

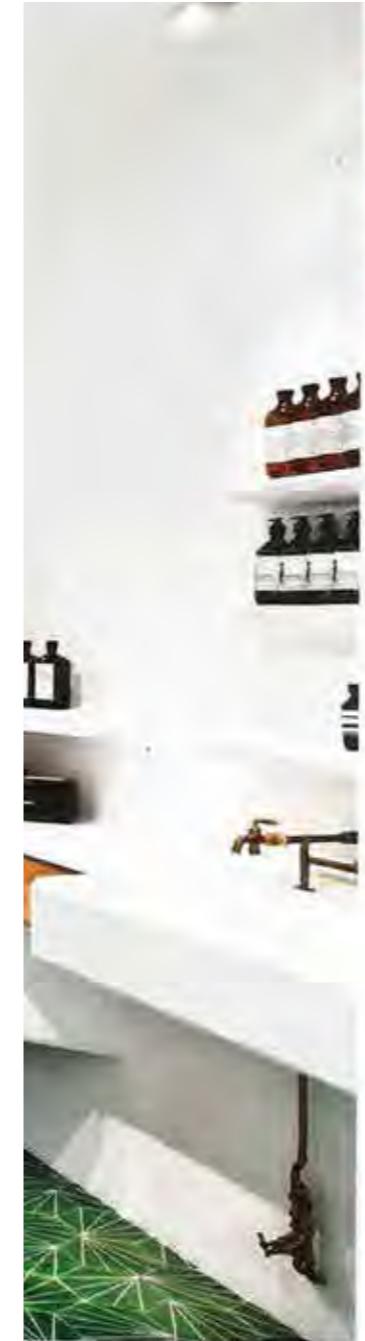


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SHOPPING

A retail fable

Australian beauty brand Aesop has built a London store interior from industrial plumbing parts, a ceiling in Adelaide from glass bottles and a kiosk in Grand Central station from copies of The New York Times. It will soon have over 100 stores worldwide, but the story behind them is always different



We didn't talk about architecture, we talked about history and art and film. It was a very inspired meeting

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Left
Aesop Covent Garden, London, by Cigué, 2013
Right
Aesop Tiquetonne, Paris, also by Cigué, 2012

Earlier this year, an unusual retail space opened amid the over-priced cafes and street performers of London's Covent Garden. Just off the main square on King Street, between a small pub and a clothing shop boasting of "Saint Tropez chic", the store represents a new kind of retail experience for an area in which shop interiors seem to oscillate wildly between ostentation and blandness. Through the subtly branded windows of this new store, curious passers-by can glimpse a white cave-like interior stocked with hundreds of

amber glass bottles that give the impression of an alchemist's workshop, an impression enhanced by two large stone sinks by the entrance and a raw palette of materials – plaster, copper and ceramic – throughout. Verdant geometric floor tiles and a lush green wall at the rear of the space seem to offer sanctuary from the surrounding chaos of Covent Garden.

At the time of writing, this store, designed by the French architect Cigué, was the most recently opened retail space for the Australian skin and haircare brand Aesop. By the time of reading,

however, there will be new outlets in Berlin, Paris, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Kyoto, Singapore and another in London – each boasting a unique interior. By the end of 2013, there will be more than 100 stand-alone Aesop stores across the globe with interiors by over 20 different architects and designers.

Even stores designed by the same practice have completely different outcomes. While the amber bottles and raw materiality mark the Covent Garden store as recognisably Aesop, for example, the interior otherwise bears little resemblance to the

five previous stores designed by Cigué. In Paris, the practice hammered hundreds of handmade nails into rows to create shelving; in London's Islington it was inspired by a 1930s medical laboratory; and in Soho, a former fried-chicken shop was transformed using industrial plumbing parts and patinated enamel surfaces.

It is part of an idiosyncratic retail design strategy employed by the brand since it was founded by former hairdresser Dennis Paphitis in Melbourne in 1987. As a retail design strategy, it is a far cry from the more conventional approach of a single fit-out concept that is rolled out around the world, regardless of location. Rather, each Aesop store is designed to reflect its context, using mostly local design talent and materials. The first retail space, which opened in St Kilda, Melbourne, in 2004, is located in a converted car park ramp and set the tone

for the unusual interiors for which the brand is now known.

Notable spaces include a ceiling in Adelaide crafted from 7,560 amber glass bottles, a store in New York constructed from over 400,000 sheets of reclaimed copies of The New York Times and a space comprising 3,000 cardboard shipping boxes in Melbourne. In Boston, William O'Brien Jr clad an entire store with cornices, and in Tokyo, Schemata Architecture Office used reclaimed domestic materials to fit out a former vegetable shop, while Torafu Architects created a sleek and minimal space using mirrors, blackened steel and sisal carpet.

The approach is best described by Matteo Martignoni, Aesop's general manager in charge of marketing, creative and product development: "Design matters at Aesop," he says. "Our objective is to do less and do it better, to respect and execute strong ideas

well and to bring joy and pleasure to ourselves and our customers."

While this strategy means each store varies drastically in appearance, there is a certain approach that they share. Material honesty, for example, is key, as is a sensitive understanding of environmental concerns and the experience of those visiting the space. "We ask the designers to translate our key design codes with local materials and with respect for the individual streetscapes," says Martignoni.

There is no real set criteria that designers must meet before designing a retail space for Aesop, and over the past decade the company has worked with architects, interior designers and product designers. When asked how Aesop selects the designers it works with, Martignoni suggests detailed medical reports on the mental wellbeing of each designer would be

of use – a reference, perhaps, to some of the challenges of working with such a multitude of designers, many of them in the early stages of their career. "In the absence of these," he says, "we prefer either precocious prodigies – which are rare – or five years of postgraduate, high-level residential experience. Only through successfully designing comfortable homes can our more idiosyncratic retail requirements be interpreted and understood."

Unusually for such a large and international brand, founder Paphitis is closely involved in initial discussions about the direction of a project, a reflection of how closely his ideals are interwoven with Aesop's. These discussions between Paphitis and designers are rarely pragmatic. Rather they are conversations about shared inspirations, music, architecture, poetry and art. For Aesop Covent Garden, Cigué and Paphitis spent months exchanging images of