

What happened to pop-up?

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From Guerilla-stores to pop-up retail.

Who still looks surprised when seeing a pop-up store? Are we affronted when a pop-up store pops up in our local shopping street? The answer is no, on the contrary, we almost expect them to pop-up in every possible location. It does make us wonder though what happened with the once exclusive, only known for insiders, guerrilla stores. If you remember, somewhere in the beginning of this century, the first temporary stores made their entry. It was there temporality that was part of the innovation which allowed retailers or brands to create a unique experience. Not only its ephemerality, but also its location and often the exclusive products developed to this end, created a buzz around the hosting brand. One innovative example comes from fashion label Comme des Garçons, who invaded a vacant building in a remote part of former East Berlin for half a year (2004). Though the shop was designed with a minimal budget and composed with mediocre materials, they were selling upmarket collections. This contradiction created a unique and exclusive experience for their clientele.

In the years that followed, many other brands launched their pop-up initiatives in many different forms and locations, ranging from one-week stores in subways to pop-up restaurants on top of skyscrapers. However, at one point, the guerilla-factor disappeared and what was once exclusive and unique, became more mainstream and multi-purposed.

Take the Bernhard Wilhelm Tokyo flagship boutique (2006) as a first example of using the pop-up concept for another purpose. The store resembled the pop-up style but was not at all temporal. The designers were asked to be resourceful with rubbish and hired the conceptual artist Cyril Duval as director. He collected a variety of discarded items in the dense and decaying areas of the city to create the store. Apart from almost being a social study, the store uses the pop-up concept as a motif by cleverly adopting its characteristics: crudely assembled interiors thrown together overnight, the ephemeral character, and mediocre materials.

A second purpose pop-up stores have been given is launching start-ups. Via pop-up stores entrepreneurs can experiment with their retail concept first, before taking a big leap and make large investments. Most certainly in times of economical crisis this is a strong benefit pop-up stores offer. In Hong Kong, for example, where there is a shortage of retail spaces and where rents are huge, they got creative by launching box shops. These are stores that are an accumulation of boxes. One box is usually big enough to display one or two products. Both up-and-coming designers as established brands rent these small displays to showcase their products. Due to the reasonable rates these, call it micro-stores, offer a great opportunity to test the marketability of new products.

Third, also cities have discovered the potential of pop-up retail and uses it for city-making purposes. Attracting new ideas or hot brands to the city can make the increasingly abandoned streets vibrant again. An example that illustrates this is the Boxstore (2012) in de Vennestraat in Genk (Belgium). This formerly empty retail outlet is renovated to host both retailers or chefs. To this end the space is fully equipped with a kitchen and some basic displays. The idea is to rent out the space for low prices during a couple of months to attract new entrepreneurs. When proven market-fit, they are stimulated to rent one of the empty premises in the same street to further grow. But, if the concept fails, the entrepreneurs have no financial whole to fill. The Boxstore combines the temporary spirit of the pop-up concept with an infrastructural investment in the street to revitalize it by dealing with the vacancy problem. Next to cities also real estate owners recognize the benefit of hosting temporary stores: they help to attract possible long-term tenants. Though very popular, pop-up stores hosted in (always the same) vacant buildings lost their unexpectedness and their ephemerality.

The multi-purposed use of pop-up retail has caused the concept to change from unique and trendy to a mainstream and commonly adopted store typology. But next to retailers, cities and developers adopting and adapting pop-up retail, also the changing experience seeking consumer have contributed to an effort to this transformation. Our online buying behavior has definitely played a role in how we want to shop offline. If online is cheap, convenient and quick, offline should offer something else, something more: experience. Retailers are therefore forced to stand out to get the consumers into their stores. Pop-up retail can make that difference. Strangely enough, it are also

online retailers who seek their success in offline retail by means of pop-up stores. Pure players like Amazon and Zalando have tested their offline marketability via pop-up stores.

The success of offering experience to lure customers to the store is illustrated by Boypark in Shoreditch (2013), London. Here not one store, but 61 striped and refitted shipping containers are the attraction point. The containers are stacked to create a complete open air shopping centre where 50 carefully selected brands have found a home for the next four years. Though located in a more remote area of the city, at a former railway goods-yard which was already abandoned for 40 years, it attracts thousands of people. Though the temporal character is, again, a bit lost - the developers have a contract for five years - it does not miss its goal in revitalizing the neighborhood.

Pop-up stores have definitely lost their pioneering role, instead they evolved on the one hand to a 'new' store typology that is here to stay, and on the other they are reduced to several characteristics which are adopted to regular store design. As Rogers would frame it within his innovation theory, we found ourselves in the fourth phase - out of five - of adopting the innovation of pop-up stores. While Comme des Garçons was an 'innovator' - phase one -, Bernard Wilhelm was an early adopter - phase two. Boypark and the Boystore are part of phase three and four. Manifestations of the pop-up store coming close to its final adoption phase can be found in, for example, the rise of matchmaking services for temporary spaces. What is more, today we not only see stores popping-up, also other sectors have adopted temporality as a way of being. Workplaces, housing, hotels, etc. are popping-up when and where needed. This answers to our more nomadic lifestyle. The last decade we find ourselves much more on the move, we are less place-attached and we almost love change.

So, what does the future behold for this 'new' store typology? Can it still surprise us? Maybe its unexpectedness is gone but we do believe it can still astonish us by being there when we need it. Students of the summer school Seamless Retail Design came up with this idea of pop-up stores being there on demand. Design students of the Polytechnico di Milano, TUDelft and Hasselt University have put their heads together in Hasselt last summer to think about the store of the future. One of the results was the concept of 'crowdretail': use crowdsourcing to find out where pop-up stores are needed and which products they should sell. This way, the journey of creating the store and going to the store becomes part of the whole experience. The students wanted to create a relationship between the community, the store, the environment and the range of products. The inspiration came from crowdbuilding.com where new ideas for empty buildings are proposed, seeking to be approved by possible inhabitants. Entrepreneurs can use the same strategy to find out online where their success offline lies and what kind of store they should be.