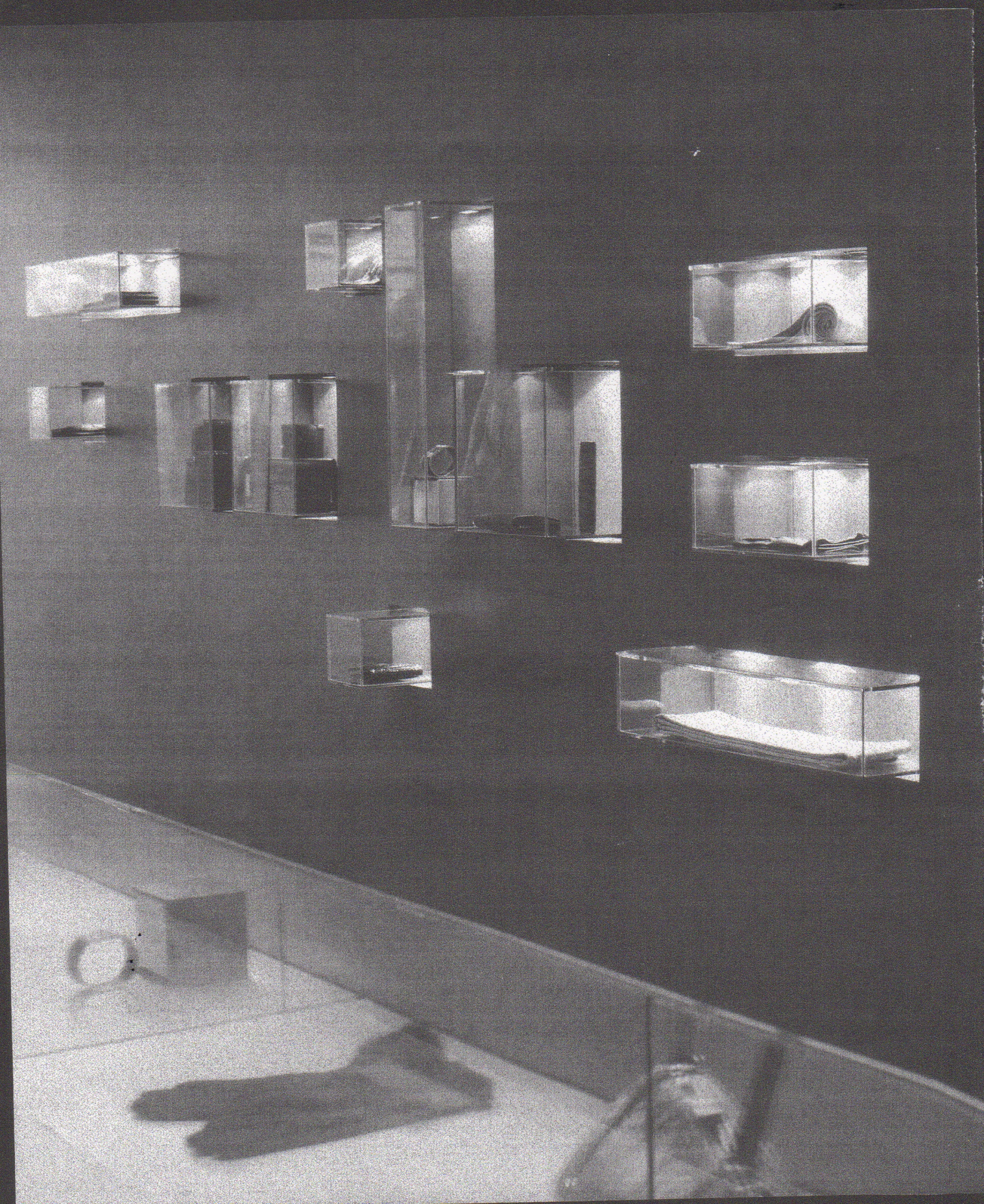




**DESIGN** 'Whether they're spending £60 on a pair of jeans or £8,000 on a beaded coat, customers feel they are getting the McQueen experience'

MARCUS FIELD ON THREE NEW FASHION SHOPS p22





# SHOP OF THE NEW

If you thought fashion shopping was all about clothes, you haven't visited the latest crop of chic outlets currently opening in London's West End. Marcus Field visits the new boutiques of three leading designers and discovers that, these days, the architecture is scarcely less important – or exotic – than the garments

IMAGINE YOU'RE shopping for clothes. Not just any old clothes, but clothes with labels, big labels: McQueen, Miyake, Dolce & Gabbana. They must be conceptually challenging, exquisitely cut, expensive. Now where do you go? Selfridges, Liberty or Harvey Nicks? Not if you take your fashion seriously.

If you want the full experience, you have to go to the designers' own boutiques, where the environments are created specifically to reflect the brand. Three newly opened London shops illustrate how architect-designed spaces have become a crucial tool in the competition for customers.

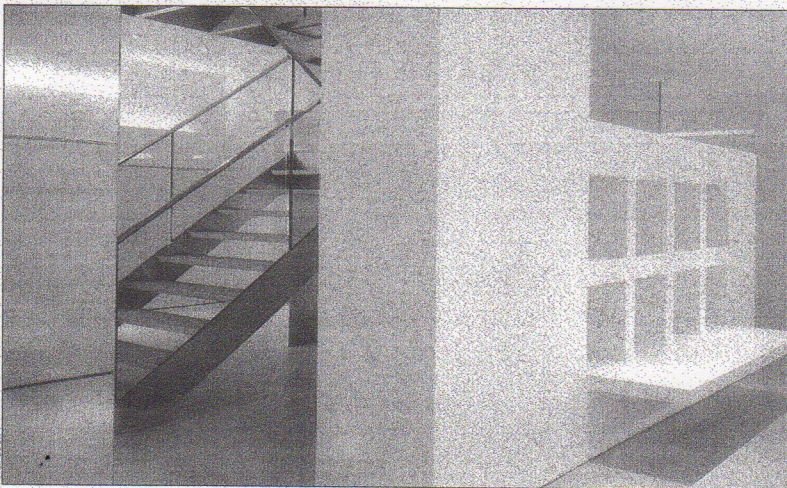
For Alexander McQueen's first London store, the clichéd solution of a neutral interior would be at odds with the eccentric and flamboyant nature of his work. "I wanted a shop that was interactive, with robots and stuff," says McQueen, "so that people would learn something about the person behind the clothes." He commissioned the architects Ferhan Azman and Joyce Owens to design the store, which is just one of a whole crop of new fashion emporiums which have recently opened on Conduit Street.

If you think it just looks like a smart shop, you would be missing the subtle devices that tell people in the know that it is just so much more. As Azman says, "this is a luxury shop, not Kookai". The messages are in the house-of-fun elements like the glass changing-room door which is clear before you go in, but automatically turns opaque when it senses your movement. Then there's the big glass vitrine at the entrance which can be filled with seasonal displays (it currently contains a snowstorm) and sticks out into the street. McQueen would have liked it to project further, "as a bit of surrealism", but Westminster planners weren't having any of it.

Back inside, the architects have devised a display system in stainless steel rods which looks like a giant piece of gym equipment. There are mechanical bits so clothes can revolve and big metal frames in which garments can be pinned out like dead butterflies. The point is to put the clothes in some kind of context, so that customers feel they're getting the McQueen experience, whether they're spending £60 on jeans or £8,000 on a beaded coat. The music is hand-picked too. Ideally, McQueen says, he would play only Diana Ross, but he thinks the staff might get bored.

Issey Miyake is known for his challenging designs (in his latest range, you buy a strip of cloth and cut out the clothes yourself), so for his new store – also on Conduit Street – he naturally wanted a space which would reflect his experimental approach. Miyake's choice of architect is Stanton Williams, a team known for its classy exhibition designs at places like the Hayward Gallery and the Royal Academy. But Miyake didn't want his clothes to be shown like art. They're not precious, he says. He wants you to come in and try them on. To convey this message, the architects have created enormous windows which give passers-by a view right in. And unlike the chi-chi Prada and Gucci stores on nearby Bond Street, there will be no black-clad doorman or fierce sales assistants.

Inside, what look like plain white walls are actually meticulously finished in plaster mixed with ground marble. The pale-grey concrete floor has been polished to the high shine of wood, and the staircase is constructed



Architectural details like the display cases (opposite) and revolving display system (above) at Alexander McQueen's new store have become crucial tools in distinguishing one top fashion shop from another. The walls at Issey Miyake's latest London shop (left) are not painted, but finished in a rich mix of ground marble and plaster

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLIVE FROST