

## Don't Get Out Much? You'll Love This Store

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THE sight of the couple draped across the bed engaged in cozy pillow talk was more than a little disconcerting. Stumbling on the scene, one wasn't sure whether to eavesdrop, look the other way or join the lovebirds on the sheets.

Convincing as it was, this slice of life was in fact a performance, enacted by models and staged at a party last Wednesday night at the Apartment, a strenuously hip fashion and home furnishings store masquerading as a private residence.

A 3,000-square-foot duplex at 101 Crosby Street, where SoHo meets NoLiTa, the Apartment is a showcase for furniture, cooking equipment and bathroom units by European design specialists like Boffi and Duravit. But it's also a site for vanguard fashions and accessories by the British label Not Tom Dick and Harry, and the French design team Marithe & Francois Girbaud.

The store, which feels like an animated version of Wallpaper, the British shelter magazine, represents the latest variation on retailing as theater, one in which the shop is a stage, the products props and the shopper both performer and spectator.

The concept of themed, interactive retailing was pioneered in the 90's when innovative retail operations like Niketown started staging multimedia happenings, and Recreational Equipment Inc., or R.E.I., in Seattle, offered a trail loop for bicycle test drives and a "rain room" to try out Gore-Tex slickers.

But the owners of the Apartment, Stefan Boubllil and Gina Alvarez, who are married to each other, took the idea of consumer participation and refined it into an art form. Every item in the store, from the Phillippe Starck notepads on the desks and the Girbaud suede slippers at the foot of the bed to the bed itself, a walnut platform priced at \$5,900, will be for sale July 1, when the store opens to the public.

At the preview party, visitors were encouraged to try things out on the spot, including the Boffi shower.

Even so, the wares seemed incidental, playing a supporting role to the action unfolding throughout the store. In the bathroom, some people removed their shoes, massaging their soles on the pebbled floor. In the kitchen, a chef from Le Gamin, a cafe in SoHo, flipped crepes in a pan. And across the room, a pair of actors staged an all-out brawl, hurling invective, along with papers and objects, to lend the evening, one supposed, a touch of gritty naturalism.

"Our idea," said Mr. Boubllil, a Parisian who also maintains a career as an independent filmmaker, "was to introduce the idea of voyeurism right from the start."

The Apartment has a Web site where with a click of the mouse one can rearrange furniture on a small floor plan or look in on Chloe and Rebekka, fictional residents. But Mr. Boubllil and Ms. Alvarez envisioned the store less as a partner of an Internet site and more as a variation on so-called reality entertainment. It was modeled, they said, on popular television shows like "Cops" and "The Real World," whose protagonists are ordinary people living their lives in front of the camera.

With its interactive, imitation-of-life approach to retailing, the store recalls -- and improves on -- the static model rooms of the 1970's created by Bloomingdale's and other stores to help customers envision products in a context. But in some ways the Apartment has more in common with theme parks and restaurants in exploiting consumers' fascination with simulated reality. Sniffing, tasting and touching the wares, chatting with staff and other customers, the shopper becomes an actor.

When you walk into such a store, "you take on a role in front of other individuals who are now watching you," said B. Joseph Pine II, the co-author with James H. Gilmore of "The Experience Economy" (Harvard Business School Press, 1999). The book, subtitled "Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage," argues that in the future consumers will likely place greater value on the experience of shopping than on goods and services. "Creating an experience, by encouraging customers to act out their fantasies in a store, much as they would at a Renaissance fair, draws the customer right in," Mr. Pine said.

Some designers and merchants view the Apartment as altogether novel. But Lee Peterson, the creative director of retail strategies at Chute Gerdeman, a Columbus, Ohio, retail design company, explored the notion of store as stage a year ago, before Mr. Boubllil and Ms. Alvarez dreamed up the Apartment.

At the time, Wolverine World Wide, the maker of Hush Puppies and other footwear brands, asked for a fresh concept for UP Footgear, its new mall-based stores. Chute Gerdeman responded with a Web concept called "I See Me." The idea, Mr. Peterson explained, is that you can watch yourself walk into the door of the store on the computer screen. "What's more," he said, "you can call up your friends, they can open the Web site at home, and there you'll be."

The strategy is evidently aimed at a generation for whom nothing is real until it is on television. The store's design serves to heighten the sense of reality. UP Footgear's prototype, at the new RiverTown Crossing mall in Grandville, Mich., is a loft-like setting complete with sofas, chairs, framed photos and a breakfast bar, a place that the cast of "Friends" or "Real People" might call home. "This setting goes beyond conventional

lifestyle retailing," Mr. Peterson said. "It perfects the illusion that you are already living the life."

The experiment seems to be working. Blaine Jungers, the president of Hush Puppies' retail division, said, "At the Grandville mall, UP Footgear, one of eight shoe stores, ranks third in sales, just behind value-oriented retailers like Payless."

The store, he noted, "encourages people to congregate." At a second store, scheduled to open July 22 in Grand Rapids, the checkout area will be in the kitchen. "That's where people gravitate at parties," he said. "We want them to hang out, just the way they would at home."

Mr. Boubilil and Ms. Alvarez would like customers to feel just as comfy at the Apartment. "We want this to be a meeting place absolutely," Mr. Boubilil said, "where people lose track of the world outside."

During the Apartment party, people did just that. One couple became so absorbed in checking out the merchandise, watching other guests and being watched themselves, they seemed to forget they had left a stroller parked outside just beyond the plate-glass window. In it, their twins slumbered peacefully, attended by a security guard.

So inclined were guests to dream and loiter, one wondered how the store might shoo them out. "We're working on a strategy for that," Mr. Boubilil said.

But until they have perfected it, the owners say they'll fall back on a time-honored ploy for disposing of guests. "I'll just tell them," Ms. Alvarez said brightly, "that I'm going to take a shower."

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