

From Gallery to Storefront: The Interdisciplinary Dialogue Between Exhibition Design and Visual Merchandising

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Abstract

In recent years, retail environments have evolved beyond their commercial function, emerging as hybrid spaces where commerce intersects with art, architecture, and sensory design. This paper examines the integration of exhibition design principles into visual merchandising through a comparative analysis of two flagship retail brands—Gentle Monster and Aēsop. Drawing on concepts from the experience economy and servicescape theory, the study explores how each brand employs spatial storytelling, sensory engagement, and aesthetic strategies to construct distinctive consumer experiences. Gentle Monster's theatrical, installation-like environments contrast with Aēsop's minimal, site-specific architectural approach, yet both position the retail space as an experiential and cultural destination. The analysis highlights how these differing strategies not only influence consumer perception but also reflect broader shifts in retail design toward interdisciplinary, art-inspired practice. By situating these cases within the discourse on contemporary art's influence on spatial design, the paper contributes to an understanding of retail as a medium for cultural expression as well as commercial exchange. Through this exploration, the paper positions retail as a hybrid cultural-commercial sphere where the logics of art exhibition and consumer space converge, offering insights into the future of both disciplines.

Keywords

experiential retail, visual merchandising, contemporary art, spatial storytelling, sensory design.

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Introduction:

In recent decades, the boundaries between cultural and commercial spaces have become increasingly porous. Museums, galleries, and retail stores—once perceived as distinct domains of aesthetic contemplation and commercial exchange—now intersect in ways that blur the traditional separation of art and commerce. Flagship stores and pop-ups in particular have evolved into sites of curated experience, borrowing heavily from the languages of exhibition design to stage consumer encounters as immersive, narrative-driven events (McLean, 2020). This shift signals not only the culturalization of retail but also the recognition of retail environments as platforms for storytelling and identity construction.

Exhibition design, grounded in curatorial practice, spatial dramaturgy, and semiotic communication, provides a conceptual and methodological framework for presenting objects in ways that stimulate meaning-making (Bishop, 2005). These principles resonate strongly with visual merchandising, which similarly seeks to choreograph spatial encounters and guide visitor

attention, but with the additional aim of facilitating commercial transactions. In both contexts, the staging of objects—whether artworks or products—relies on atmosphere, spatial rhythm, and narrative cues that engage audiences emotionally and cognitively (Bourriaud, 2002; Joy et al., 2014).

Within this context, the boundaries between retail and exhibition spaces have increasingly blurred. Visual merchandising has adopted curatorial and spatial strategies historically associated with museums and galleries—such as narrative sequencing, scenography, and participatory installations—transforming stores into environments that resemble cultural exhibitions as much as commercial spaces. Pioneering brands such as Gentle Monster and Aēsop exemplify this interdisciplinary exchange: Gentle Monster stages its boutiques as conceptual art galleries with ever-changing installations, while Aēsop integrates minimalist, site-specific design echoing museological atmospheres. Both cases demonstrate how exhibition design principles can be reinterpreted to create distinctive, memorable retail experiences.

CITATION

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Despite these developments, academic research on the systematic integration of exhibition design into retail remains limited. Much of the existing literature emphasizes consumer experience or branding strategies (Joy et al., 2014), without sufficiently addressing the methodological frameworks that link curatorial practices with visual merchandising. This gap highlights the need for interdisciplinary inquiry that bridges museology, contemporary art, and retail design.

Research Significance:

The significance of this study lies in its potential to expand the theoretical and methodological foundations of visual merchandising by situating it within exhibition design discourse. By doing so, it not only contributes to retail innovation but also deepens our understanding of how cultural and commercial practices intersect in shaping spatial experience.

Research Question:

- How can exhibition design principles be systematically applied to visual merchandising in order to create immersive and culturally resonant retail spaces?

Hypothesis:

- Integrating exhibition design strategies into retail visual merchandising enhances consumer engagement by transforming stores into experiential, narrative-driven environments that transcend traditional commercial functions.

Objectives:

- To propose an interdisciplinary framework that bridges curatorial strategies with retail display methodologies.
- To contribute to the academic discourse on spatial design by situating retail within a broader cultural and aesthetic context.

Research significance:

- The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how retail environments are increasingly shaped by exhibition design principles, blurring the boundaries between commerce and cultural spaces. By analyzing two brands with distinct yet art-driven design philosophies, this research offers insights for designers, retailers, and academics into how spatial storytelling, sensory engagement, and interdisciplinary strategies can enhance customer experience and brand perception. In an era where physical retail competes with e-commerce, such approaches may provide a competitive

advantage and foster emotional connections between consumers and brands.

Research Methodology:

- Research Approach: Qualitative, Literature review and comparative case study analysis.
- Case Selection: Gentle Monster (Seoul flagship) and Aēsop (selected flagship store with site-specific design).

Data Collection:

- Visual analysis of store interiors, layouts, and merchandising displays using high-resolution images.
- Secondary literature on experiential retail, exhibition design, and sensory branding.

Data Analysis:

- Thematic coding of spatial, sensory, and narrative strategies.
- Comparative analysis to highlight similarities, differences, and unique brand approaches.
- Mapping findings against established theories such as servicescape (Bitner, 1992) and experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Literature Review

Exhibition Design Principles:

Exhibition design, historically associated with museums and galleries, has evolved as a discipline that combines spatial planning, scenography, and narrative construction. Central to exhibition practice is the idea of spatial storytelling, where spaces are organized in sequences that guide visitors through curated experiences (Dean, 1994). Exhibitions employ immersive atmospheres and sensory engagement—through lighting, sound, materiality, and spatial rhythm—to evoke emotions and construct meaning (MacLeod, 2005). These principles shift the focus from static display to dynamic experience, positioning the visitor as an active participant in meaning-making.

Experiential Retail and the Experience Economy

The evolution of retail design parallels this exhibition-oriented approach. (Pine and Gilmore's 1999; 2019) concept of the Experience Economy emphasizes that consumers increasingly seek memorable, staged experiences rather than functional transactions. Retail spaces have thus transformed into theatrical environments, where narratives, sensory cues, and brand values converge. Experiential retail foregrounds the affective dimension of shopping, integrating cultural and emotional value into consumption. Scholars argue that this repositioning of retail towards experience mirrors curatorial strategies in cultural institutions, aligning commerce with practices of cultural display (Joy et al., 2014).

Servicescape and Sensory Branding:

The theoretical framework of servicescape (Bitner, 1992) further underscores the importance of spatial, ambient, and social cues in shaping consumer behavior. Elements such as layout, lighting, color, and music act as stimuli that influence affective and cognitive responses, thereby guiding purchasing decisions. Building upon this, sensory branding research has demonstrated how multi-sensory stimulation—scent (Hultén, 2011), tactile surfaces (Spence & Gallace, 2011), or soundscapes (Spence, 2020)—creates holistic environments that strengthen brand identity and consumer attachment. In retail contexts, these sensory cues often overlap with exhibition design tactics, revealing the shared language between cultural and commercial practices.

Contemporary Art Installations and Retail:

Recent practices have highlighted the influence of contemporary art installations on retail design. Practices such as Yayoi Kusama's immersive polka-dot environments or Olafur Eliasson's atmospheric works demonstrate how large-scale, multi-sensory installations dissolve boundaries between space, body, and perception (Bishop, 2005). Retailers have adopted similar strategies, staging stores as art-like environments that provoke curiosity, spectacle, and engagement. Brands such as Gentle Monster, with its rotating kinetic installations, and Aēsop, with its site-specific interior concepts, exemplify how retail borrows from the logic of contemporary art to enhance consumer experience and create distinctive cultural capital.

Identified Gap:

While there is growing recognition of the convergence between exhibition design and retail, much of the academic literature treats them in parallel rather than integrative terms. Existing studies focus either on experiential retail (Pine & Gilmore, 2019; Joy et al., 2014) or on sensory branding (Hultén, 2011; Spence, 2020), but lack comparative analysis of how distinct brands apply art-driven, exhibition-like strategies in their spatial merchandising. Furthermore, few studies address the methodological implications of translating curatorial practices—such as spatial sequencing, scenography, or immersive installations—into the

commercial domain of retail. This gap motivates the current study, which examines Gentle Monster and Aēsop as exemplary cases that explicitly operationalize exhibition design within visual merchandising.

Case Study Analysis

To illuminate the intersection of exhibition design and visual merchandising, we analyze two emblematic retail environments: Gentle Monster's Seoul flagship and Aēsop's site-specific flagships. Each demonstrates distinct art-informed strategies for creating immersive, emotionally resonant retail experiences.

Gentle Monster Flagship stores

Gentle Monster has positioned itself as one of the most radical disruptors in contemporary retail, transforming its stores into hybrid spaces that operate at the intersection of art, performance, and commerce. Its flagship spaces demonstrate how visual merchandising can adopt methodologies from exhibition design and contemporary art to create immersive, emotionally charged encounters. The following analysis situates the four dimensions of Gentle Monster's retail design—store window, interiors, layout, and atmosphere—within the frameworks of Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy (1999), Bitner's Servicescape theory (1992), and sensory branding approaches.

Gentle Monster's storefronts often resemble kinetic art installations rather than traditional displays. The brand stages surreal, evocative scenes—including lifelike robotic sculptures and oversized motifs—that transform the façade into a theatrical narrative threshold. These interventions align with installation art practices that prioritize visitor engagement and surprise (At Issue Journal, 2018).

In the context of the Experience Economy, this theatricality provides the aesthetic and entertainment dimensions of experience, provoking curiosity and inviting entry. Bitner's servicescape model positions the store window as a powerful design cue shaping approach behavior, while sensory branding highlights the primacy of the visual spectacle, enhanced by movement and scale, as a marker of brand identity. For Gentle Monster, the window is less a product showcase than a narrative provocation, aligning retail with the dramaturgy of an exhibition.



Fig.(1): GENTLE MONSTER store window
Las Vegas The Forum Shops at Caesars

Source: Gentle Monster Store Opens in Las Vegas at Caesars Palace | The Impression

The Gentle Monster store at The Forum Shops, Caesars Palace in Las Vegas immerses visitors in an atmosphere of surprise and emotional tension through its unconventional approach. At the entrance, the Giant Head Trio, a monumental kinetic installation animates the space with subtle movements and enigmatic, almost unsettling expressions that captivate onlookers. Created by the brand's in-house Robotics Lab, this installation invites reflection on the evolving relationship between humans and machines, exemplifying Gentle Monster's vision of dissolving boundaries between retail, contemporary art, and technological innovation. Fig(1)

The Gentle Monster store at Singapore's Ion Orchard, named 'AWAKEN,' envisions a futuristic narrative centered on the fragmentation and reinterpretation of data. It reassembles a torrent of distinct digital images to express a renewed identity through an individual's own 'Awakening.' The store's diverse artworks and installations are carefully curated to showcase stark contrasts in color and material, highlighting the theme of disintegration. Video artworks featuring humans illustrate the journey of self-realization amidst the overwhelming influx of data. Scattered throughout the space, installations of ants, eyes, and robots symbolize a new creative order, offering a subtle yet impactful retail experience that Gentle Monster aims to deliver. (Gentle Monster, n.d.) Fig. (2)

Gentle Monster (Haus Dosan, Shanghai)

Gentle Monster introduces the HAUS concept, heralding the future of retail. HAUS blends Gentle Monster's innovative retail vision with the artistic flair of the Tamburins cosmetic brand and the whimsical charm of the Nudake dessert brand. HAUS DOSAN is the inaugural embodiment of this concept, uniting the three brands into a singular



Fig.(2): GENTLE MONSTER store window,
"Awaken" series Singapore ION

Source: Stores Archives - Great New Places

experience. Gentle Monster intends to extend this journey with HAUS SHANGHAI, offering fans and visitors the chance to explore a variety of experimental concepts and content within its space.

Store Window:

Haus Dosan's façade serves as a formidable visual gateway, a blank canvas of concrete that offers no direct hint of traditional retail. Instead, it sets the tone for "future-forward" retail, standing as part of Gentle Monster's UNOPENED:FUTURE concept that merges retail and art into one multisensory experience. This understated exterior invites curiosity, signaling a shift from commercial display to experiential provocation.



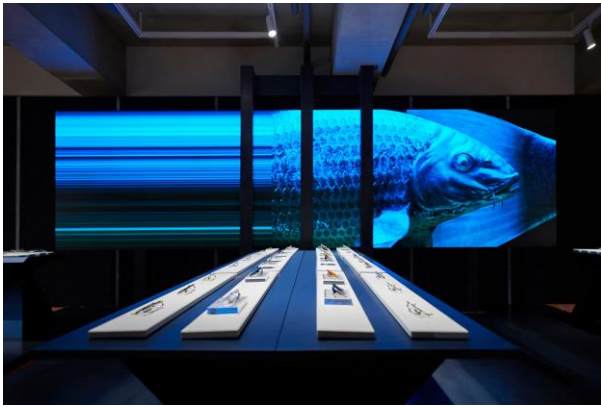
Fig(3): GENTLE MONSTER Haus Dosan Store
facade, Shanghai.

Source: Seoul: HAUS Dosan opening | superfuture®

Store Interiors:

Ground Floor / Lounge: Visitors are welcomed into a dystopian lounge dominated by a massive 3D-scanned installation by Frederik Heyman, serving as a visceral and sculptural introduction to the Haus Dosan narrative.

Second Floor (Optical Eyewear): This level emphasizes minimalism and restraint, punctuated by the moving media piece Truth or Dare, which introduces visual rhythm and movement within a serene spatial composition.



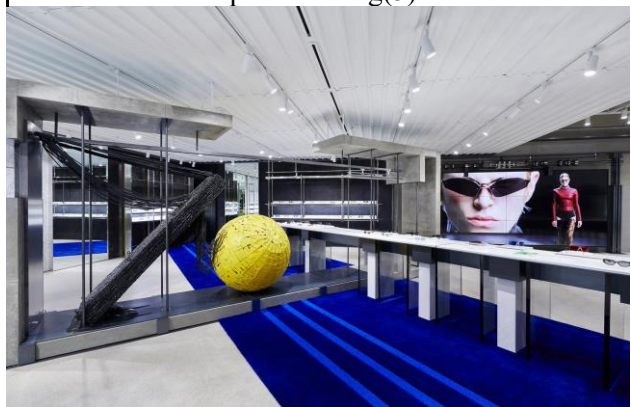
Fig(4): The second floor dedicated for Gentle Monster's optical glasses, Haus Dosan, Seoul, Korea

Source: GENTLE MONSTER | HAUS DOSAN

Within HAUS DOSAN, the Gentle Monster store explores the distinct emotions associated with glasses and sunglasses by separating them. By thoroughly examining the unique qualities of each, the second floor is devoted to glasses, while the third floor showcases sunglasses. The contrasting atmospheres and themes of each level merge to create a unique retail experience exclusive to Gentle Monster. Emphasizing 'minimalism' and 'restraint,' The second floor of Haus Dosan features the mixed-media installation "Truth or Dare" by Jonas Lindstroem, a concept that draws from the social game's inherent dynamics of choice, vulnerability, and risk-taking, usually represented by red and blue colors, where blue refers to Truth and red refers to Dare. This theme materializes through a series of rhythmic visual and auditory shifts, creating an atmosphere of tension and unpredictability within an otherwise refined spatial setting. The installation challenges visitors to oscillate between moments of comfort and disruption, mirroring the duality of revealing a truth versus accepting a dare. By transforming a playful,

psychologically charged concept into an immersive artistic environment. Fig(4)

Third Floor (Sunglasses): The third floor of Haus Dosan is dominated by The Probe, a six-legged kinetic robot developed by Gentle Monster's in-house Robotics Lab. This installation is not a mere decorative piece but a conceptual anchor that reflects the brand's ethos of exploration and technological artistry. The term "probe" signifies an object of investigation and discovery, echoing the idea of venturing into the unknown. Its autonomous movements and insect-like form create an atmosphere of curiosity and tension, blurring the boundaries between retail, art installation, and speculative design. By positioning this robotic entity within the store, Gentle Monster transforms the retail environment into a futuristic laboratory of imagination, reinforcing its narrative of innovation and its ambition to reframe the shopping experience as an intellectual and sensory journey. This floor merges nostalgia and futurism into a kinetic installation that literally and figuratively elevates the consumer experience. Fig(5)



Fig(5): The third floor zones dedicated to Gentle Monster's Sunglasses, Haus Dosan, Seoul, Korea

Source: GENTLE MONSTER | HAUS DOSAN

Fourth Floor (Tamburins): Tamburins' second flagship store, located on the 4th floor of HAUS DOSAN, is created with a sense of delicate balance to express sophistication and special sentiments throughout the space, demonstrating the start of the

future of Tamburins a refined, nature-inspired art space for cosmetics, featuring kinetic artwork resembling reeds in the wind by the in-house design team and contributions from artists like Chulan Kwak and Mercedes Vicente. (Gentle Monster, n.d.)



Fig(6): The fourth floor zones dedicated to Tamburins Cosmotics, Haus Dosan , Seoul, Korea

Source: GENTLE MONSTER | HAUS DOSAN

This flagship store, inspired by 'nature,' highlights the beauty of empty spaces by creating an atmosphere with simple white, black, and sunshine hues. The area exudes a sense of grandeur, adorned with artworks by Chulan Kwak, Mercedes Vicente, and Casper Kang. Additionally, taking cues from 'reeds' swaying in the breeze, the in-house kinetic sculptures showcase the 'elegance and uniqueness' that set Tamburins apart. (Gentle Monster, n.d.)

Fifth floor (Nudake Café): NUDAKE's inaugural flagship store in Korea is situated on the 5F level of

HAUS DOSAN. The theme of this floor, "TASTE OF MEDITATION," is characterized by a calm atmosphere and ample space, allowing visitors to concentrate on their sense of taste. As guests enter, they are welcomed by a long table that stretches through the center of the room. This table is adorned with a selection of sculptural desserts and cinematic video installations that challenge traditional pastry concepts and engage all five senses.

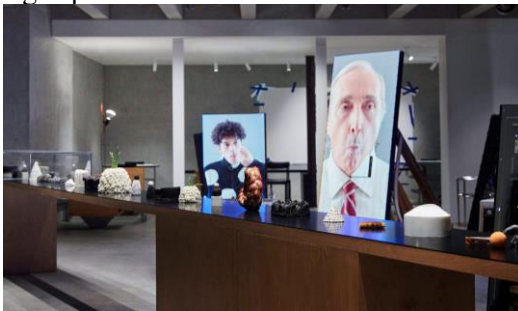


Fig. (7): the basement NUDAKE Zone, Haus Dosan, Seoul, Korea

Source: GENTLE MONSTER | HAUS DOSAN

The media installation in the center was created as a collaborative artwork with Italian visual artist ANDREA ARTEMISIO to show the repetitive motion of consuming food and the emotions behind the action in a whimsical manner. (Gentle Monster, n.d.)

The author concludes that once visitors come inside, they encounter environments that synthesize directly from installation art and scenography. Rather than conventional shelving and product-first displays, Gentle Monster constructs elaborate robotic creatures, theatrical props, and rotating exhibitions each communicating a distinct narrative. Within the Experience Economy, these immersive interiors produce escapist encounters that transport visitors beyond functional shopping into a world of fantasy and speculation. From a servicescape perspective, the interiors represent



physical and symbolic design elements that shape perceptions of brand quality and distinctiveness. Sensory branding is particularly evident here, as tactile materials, oversized sculptures, and unexpected textures encourage physical and emotional engagement. The interior therefore becomes an extension of brand storytelling, situating eyewear within a world of speculative futures.

Store Layout:

Gentle Monster embraces a non-linear layout—customers explore thematic "zones" rather than following a predefined path. This spatial sequencing mirrors curatorial practices in exhibition design, where visitors navigate through curated experiences at their own pace (Indesign Live, 2017)



Fig(8), Gentle Monster Haus Dosan store 5 floor section, Haus Dosan, Seoul, Korea.

Source: GENTLE MONSTER | HAUS DOSAN

The author suggests that Gentle Monster rejects the logic of linear, efficiency-driven circulation in favor of a fragmented, gallery-like spatial choreography. Customers are invited to wander, explore, and even lose themselves within “exhibition zones,” each with its own narrative. This aligns closely with Pine and Gilmore’s insistence on staging experiences rather than delivering goods: the customer journey is designed less as a path to purchase than as a series of aesthetic encounters. In servicescape terms, layout becomes a behavioral setting that prompts exploration and extended dwell time. For sensory branding, layout contributes indirectly by orchestrating the rhythm of sensory encounters—transitions from light to dark, quiet to sound-filled, minimalist to chaotic—producing a curated journey of emotional intensities.

Store Atmosphere:

The atmosphere is the most powerful sensory dimension of Gentle Monster’s retail spaces. Stores often deploy dystopian soundscapes—low, industrial frequencies or futuristic tones—that envelop the visitor in a cinematic environment. Lighting is used dramatically, alternating between shadowed, intimate zones and brightly illuminated showcases. The overall result is an effective field that stages the brand as more than eyewear: it is an immersive cultural narrative. Pine and Gilmore’s experiential framework places such atmospherics within both aesthetic and escapist dimensions, as customers feel transported into another world. Bitner’s servicescape identifies atmosphere as a critical ambient condition shaping emotional responses, and sensory branding underscores how the integration of sound, light, and tactile elements builds a coherent emotional identity. Gentle Monster’s atmosphere ensures that the brand is not just seen, but felt.

Atmospherically, the brand leans into the dramatic: dim lighting, immersive soundscapes, and futuristic materials dominate. These design choices evoke emotional engagement and function as aesthetic signifiers, resonating with servicescape theory’s focus on environment-driven consumer behavior (Bitner, 1992). The atmosphere is central to the experience. The lounge in Haus Dosan features a dystopian soundscape by artist Arca, reinforcing the emotional tone established through visual design. Across levels, materials shift from minimalist restraint to kinetic drama, balancing emotional provocation with sensorial narrative cues.

The author suggests that the experimental approach used in HAUS DOSAN might serve as a good example that manifests the unlimited potential of using physical retail spaces. In an era dominated by online shopping, Gentle Monster advocates for the significance of spatial storytelling. Every element of HAUS DOSAN, from its architectural design to its multisensory engagements, challenges conventional retail norms and invites visitors into a dynamic and ever-evolving environment. By seamlessly integrating art, technology, and commerce, Gentle Monster establishes a new standard for experiential retail. HAUS DOSAN exemplifies the notion that physical spaces should transcend mere product sales; they should provoke thought, ignite curiosity, and foster enduring emotional connections. Through HAUS DOSAN, Gentle Monster invites us to envision a future where shopping transcends mere transactions and becomes an exploration, where retail is not static but vibrant.

Analysis Conclusion:

Together, these four dimensions establish Gentle Monster as an exemplar of interdisciplinary visual merchandising, demonstrating how retail can evolve into a form of cultural production. By mobilizing exhibition design principles, the brand stages its stores as sensorially saturated environments where commerce is secondary to experience. Within the frameworks of experiential retail, servicescape, and sensory branding, Gentle Monster’s strategy reveals how spatial design can reframe consumption as participation in an aesthetic event. This positions the brand not only within the competitive retail sector but also within broader cultural dialogues about the future of art, design, and commerce.

Aēsop Flagship Stores

Store windows:

Unlike Gentle Monster’s theatrical exteriors, Aēsop’s windows are understated and often nearly transparent, designed to reveal the interior without distraction. This deliberate minimalism communicates trust and authenticity, resisting

retail's traditional reliance on spectacle. In the Experience Economy, the window positions itself within the esthetic and educational realms by inviting contemplation rather than provocation. From a servicescape perspective, the window functions as a symbolic cue of brand philosophy,

conveying restraint and sincerity. In terms of sensory branding, the pared-back aesthetic appeals to visual simplicity and intellectual engagement, targeting a customer who values purity over display.



Fig(9): Aēsop different Store windows, Singapore

Source: The Aesop Experience | Habitus Living

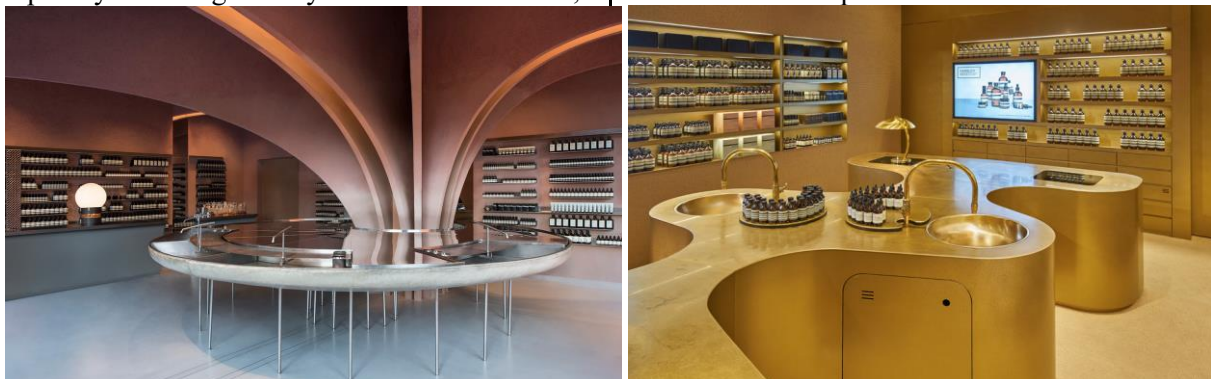
In the left side store Window display Oak timber remains a significant material, but it is utilized differently here. It pays homage to the area's history of sawmilling, starting as a grid of quadrilateral frames behind the store's glass front and extending into the interior as various forms of shelving and displays, including low and high counter blocks, window display niches, poster frames, and ceiling light elements.

On the right side it is a transparent store window where the visitor sees the interiors directly.

Store Layout:

Aēsop's layouts are generally linear or semi-linear,

with clear zoning based on product categories and usage (e.g., skin, hair, body). The spatial clarity encourages unhurried browsing, embodying the brand's philosophy of slowness and care. This design promotes the educational realm of the Experience Economy, allowing customers to learn about products through guided, intentional navigation. In servicescape terms, the layout reduces cognitive load and enhances approach behaviors by creating a calm, comprehensible environment. Sensory branding manifests in the pacing of movement, as the spatial rhythm fosters mindfulness and product focus.



Fig(10): Different Aēsop store layouts, London and Singapore.

Source: The Aesop Experience | Habitus Living

/ Snøhetta designs new Aesop London flagship | Wallpaper

In the right photo, The store design was inspired from the shopping mall's central location in the cultural district and Singapore's rich history as a bustling port. This led to a dreamy color scheme of brassy, sandy hues that evoke "the romance of trade, exploration, and tall ships, along with the weathered resilience of nautical materials," as stated in Aesop's press release. At the heart of the

store is a sculptural brass counter, complemented by lamps and faucets in a matching shade, creating a cohesive look that almost resembles an art installation. Its wavy design allows both staff and customers to easily access products from the surrounding insert bays. (McDonald, A. (2021, March))

In the left photo, The central feature is a column clad in Devonshire clay-plaster, which rises from the floor and transforms into what Girgis calls 'an architectural tree.' This structure extends across the ceiling, creating a breathable texture that enhances the atmosphere and aids in ventilating the subtly scented area. The 'trunk' encircles a 4.5 square meter 'water table,' where a thin layer of water flows into four fiberglass sinks, each the size of a tin bath, used for skin consultations. (Parsons, E. (2022, October 10))

Store Interiors:

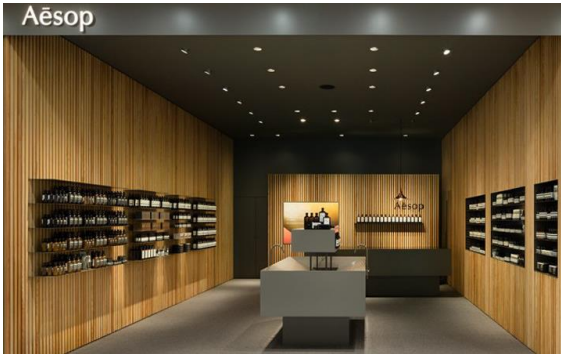


Fig.(11): Different Aēsop's store interiors, Japan, Brooklyn.

Source: » Aesop store by Torafu Architects, Sendai – Japan /

Frida Escobedo's New Aesop Store Blends Classic Brooklyn and Mexican Craft | Architectural Digest

Store Atmosphere:

The atmosphere is central to the Aēsop experience. Spaces are bathed in warm lighting, scented with signature aromas, and dressed in tactile materials—evoking a sensory refuge rather than a transactional environment. This aligns closely with sensory branding strategies that elevate customer perception (Hultén, 2011; Spence & Gallace, 2011). The quietude of sound, often with minimal background noise or ambient tones, reinforces the brand's

Aēsop's interiors are crafted as site-specific installations, leveraging local materials and architectural history. For instance, Frida Escobedo's Brooklyn store fuses red brick aesthetics with Mexican tile craftsmanship and sensory cues—bergamot, cedar, rosemary—to anchor brand identity within regional context (Architectural Digest, 2019). Similarly, the brand's use of reclaimed materials in its Los Angeles outlet underscores environmental and cultural narrative through material authenticity.

meditative character. Within the Experience Economy, this aligns strongly with the esthetic realm, immersing visitors in an environment of sensory harmony. Servicescape theory explains how these ambient elements create a calming psychological response, increasing dwell time while reducing purchase pressure. Sensory branding is most powerfully enacted here, with scent functioning as Aēsop's signature, directly linking store experience to brand memory.



Fig.(12): Aēsop store, with a warm atmosphere, Hongkong.

Source: Aesop reopens on Hollywood Road in Hong Kong | Indesign Live: Interior Design and Architecture

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Comparative Analysis of Gentle Monster and Aēsop through the Lens of Experiential Retail, Servicescape, and Sensory Branding

Dimension	Gentle Monster	Aēsop	Framework Links
Store Window	Theatrical, often featuring large-scale kinetic art (e.g., Giant Head Trio in Las Vegas). Functions as a spectacle to intrigue and provoke curiosity.	Minimalist, transparent, or understated. Emphasizes authenticity by revealing interiors without distraction.	Experience Economy: Entertainment/Escapist (GM) vs. Esthetic/Educational (Aēsop). Servicescape: Symbolic cues of spectacle vs. authenticity. Sensory Branding: Visual provocation vs. visual simplicity.
Store Layout	Non-linear, labyrinth-like “exhibition zones.” Encourages discovery, disorientation, and playful wandering.	Linear/semi-linear layouts with clear product zoning. Promotes calm, guided, and educational navigation.	Experience Economy: Escapist exploration (GM) vs. Educational clarity (Aēsop). Servicescape: Cognitive stimulation vs. cognitive ease. Sensory Branding: Movement as surprise vs. movement as mindfulness.
Store Interiors	Gallery-like installations, often rotating and experimental. Emphasis on futuristic materials and theatrical props.	Site-specific materials tied to local culture (timber, copper, marble). Each store narrates a place-specific story.	Experience Economy: Escapist immersion (GM) vs. Esthetic/Educational rootedness (Aēsop). Servicescape: Symbolic unpredictability vs. symbolic authenticity. Sensory Branding: Visual/auditory immersion vs. tactile/material honesty.
Store Atmosphere	Dark lighting contrasts, dystopian soundscapes, futuristic aesthetics. Creates a sense of otherworldliness.	Warm lighting, natural scents, quiet soundscapes. Evokes calm, mindfulness, and care.	Experience Economy: Entertainment/Escapist provocation (GM) vs. Esthetic immersion (Aēsop). Servicescape: High arousal vs. low arousal environments. Sensory Branding: Visual & auditory provocation vs. olfactory & tactile resonance.
Experiential Identity	Spectacle-driven, theatrical, and disruptive; blurs retail, art, and technology.	Minimalist, sensory, and authentic; blurs retail, architecture, and cultural identity.	Both expand visual merchandising into cultural mediation; both exemplify experiential retail as more than commerce

To further illuminate the interdisciplinary dynamics between exhibition design and visual merchandising, a comparative framework is useful in positioning Gentle Monster and Aēsop as two distinct yet complementary paradigms of experiential retail. While both brands employ spatial design as a cultural and emotional mediator, their strategies diverge significantly in how they activate the store window, interiors, layout, and atmosphere. Table 1 synthesizes these contrasts and overlaps through the lenses of the Experience Economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), Servicescape theory (Bitner, 1992), and Sensory Branding (Krishna, 2012). The juxtaposition highlights

Gentle Monster’s theatrical, spectacle-driven environments that blur art, retail, and technology, against Aēsop’s minimalist, sensory-focused spaces grounded in authenticity and cultural context. This comparative view reinforces the argument that visual merchandising today is not merely functional but increasingly interdisciplinary, merging exhibition design philosophies with retail strategies to shape unique customer experiences.

Conclusion:

This research has explored the interdisciplinary dialogue between exhibition design and visual merchandising, examining how brands such as

Gentle Monster and Aēsop embody two contrasting yet equally powerful models of experiential retail. Drawing upon the frameworks of Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy, Bitner's Servicescape theory, and contemporary approaches to sensory branding, the analysis demonstrates that retail spaces are increasingly evolving from sites of mere product exchange into immersive cultural environments.

The case study of Gentle Monster illustrates how exhibition-led strategies, theatrical installations, and kinetic displays transform the store into a stage for speculative narratives that blur the boundaries between art, technology, and commerce. In contrast, Aēsop's flagship stores represent a counterpoint: understated yet deeply atmospheric spaces rooted in material authenticity, local culture, and multisensory intimacy. While both approaches differ in execution, they converge in their rejection of traditional retail logics, instead positioning the store as an experiential medium capable of provoking emotions, shaping cultural meaning, and cultivating brand attachment.

Recommendations:

- **For Retail Designers:** Adopt a hybrid methodology that draws from both spectacle-driven exhibition strategies and sensory-centered atmospheres. Integrating narrative staging (as seen in Gentle Monster) with site-specific authenticity (as exemplified by Aēsop) allows for adaptable designs that appeal to diverse customer psychologies.
- **For Brands:** Move beyond a purely product-centric approach to embrace storytelling through space, where the retail environment becomes a medium for cultural and artistic dialogue. This not only differentiates the brand but also generates emotional resonance and memory retention
- **For Researchers:** Future studies should expand the comparative framework across additional sectors and geographies, including luxury, mass-market, and digital-native brands. Moreover, further integration of digital technologies (AR, VR, AI-driven personalization) with exhibition-inspired retail design represents a fruitful area of investigation.
- **For the Retail Industry:** Recognize the strategic importance of interdisciplinary collaboration—between architects, artists, technologists, and brand managers—in shaping next-generation retail experiences. By leveraging art and sensory design, retail can maintain its cultural relevance in an era of rapidly expanding e-commerce.

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