

The bliss BOUTIQUES

INVITING, INDIVIDUAL AND ALTRUISTIC – **PIP MCCORMAC**
UNCOVERS A NEW BREED OF FEELGOOD SHOPPING EMPORIUMS



With customers reluctant to part with their bucks, stores are getting clever to lure us to the checkout. So welcome the biggest hit of the season: the experience boutique, the latest of which is *Merci*, in the Marais district of Paris, and the hottest destination store since *Colette* – it was a must-visit for the fashion crowd when they were over for the shows. “We’re not just a shop,” says Marie-France Cohen, the woman behind the concept. “We have a cafe, a charming little garden and a book-lending section. My idea was to make a place that people want to spend a few hours in.”

Opening a new shop amid closing-down sales may seem foolish, but where midmarket outlets are struggling, one-off boutiques are flourishing. At *Merci*, you get the sense that you have been invited to the house of someone who has hand-selected key pieces specially for you. The process of shopping becomes magical and inviting. It’s far more nourishing for the soul than worshipping at don’t-touch-me altars of designer cool ever was. After all, it’s not that shoppers don’t have money to spend, but that they want to get more from their purchases than merely the product to take home – it’s about the seduction of the item that whispers, “Buy me”, the feeling of discovering something nobody else knows about.

As the sister of the *haute parfumière* Annick Goutal and founder of the exclusive children’s clothing chain *Bonpoint* – which Cohen sold in 2006 – it’s no surprise *Merci* is spectacular. The cavernous space, spread over three floors of a renovated building, is filled with treasures. “We just bought things we liked and that fitted together,” she says. “In the UK, you go to *Ikea* for cheap things and *Harrods*

for the expensive, then put them together. We thought, why not have two things from different price points, which wouldn't normally be neighbours, and sell them right next to each other?"

The unusual mix includes everything from drinking glasses for €1, through dining tables and fashion collections selected from Stella McCartney and Yves Saint

Laurent, to a beauty section, plus, of course, a children's wing. It's more than that, though, as the other trend emerging from the chaotic economy is that consumers want to spend their money altruistically. And Cohen is bang on there, too. "All the profits from Merci go to provide work for the poor in Madagascar."

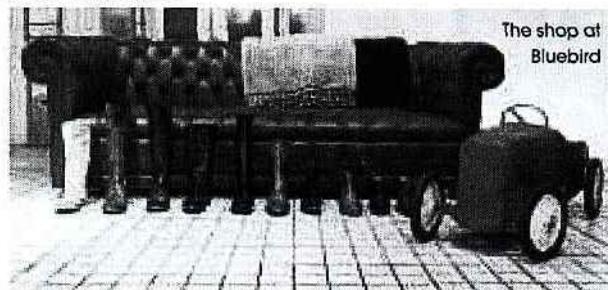
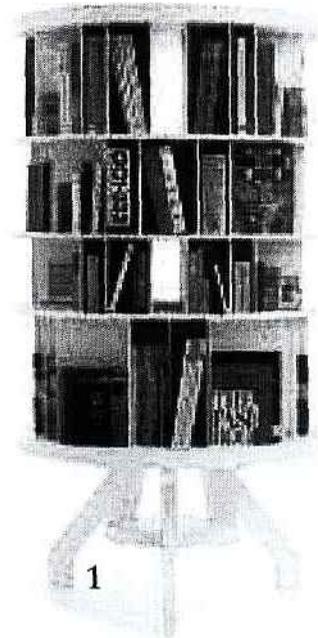
Closer to home, experience boutiques are doing just as well. The Shop at Bluebird, on the King's Road in Chelsea, sells an enticing mix of hot-pink sofas, designer dresses and gold handcuffs, and again, it works. "I was looking to create a 21st-century boudoir," says Belle Robinson, the founder. "One in which you get a feeling of discovery every time you come in. The relationship between the customer and the boutique is one of mutual affection. A department store can be quite overwhelming and cold." Few and Far, the Brompton Road "lifestyle" store owned by Priscilla Conran – sister of Sir Terence – has a similarly individual feel.

In a way, these boutiques are a modern version of the vintage store – you never know what you'll find, but can spend hours poring over the wares. Pop Boutique in Manchester is filled with second-hand coats, teapots and a Brief Encounter-style cafe, and No 15 in Leeds is run by two former buyers from Harvey Nichols. Then, of course, there's the granddaddy of the experience boutique, Liberty, in London, with its newly revamped fourth floor selling Tom Dixon furniture just upstairs from APC dresses.

At Couverture & The Garbstore, in Notting Hill, Emily Dyson says the key is in the element of surprise. "We were lucky enough to find the perfect premises. It appears small from the outside, then opens up at the back to spread over three floors. It adds to the experience because people don't know what they're going to get."

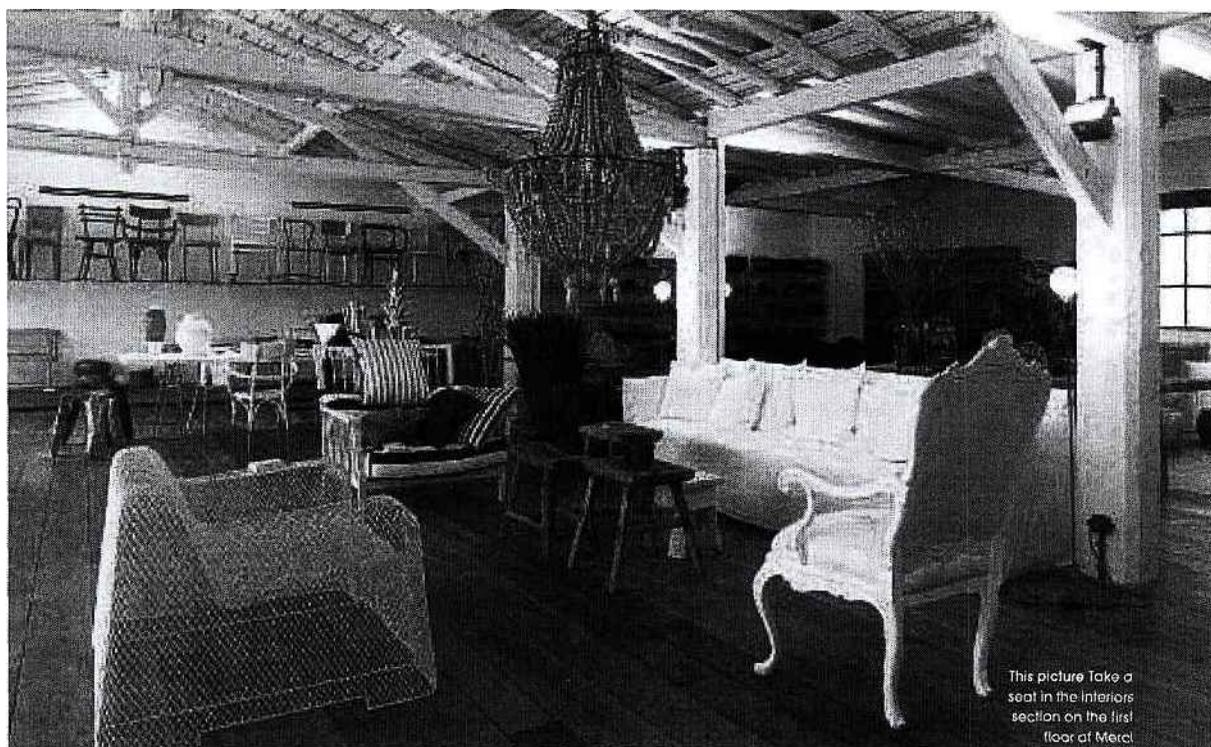
As in life, the thrill of these shops is in the hunt. "Shopping should be about scouring a friend's home and enjoying the discovery process – of clothing, music, books and home goods," says Robinson.

These ground-breaking boutiques are the new one-stop shops – selling hip without the hard edge. □





- 1** Revolving library, £3,763, from Merci. **2** Tapiovaara chair, £269, from Merci; merci-merci.com. **3** Collection of recycled vases, £165, from Merci. **4** Assorted vintage hand-stitched quilts, £899 each, from Couverture; couverture.co.uk. **5** Pendant lamps, £70 each, from Merci. **6** Kitten lamp, £49, from Couverture. **7** Goldfish bowl, £1,530, by John Derian, from the Shop at Bluebird; theshopatbluebird.com. **8** Cabinet covered with hand-blown mirrors, £3,500, by Paola Navone for Gingerbread, from Few and Far; fewandfar.net. **9** Enamel bowls, £6.50, from Merci. **10** Margate coffee table, £475, by Zoe Murphy, from Liberty



This picture Take a seat in the Interiors section on the first floor at Mercat