



Better by design

When you look at the retailers that have replaced Woolworths, it's a wonder the general store had any shoppers at all. John Ryan reports on how the new guard are making use of Woolies' former branches

Walk the length of the average high street and you might be forgiven for not mourning absent friends. The first anniversary of the demise of Woolworths is upon us and while there is a tendency to don the rose-tinted spectacles when thinking of the former general store, it is easier to forget about it altogether.

And the reason is simple. In a vast number of instances new tenants have moved in, refitted the spaces and filled the hole that was created by the disappearance of good ol' Woolies.

While it may be a considerable generalisation, the majority of those that have done so operate at the value end of the market, whether it's 99p Stores or branches of Sports Direct.

There is also the matter of what has been done with these spaces. In many cases, Woolworths stores were, to put it politely, basket cases as far as store maintenance and design was concerned, principally owing to a chronic lack of investment over a very protracted period.

Michelle du-Prat, Insights director at design consultancy Household, says: "It was such a replicable offer and there was no real sense of being in a Woolworths. It doesn't really feel like the offer has disappeared either. I walked into a branch of 99p Stores and it felt just like Woolworths, except that not only did it feel cheap, it really was cheap."

And that perhaps is the point. Woolies' stores created a presumption of low price that was never realised when you reached the checkout, in spite of the low-price make-do message of the interiors.

Whatever your view on the tenants that have taken space in former branches of Woolies, they do all have one thing in common: they have, with a few inglorious exceptions, taken on unloved retail spaces and turned them into interiors that recognisably belong to a particular brand. And because of the sheer profusion of

WOOLWORTHS: A DESIGN DIAGNOSIS

Logo Varied depending on location, but white on red was the high street's classic value indicator

In-store signage Generally confusing, with a mix of value and brand signals

Merchandising An apparent lack of visual merchandising always made instinctive in-store navigation an aspiration rather than a reality

Layout Not helped by long, high pieces of mid-floor equipment that frequently prevented shoppers seeing across the space

locations, getting a view, at first hand, of the way this has been handled is relatively straightforward.

A south-bound bicycle-equipped progress across London from *Retail Week's* offices, in Camden's lower reaches, to the point when the capital finally runs out of breath and becomes an edge city (Croydon), reveals most of the formats that have taken the place of the erstwhile high street perennial.

There are broad differences of approach yet most of them are better than what they have replaced – with the possible exception of Brixton, which opened as a discount store without bothering to remove the Woolworths signage and closed shortly afterwards.

Camden

There's quite a lot to object to about the way that Sports Direct sells its wares. For starters, try finding anything. The stores are among the most densely merchandised on the high street, with high units in the middle of the shop and walls where every square foot is festooned with stock.

Shopping in a space of this kind becomes something of a voyage of discovery – one that reveals the unexpected at every turn, because the space is so badly signposted. And one of the reasons this is the case is because Sports Direct adheres slavishly to a more-is-more diktat that means wherever you happen to look, there's going to be another sign, either informing you that there's a particular brand on offer or that a specific item is incredibly cheap.

The only take-out from all of this is that you are not going to spend a lot of money and still walk out with a bag full of sports or sports-related clothing and equipment. At this level, Sports Direct does do what the Woolworths on this site did not – it sets the expectation of low price and then delivers on that promise.

And in the interests of objectivity and fairness, there are certain aspects



* A look at how Woolies' property portfolio has been carved up **In business, p40**

WOOLWORTHS ONE YEAR ON



1 and 4 The 99p Stores branch in Streatham may be densely merchandised but it is unfussy and very functional 2 and 3 Sports Direct's fascia sets the expectation of value and follows through inside – but still pulls off clever visual merchandising with a back-lit wall of shoes 5 Iceland has given Wallington's Woolies a complete refit and is bright and easy to shop

WOOLWORTHS ONE YEAR ON



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of the way in which things are done that are noteworthy. You would never in a million years have imagined an illuminated perimeter wall providing the setting for shelves of football boots. Yet this is what is on view on the first floor and the effect is startling. In spite of the fact that this runs almost the entire length of a long wall and is bordered by more high shelving, creating the sense of a corridor, you can't help but look. There is, of course, an element of the Skechers about this, where backlit walls have been *de rigueur* for years, but this is none the worse for it.

And there are brand signs everywhere. The stairs leading up to the first floor have massive signs announcing Lonsdale, Puma, Everlast and Karrimor and there's even the Nike "swoosh".

There are a number of cheap suitcases lining the lower flight of stairs, a nice Woolworths touch, but in general this is still a long way from what preceded it.

It's also worth making note of the fascia. The bright, brash logo may not be to everyone's taste, but it screams value. Add to this the window filled with an image of red football boots on small poles and an ad for Nike football and the message is that it's probably worth having a look inside – something that could never have been said for the store in its previous incarnation.

Clapham

Clapham High Street is where south London ends and southwest London starts – meaning that it is rather more affluent than other parts of the capital south of the river. Yet despite its very prosperous nature, a year ago there was a large branch of Woolworths, cheek by jowl with Clapham Common Tube station.

Fast forward 12 months and there is neither a sense of loss nor of any conspicuous gap on the high street. In place of the former general store is a branch of Boots. The whole of the store has been gutted and refitted leaving absolutely no trace of the previous tenant.

And while this may be a perfectly standard example of Boots' present store design roll-out, it measurably improves the retail provision on this long and busy street.

There's even a prescription window that opens out onto the street (methadone anybody?) with an out-of-hours service.

There is nothing terribly remarkable about this store, except that it is so much better than the Woolworths that it replaces. Of all the retailers visited on



(Above) The Brixton Woolies re-opened for a time as a discount store but has now closed; (below) Boots has taken over the Clapham store, improving the area's retail offer

this trek through London, Boots was far and away the most complete makeover of a space. Clapham residents are the clear winners.

Streatham

Streatham used to be the Las Vegas of south London – an incredibly long and brightly lit strip of generally low-rent retail and cheap restaurants where people seemed intent on eating as much as possible, rather than any kind of fine dining. The failure of Woolworths left a hole opposite the cinema that was quickly filled by a 99p Store.

As in so many other locations, the Woolworths store that stood on this site was down at heel – although little that a couple of coats of long-life emulsion wouldn't have gone a long way towards fixing. The 99p Stores branch that replaced it is unfussy, with the now familiar blue and yellow logo stretching across the lengthy frontage.

Inside, it follows a fairly traditional value route but, like Sports Direct,

works on the principle of very dense merchandising. To its credit, the floor has been changed and the functional wood vinyl makes this a perfectly pleasant place in which to pick up items that you didn't know you wanted or needed.

Wallington

And at the end of the journey south, just before you reach Surrey proper, is Wallington. It has a relatively modest high street and the Woolies here was among the last to close in January. The site remained vacant for some months before the hoardings went up and it became apparent Iceland had taken the space. Following a complete refit, the store opened in the summer and is refreshingly bright, white and easy to shop.

The point about this store is that it's an absolutely standard iteration of the Iceland format, but it is infinitely better than the very tired Woolworths that was still trading on the site at this point last year. With a slight hiatus, the transition has been almost seamless and it really is as if Woolworths never traded in this outer London suburb. Iceland is a positive addition to the area.

Epilogue

Bill Cumming, creative director at design consultancy Twelve, sums up the post-Woolies changes succinctly: "What the new guys have done is to bring some freshness to high streets and they do what they do better than Woolworths did. Woolies stores were generalists that have now been made specific by new tenants such as Sports Direct, and where general value retailers have moved in they have just given us better shops."

