

A Window on Christmas | A Display Expert's Analysis



"I'll make a brand new start of it..." in old New York, are brands rolling out a new, more localised barrel or are store windows being homogenized worldwide? Jonathan Baker reflects on Manhattan's Christmas '06 window displays, in search of true creativity.

New York, New York, and at Christmas! As a Professor of Visual Merchandising Design and Management, this is my chance to try and drop the academic approach to my research and observe the store fronts, from the point of view of a regular guy, or of any customer buzzing around Manhattan on a freezing cold, pre-Christmas, shopping day.

But it's hard to leave my education behind as I immediately find myself questioning the methodologies retailers use, to entice us into their stores. I question how, if at all, visual communication is being defined and developed globally?

Christmas 2006, in NYC, seems to whole heartedly embrace Andy Warhol and other references to Pop Art; from Diana Vreeland paintings in a mannequin showroom on 25th Street, to Adel Rootstein's subtle printing of Warhol's name on a box in their "Shawfield Hotel" installation. I even spot a Campbell's Tinned Soup, signed by the man himself, in the lobby of The Gershwin Hotel.



Barney's have beautifully executed a "Happy Warhol-ids" concept, delivering their characteristic, narrative, elegantly unrefined windows (which made me glad I didn't have to install them!). Product was 'packed to the rafters' which seems so indicative of many US retailers. I was reminded of Warhol himself, who said, "When you think about it, department stores are kind of like museums."

Bergdorf Goodman's windows are based around the concepts of Entertain, Decorate, Astound, Recollect, Cultivate and Explore. I never understand why Bergdorf's keynote concepts are not carried around to the front of the store, on 58th Street, which again this year comprises an apparently unrelated, albeit Christmas, theme.



Of course, everywhere I look, there are chain stores, all with their corporately, identikit schemes. Some, I have already seen in London and frankly, it's boring. With the prevalence of globalisation, so many commercial experiences are characterised by high levels of market concentration, centralisation and standardisation, leaving few commercial environments able to (locally) differentiate their 'offer' and thereby, potentially, increase their market share.

Perhaps this is a casualty of corporate brand management, but it does not always seem the case with independent, small enterprises or, occasionally, even with established, luxury environments; the emergence of Boutique Hotels in Manhattan is welcome.



So, it is momentarily refreshing to see Olafur Eliasson's work, "Eye See You", strategically placed in the windows of Louis Vuitton on 5th Avenue and its sister store in Soho. According to the Louis Vuitton's website, this has been implemented, "...throughout all of its 350 stores worldwide". The concept loses its incisiveness, on my discovery of yet another "roll-out" global presence.

My Christmas visit leaves me pondering; actually, very little seems to have changed in my ten years of photographing New York window displays. 'House-styles' need to be prised away from corporate marketing teams and an intelligent lateral approach adopted. Creative departments need to ensure parity across the brand, while boldly effecting, possible, diverse outcomes, at a local level.

A revival of "fun and excitement" for the customer would necessitate a new creativity for the Designers, Display teams and Visual Merchandisers. This can only happen with confident investment in education, to teach upcoming designers how to achieve this. So, no big surprises in Christmas display, then? And I always expect some, from New York, New York, where they seem to be so brilliant at creating Christmas spirit!