resurgence of tweed was provoked by manufacturing developments that made the fabric lighter, more supple and easier to manipulate. Every year there's a new way of treating denim, to give jeans a look that is subtly different from the year before.

At the other end of the chain, if retailers tacitly agree to support certain colour or fabric trends, it means heightened customer demand, guaranteed sales, and less remaindered stock – which they might have been saddled with if they'd veered off-message. Hence, fuchsia one summer, lavender the next; this season linen and denim, next season velvet and corduroy.

But if the secret meeting suggested above does not actually take place, how do they know to stock similar stuff at exactly the same time?

THE STYLE BUREAU

Sitting in front of me is a man in a sky-blue V-neck sweater. He is casually yet stylishly dressed – but not particularly trendy. And yet he runs one of a handful of companies that, ultimately, have a significant impact on what we wear.

Pierre-François Le Louët is chief executive officer of Nelly Rodi, a 'style bureau' (www.nellyrodi.fr). Based in Paris, the company has offices in Italy and Japan and a network of affiliates worldwide. Its

clients come from the fields of fashion, textiles, beauty, retail and interiors. They include, in one category or another, L'Oréal, LVMH, Mango, H&M, Liz Claiborne, Agnès B, Givenchy, and a clutch of brands across Asia. There are other, similar agencies, including Promostyl, Peclers and Carlin International, but Nelly Rodi (Le Louët's mother) was one of the pioneers of trend counselling in Europe. She remains chairman of the company, while he handles the day-to-day running of the business. In the early 1970s she looked after communications for the designer Courrèges, before being appointed in 1973 as manager of an organization called the International Fashion Committee, which had been created by the French government two decades earlier.

Nelly Rodi's son takes up the story: 'In the 1950s, ready-to-wear was an American phenomenon, and it was felt that the French offering was disorganized and behind the times. Following a trade mission to the United States to see how the industry was structured over there, the French government created the committee, which was essentially a state trend co-ordination agency financed by the textiles industry. Why co-ordinate trends? Simply, to reduce incertitude: if you give the same intelligence to those who sell the clothes, those who design them, those who buy the fabrics and those who supply them, there are enormous economic advantages for the fabric manufacturers, because they know what material will be in demand and where to concentrate their efforts. Similarly, if the retailers are all stocking violet that year, it inevitably creates a demand for violet, so they sell out their stock. The idea was to reduce the margin for error in the extremely risky field of fashion.'

This was the organization Nelly Rodi joined in 1973, and where she learned many of her skills before quitting to form her own agency in 1985. In 1991, she purchased the newly privatized International Fashion Committee, ensuring beyond a doubt that she would become the trend counsellor of choice. Today, inevitably, the company has a team of trend-trackers who jet around the world monitoring social phenomena, observing the emergence of youth tribes and taking note of obscure trends, which they might pluck from the streets of Rio or Tokyo to turn into global fashions. As well as supplying such information to its clients, the agency can advise on brand strategies, produce marketing materials, organize events, provide stylists, and even design entire collections (its 30-odd staff come from both design and marketing backgrounds). 'We are the mercenaries of fashion,' Le Louët smiles.

But Nelly Rodi's most celebrated products are its 'trend books'. These hefty tomes, filled with photographs, illustrations and fabric swatches, as well as explanatory texts, resemble luxurious scrapbooks. They round up the agency's predictions of forthcoming trends and act as inspirational tools – or, more accurately, as prompts – for designers looking for the next big idea. Every season, the agency produces a dozen separate trend books covering categories such as ready-to-wear, knitwear, lingerie, colours, prints, fabrics, lifestyle and beauty. It even provides a 'perfume trend box set' containing little bottles of notes, blends and scents. Each book costs around €1,400 and only about 200 are printed in each category. Retailers and the beauty industry are the biggest buyers. Le Louët says, 'The luxury brands don't often buy them, because they see themselves as trendsetters. Nevertheless, I know that photocopies can be found in many designers' studios.'

To illustrate his point, he opens a trend book at a page detailing a 'heritage' theme. It features an atmospheric photograph of a handsome tan Chesterfield sofa on a carpet with a muted paisley pattern. Then he leafs through a recent copy of *Vogue*, and shows me an ad for a well-known Italian designer label. There is the moody photography, the carpet and the Chesterfield sofa – only this time with a lithe model reclining on it. The resemblance is striking. Le Louët grins. 'And, as I say, they are not one of our clients.'

A team of independent experts helps to create the trend books. Each October, the agency rounds up 18 personalities from the fields of fashion, design, sociology and the arts for a brainstorming session. Smaller meetings, aimed at strengthening the resulting theories and synthesizing them into text, last a month and a half. As Le Louët explains, 'There is a regular core of contributors, and an outer circle that changes from year to year. We are careful to choose people who can look beyond the media of today and give us an original perspective on the future, without relying too much on their personal opinions.'

The theory is that these people are constantly creating and absorbing fashion shows, art events, exhibitions, literature and social phenomena, and can divine which of these will have an impact on consumers' appearance and lifestyles in the near future. It's like watching stones being thrown into a pond, and analysing how far the ripples will spread. As a fictitious example, let's say we know that a major exhibition about Art Nouveau will be staged at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York next summer. In all probability, as designers often attend such

shows, we will see fashions inspired by the style of the early 1900s emerging on the catwalk a season or so later. Visualizations of the resulting fabrics and designs will appear in the trend book. Another trend could just as easily be sparked by street kids in Mexico City personalizing their T-shirts by hacking complex patterns into them.

Once all these theories and insights have been gathered, a team of photographers and illustrators brings them to life. The resulting books, as plundered by Nelly Rodi's clients, have an impact that may trickle down to consumers a year and a half later. Chain stores such as Zara and H&M, with their quick turnaround, can act on the prompts much earlier than designer brands, which is why their clothes are 'trendier' than those of their more expensive counterparts.

'I'm not saying we're indispensable – some brands are perfectly capable of anticipating or creating trends by themselves,' stresses Le Louët. 'But we're one of the many ingredients that have an impact. It's also important to note that trends, particularly colours, have expanded beyond fashion to take in beauty products, interiors, and even electronics – what colour is your mobile phone this season?'

THE NEW ORACLES

With fashion in constant flux, there is a strong argument for producing a trend book that can be updated not every season, but every day. An online service called the Worth Global Style Network (www.wgsn.com) has dramatically changed the way trends are monitored.

Created in 1998 by the brothers Julian and Marc Worth and later acquired by publisher Emap, WGSN is the Bloomberg of the fashion industry. Based in London, it has more than 150 staff, and outposts in New York, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Milan, Barcelona and half a dozen other cities. As well as daily fashion business news, it delivers interviews, analyses, surveys, city reports, coverage of trade shows, and thousands of photographs of stores, runway shows and street life from around the globe. With a click of the mouse, its subscribers can see what fabrics were on show at *Première Vision* the previous morning, or what teenagers on the streets of Shanghai are wearing today. Not surprisingly, its extensive client list covers everybody who is anybody in fashion and retail, from Abercrombie & Fitch to Zara.

The WGSN headquarters in London resembles the bustling editorial floor of a major newspaper, with dozens of journalists tapping away at keyboards. And I'm assured that there are many others, out snapping the latest trends with digital cameras.

'It's amazing that [the traditional style bureaux] let us into the market without a fight,' observes Roger Tredre, WGSN's editor-in-chief. 'Most of them still don't have an online service to speak of, while we've been around for more than six years.'

But WGSN is no fly-by-night dotcom – it sees the web merely as a means to an end. 'We've never used the term dotcom internally,' Tredre says, 'because it has all the wrong connotations for us. We perceive ourselves as a research and information company that just happens to use the internet as the quickest means of diffusion. With the ever-changing nature of fashion, speed is of the essence.'

He adds that WGSN does not so much predict trends as provide vital intelligence for a multi-billion-pound industry: 'But of course, part of our job is to monitor cutting-edge trends, and to explain how these might be interpreted for the mass market.'

Other trend-trackers act not so much as consultants to the fashion industry, but as observers of cultural shifts that may have an impact on product development. One such agency is Style-Vision, founded in 2001 (www.style-vision.com). Alongside its bi-monthly 'mega-trends' reports, it produces surveys of individual industries (not just fashion, but also food, personal care and technology, among others) and regularly holds round-table conferences on evolving consumer trends. Usually staged at exclusive hotels or villas in the south of France, these events attract leading marketing directors, advertising creatives, designers, architects, branding experts and journalists.

Style-Vision's business development director, Genevieve Flaven, says, 'Our goal is to provide a rational analysis of societal changes, as well as forecasting developments that may have an impact on design. We're also interested in mixing consumer insights and expertise from different industries. We're very practical – there's no crystal ball, and we're not gurus. The main thing we strive to avoid is treating consumers as if they're malleable and somewhat naïve. We realize that we're all consumers – intelligent human beings with highly complex responses to the world around us.'

In fact, says Flaven, the agency is less concerned with predicting trends than in getting inside consumers' heads. 'We're interested in

individuals in the context of society. Through our research among consumers and opinion-formers, we imagine future scenarios, how consumers will react to them, and what kind of products and services they might require within those scenarios.'

Ironically, though, the only people really in touch with the latest trends are those who create them – on the streets. Consumers themselves, particularly young ones, are more iconoclastic, inquisitive and inventive than any designer armed with a WGSN password and a stack of trend reports. No sooner has a marketing executive told adolescents that this is the correct way to wear a pair of jeans, than they've torn off the waistband and started wearing them differently. The classic argument runs that, once a trend has crossed over into the mainstream, it is already out of date.

The fashion industry is the ultimate fashion victim.

THE COOL HUNTER

I find the prospect of meeting a cool hunter rather daunting. After all, as somebody who mixes with rappers, graffiti artists and Mexican gang members to get a line on youth trends for a music television channel, Claudine Ben-Zenou has got to be one of the coolest people on the planet. Accordingly, I fix our rendezvous at the trendiest bar I know, and go along dressed in ancient jeans and a black T-shirt advertising the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo, as purchased on a market stall there a few months earlier.

I needn't have worried: Ben-Zenou is not some thrusting style maven in shades, but a friendly, discreetly well-dressed woman in her mid-20s. However, for somebody so outwardly normal-looking, Claudine has some very specialized areas of interest that have made her invaluable to a wide range of brands. She recently quit a full-time post as MTV's official trend-tracker to set up her own agency, called Vandal, with a colleague.

'I've always been immersed in subcultures and youth trends,' she says, without pretentiousness. 'I've been involved in the hip-hop scene for more than 12 years – I was part of a hip-hop collective called Sin Cru when I lived in London. I was also into skateboarding from about the age of 14 and had a lot of friends involved in that culture. Later I got interested in the urban music scene and the rave scene. But, while I

found all this fascinating, I didn't have a clue that I could put it to any practical use.'

She studied marketing and advertising, but at the age of 19, while still at university, she got a job at a small marketing agency in Hoxton. At the time, the area was beginning to emerge after years of neglect as one of London's most vibrant districts, a veritable Petri dish of trends. 'The agency specialized in underground and youth marketing, and as I got more involved I realized that I had inside knowledge and connections that could be very useful,' she recounts. 'We were working on [beer brand] Fosters Ice and doing lots of stuff with street art and graffiti. It really opened my eyes to the possibility of using subcultures for marketing. Collaborations between mainstream brands like Nike and Adidas and underground designers are very common today, but we were among the pioneers.'

Since that first job, Ben-Zenou has acted as a consultant for global brands such as Levi's, Casio G-Shock, Pepsi and even Disney, always providing them with the inside track on street culture. 'The way I position myself is that I'm equally at home in the boardroom and on the street. I'm the connection between the two. I can talk to kids on their own level without coming across as a suit. What they're doing is not some abstract concept to me – it's very real.'

She also describes herself as 'a huge geek', and she has forged many of her underground connections via internet chat-rooms. 'A lot of the people I got close to in the early days have since become quite famous in their fields. I'm able to pick up the phone and talk to a friend who's a graffiti artist or a hip-hop MC. And, as they're my mates, I'm not trying to interpret these quite complex scenes as an outsider. Youth brands that try to connect with these communities have a habit of getting things wrong and basically getting everyone's back up. I feel strongly about trying to avoid that.'

Brands who try to target niche opinion-formers without doing their homework often find themselves exposed to ridicule. 'You can miss a step very easily. The key is to work closely with influential people within the communities, and listen carefully to what they say. Graffiti is a good example. I hear all the time about brands that've plucked some random kid off the street. If you're using somebody who's not a respected artist, the result may not be obvious to you, but it's extremely obvious to people within the scene, which undermines your credibility as a brand. It's very important to develop long-term relationships, rather

than just latching on to a scene in the short term and sucking everything you can out of it in a parasitical way.'

I ask Ben-Zenou if she ever feels in danger of being regarded as a sort of double agent – a suit in hip-hop clothing. 'Most of the people I deal with know exactly what I do,' she replies. 'I've always tried to make a positive contribution, encouraging brands to create events that will bring money back into these scenes and elevate artists who might not have been able to make it in other circumstances.'

For a while, she acted as an agent for a group of graffiti artists and breakdancers, liaising with brands on their behalf. 'A common attitude among marketing executives was that they were just dealing with a bunch of kids doing graffiti, so they didn't need to pay them or even particularly acknowledge their contribution. But these people are extremely talented and often do a lot for brands, so I'm keen to get them the recognition they deserve.'

Later she worked for the MTV website, but talked the broadcaster into creating a new role after observing that 'although we were very good at mainstream research, we didn't seem to be monitoring trends'. (And yet the stars of MTV's music videos have always had an impact on trends – brands such as Tommy Hilfiger and Dolce & Gabbana swear by the access the channel provides to a young, logo-oriented public.) In addition to providing regular e-mail newsletters, she wrote a quarterly trend report called 'Switched On', which was sent to MTV's advertisers and their agencies, as well as acting as an internal primer for staff. 'It was a creative tool designed to inspire people and give them a snapshot of what's happening out there. I picked up on micro-trends rather than huge shifts in behaviour.' Following her own rule of working within cultures, she often asked hip-hop artists and DJs to write their own articles. 'I think it's important to get people to talk about their scenes in their own voices.'

The position was based in Chicago, where she is now installed at the helm of her own agency. 'I'm moving away from trend-spotting into more of a consultancy role. Lately it has become in vogue to say you're a trend-spotter. Trend-spotting has become a trend. What clients are asking us for now is not just information about emerging trends, but advice on how to use this knowledge.'

Although she's one of the global elite of cool hunters, Ben-Zenou doesn't feel part of any such group. 'I'm aware of people who do a similar job and I've met a few of them, but I always have the impression

that I'm taking a somewhat different approach. They tend to come from a research background, while my training is in marketing. I suppose the main difference is that I'm not approaching it objectively – I'm deeply, passionately involved. I still go to hip-hop events, my boyfriend is from that community. . . What some people don't realize is that you can't just turn up one day and break into these scenes. I get a lot of respect because I've been involved for years. If I didn't do this for a living, I'd be doing it anyway – always reading magazines, going online, chatting to people at parties and trying to find out how they think.'

Hence her recent brush with Mexican gang members. 'I met them at a party and got talking to them. It wasn't a work thing – I just found them interesting. I'm like a cross between a journalist and a sociologist.'

Perhaps because I'm a decade older than Ben-Zenou, it occurs to me to ask if there's an age limit for being a cool hunter. Isn't there a danger that, one day, she'll no longer be able to relate to icons of hip? She says, 'I've occasionally wondered about that myself, but I think attitudes to age are changing. I've got lots of friends who are older than me and who are still very much involved in the scene. There's a graffiti artist called Futura 2000 who's 50 years old and still considered an icon of cool. He's recently done some work with Nike. Then you've got someone like Vivienne Westwood, who's still very influential. As for me – let's face it, I've got 200 pairs of trainers. I can't see myself suddenly giving up everything I love and dressing in beige anoraks.'