

Conventional wisdom – and, granted, skyrocketing sales figures – say that e-tail is the way forward. A digital world of choice, techy, streamlined service, stylist advice at a click, worldwide delivery and ultimate convenience. But wait, bricks-and-mortar stores are biting back, rebranding themselves as cultural hubs offering talks, events, and exhibition-like sets and installations.

When it comes to retail, Matchesfashion.com has always been ahead of the curve. Its history is well documented: one of London's first multibrand stores, Matches opened in leafy Wimbledon, with founders Tom and Ruth Chapman selling designer clothes – they were first to stock Prada and Versace – alongside serving tea and coffee to customers, encouraging them to “hang out” while they shopped. Back then, that was novel. More stores opened. Then the digital revolution hit, e-commerce, Matchesfashion.com launched and all physical stores were rebranded and resources poured into creating an online empire that now ships to some 170 countries and stocks more than 400 brands. Over the course of this year, the site has already received 100 million visits, but now the luxury retailer comes full circle as Matchesfashion.com's latest venture – a new flagship townhouse – opens this month in Mayfair.

The six-storey destination at 5 Carlos Place promises to be something between a shop, an events space and a broadcasting hub; what's more, all the designers it stocks will contribute. Oh, and there'll be a courtyard and a chef's table, too. “We want to bring a sense of enjoyment back to physical retail and create a sense of community,” says Jess Christie, chief brand officer. “We understand our customer's lifestyle and interests – whether it's art, photography, wellness, floristry or food. Creating an event programme that reflects the cultural calendar feels relevant and personal.” She's taken note of research that shows consumers, in particular millennials, want experiences rather than just access to product. “Retail needs to be surprising, inclusive and personal – it's about how it makes you feel. If customers take the time to come into your space, they're looking to connect and discover something, and here nothing will be fixed – it will constantly evolve to reflect each event and designer's installation.”

Matchesfashion.com will focus on blending the physical with the technological. “In a world where a narrative is fast becoming the most popular way to consume content, broadcasting live feels like the freshest way to deliver a brand experience,” says Christie. “We're launching a podcast series because audio is an exciting medium right now – partly because of the popularity of new voice-activated devices as we move to a head-up, hands-free world, but also because

it's the best way to deliver quality, long-form content to audiences oversaturated with visual distractions.”

These experiential stores are popping up across the retail landscape, because, let's face it, to survive you have to stand out. The Shop at Bluebird's flagship emporium has relocated from its King's Road home to Carriage Hall in Covent Garden, an imposing 19th-century Grade II-listed building boasting beauty bars and a soon-to-open restaurant and roof terrace. Claire Miles, buying director, hopes people won't just pop in and out for a fashion hit, but hang around. “You could lose an entire afternoon in the store, whether buying a Peter Pilotto gown or a more affordable coffee-table book from Phaidon; getting your brows fixed at BBB London; seeing new works in the Fashion Illustration Gallery; or having a meal in the restaurant, which will open in the autumn.”

You'd be forgiven for thinking the most important features of a good shop are well-lit changing rooms and organised racks. Not so. “There are so many elements of the store I love, from the mirrored icosahedron in the centre of the atrium to the lighting installation on the first floor,” continues Miles. There's also a stone courtyard floor under the glass roof to bring the outdoors in.

Designer Osman Yousefzada has also upped the ante with House of Osman. The 3,000sq ft location on Percy Street will feature shoppable contributions from some of his glamorous network, including buzzy artists such as Prem Sahib, Celia Hempton and Erika Verzutti. He has also collaborated with rare and antiquarian bookseller Cecil Court, to sell sought-after works and first editions – a good distraction for bored husbands and boyfriends who are unlikely to be seduced by the ready-to-wear.

Jess Christie is adamant this is the way for stores to survive. “I think now more than ever our customers want everything in their lives to feel considered. They want to be educated about new designers, about the provenance of clothes and to understand the story behind the brand. We want 5 Carlos Place to feel as though you are being invited to the ultimate collector's house where we can host you and create memorable experiences.” A stylish home from home, where you'll always find something to wear. Just remember, you do have to leave at some point – opening hours still apply. ■

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New stores from Matchesfashion.com, The Shop at Bluebird and Osman Yousefzada offer events, art installations and first-edition books alongside the designer gowns