

# A masterclass in Anthropologie

In the US, Anthropologie is renowned for its bold and inventive store design. Can it raise the bar in its first store in Europe, asks John Ryan

Every year has its store opening event and when the report on 2009 comes to be written, it seems probable that in the UK, US fashion and homewares retailer Anthropologie's European debut will loom large. And it would be little surprise if this proves to be the case given this retailer's reputation in its home country.

In retail circles, it's well known that Anthropologie is the sister brand of Urban Outfitters and that both have their head office in Philadelphia. For most people, however, the chances are they may well be unaware of what a visual merchandising force this retailer is.

Yet visit almost any big North American conurbation and before long you are standing in front of a shop whose windows will be unlike its neighbours, or those of any other retailer in town.

Anthropologie's consistent ability to make visual merchandising do what it is supposed to do – say "look at me" – has been born out of the way it seems to take odds and ends and turn them into something visually compelling.

Hardly surprising therefore, that when its European arrival was announced last year, there was a buzz of excitement that was inevitably reinforced by the retailer's choice of Regent Street as a location. Now the store is open, and its 10,000 sq ft arranged on an open-plan basis over three floors has had more than its fair share of admirers.

Indeed, two days ahead of the ribbon cutting last week, it was quite hard to keep track of the number of curious onlookers peering through the twin glass doors to try and catch a glimpse of what lay within. Had they been permitted to wander in, the view would indeed have been remarkable.

And the first thing that they would have encountered would have been what European chief executive James Bidwell refers to as: "An area where you come in to slightly decompress, which provides a hint of what is to come, before you hit the store's volume." Another way of putting this

**ANTHROPOLOGIE,  
REGENT STREET**  
**Size** 10,000 sq ft selling on three floors  
**Visual merchandising and store design** In-house  
**Shopfit and store equipment** Mackenzie Keck  
**Major design features** Staircase and hydroponic plant wall

might be to remark that there is a lower ceiling to the store's initial few yards before you pass through a thick metal frame into an interior where you can stare from the top to the bottom of the store's three levels.

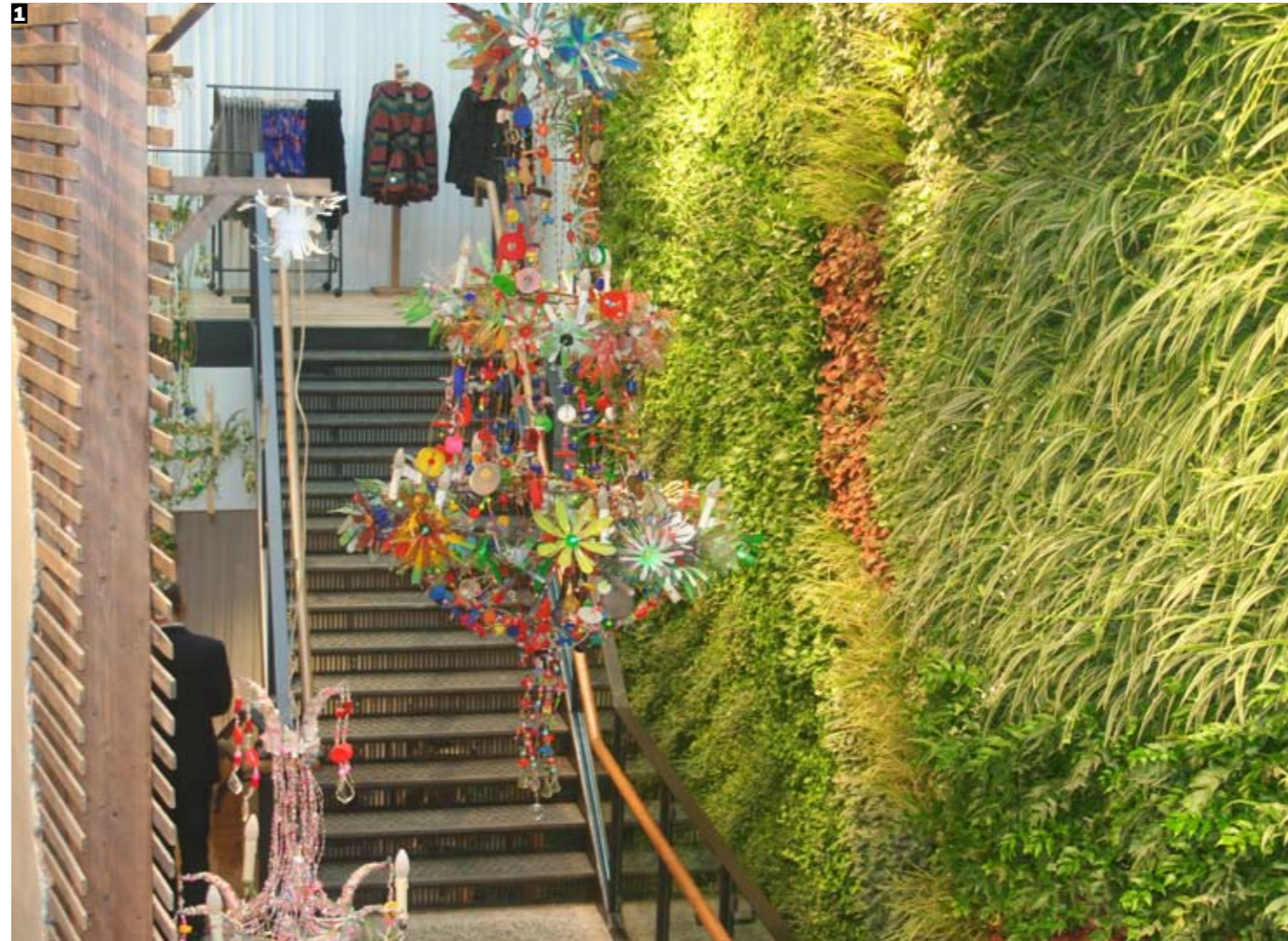
However, long before getting to this stage anybody passing the store's exterior will have clocked the windows, which, rather than containing apparel or sundry pieces of furniture or homewares, give prominence to teabags. Yes teabags – builders' and herbal – 12,000 of them and they've all been used.

What the Anthropologie visual merchandising team has done is to take each teabag, attach a cotton line to it and then suspend it from the upper part of the street-facing windows, to create a massive installation. It's the sort of thing that wouldn't look entirely out of place in the modern galleries at Tate Britain or perhaps the Saatchi collection. And as such, while it may be different from what is done by other retailers, it is bang on brand for Anthropologie.

Having been tempted through the door, the initial impression is likely to be that you have entered some kind of boho art gallery, which also happens to have some clothes on sale. The most arresting piece, and there are many contenders, is likely to be the dressmaker's body, positioned on an antique table, which sports a grey cardigan and a skirt made of broken willow-pattern style crockery that has been wired together.

Bidwell says that he likes to think of this as a reference to the store's previous tenant, Wedgwood, and also to the fact that although this is an essentially US proposition, this is tempered by a measure of UK-sourced merchandise: about 20%.

Elsewhere in this initial foray, there are pieces of pottery that have been covered with semi-unravelling knitwear, to add visual interest, smooth, dark stone flooring and then a rusted metal arch, ushering shoppers into the main event: an interior with a floor-to-ceiling verti-



**1** A hydroponic living wall is the store's most compelling feature **2** a narwhal made out of scraps of fabric and stuffed **3** vintage cabinetry sourced from flea markets is used to form a perimeter **4** mid-floor equipment includes lentil-filled trays, providing a home for paste crystal knobs **5** teabag installations fill the windows **6** smashed and wired willow-pattern crockery is used to create a skirt on a dressmaker's body



cal garden and massively high amounts of natural daylight. The latter is provided courtesy of a series of sawtooth skylights at the top of the building that have always been in place, but which were concealed from view by a false ceiling in Wedgwood days.

Bidwell says that prior to signing the deal on the lease, a hole was poked through this ceiling to ascertain whether natural daylight in the store's higher reaches would be a possibility. Finding it was, the deal was signed and negotiations began with English Heritage regarding what might or might not be done with the space.

The agreed outcome is to the benefit of all parties. Before describing the visual merchandising tricks deployed in this, the main part of the store, it makes sense to consider what has been done to the interior as a whole. The floors have been punched through to allow the insertion of a 50-ton steel staircase. Its steps are studded with glass nodules – supplied by the manufacturer that equips the New York subway system – with glass for its sidewalk-level skylights. And about halfway up to the first floor there is a large landing where chandeliers made from recycled light-bulb sockets and strips of coloured cellophane, created by a South African company, vie for your attention.

In any other retail environment this would be sufficient wow factor to ensure that shoppers remain engaged, but in this store, it plays second fiddle to the main interior event: the wall behind the staircase and stretching from the basement to the top of the store is alive. Created by Chichester-based firm Biotecture, this is a wall of plants, retained by clear panels with holes in them. The plants are fed by a hydroponic system and as Bidwell remarks: "If one panel dies, it's easy to replace."

It also gives the whole enterprise an aura of sustainability – whether this is the case or not. This is reinforced by the large amounts of reclaimed wood that have been used to cover everything from the cash desk surroundings, topped by polished concrete, to the various fixtures and fittings that use, for example, repurposed vintage tables from southern French flea-markets.

Back to the visual merchandising and given the building's internal landscape, it has to be of the highest order merely in order not to be overawed by its surroundings. The rest of the ground floor is about semi-boho clothing and a measure of homewares. One fixture serves to illustrate the level of attention to detail that pervades everything. This is a relatively unobtrusive multi-tier, mid-shop



**(Clockwise, from top)**  
A large slab of slate forms the top of a display table; an 1860 plaster-cast of a bear from Berlin Zoo is an example of the store's many 'found' objects – £8,000 to you and me

piece of equipment that is home to a series of knobs with paste crystal tops that are bedded in trays filled with dry lentils. You'd be hard pushed to think of a simpler, or more elegant solution to the problem of giving display space to small objects and it typifies what is being done across the store. You might also notice the wall graphic that looks like a "haunted tree", as Bidwell puts it, but which is, in fact part of stage set from a Barcelona theatre.

Head downstairs and you encounter the Prince of Whales: narwhals, to be precise. This is the homewares floor and a full-size narwhal has been created from scraps of fabric, stitched together to create the shape and then stuffed. The whole piece has been hand-painted and is suspended above an antique table intended to emulate a shipwrecked dining party, according to Bidwell. The thinking behind this is related to the hand-painted plates that are on the faded wooden cabinetry that has been used to form the perimeter. These have been created by Paris-based artist Nathalie d'Éte and they depict

sea-scenes. Bidwell says this provided the inspiration for the rest of the visual merchandising in this area.

Mention should also be made of the white plastic bin liners that have been scrunched together and back lit to create an algae-like bloom around one of the pillars on this floor, as well as the Berlin Zoo plaster-cast bear that can be yours for a mere £8,000.

The top of the store has one area for homewares and features such exotica as an alpine carpenter's workbench (close to £10,000, if the fancy takes you), now used as a display for chandeliers made from mud by a company called Mud and a table with a massive slab of slate on its top, among many other things. Beyond this lies a room with "more preppy clothing", Bidwell says, which has a distinctly British slant to it, fostered by the quilts on its back wall, fashioned from vintage Union Jacks.

Anthropoligie does what the best stores should do – surprise at every turn. It may be a triumph of visual merchandising over merchandise, but it is still worth multiple visits.