

Black beauty

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Black, Dixons' new stylish store in Birmingham, is unlike anything the electricals giant has done before.

[Birmingham](#) may be the UK's second city, but when it comes to retailing it is easy to see that it trails the capital by somewhat more than this tag might suggest. That was certainly the impression held by many until November last year when US fashion retailer Forever 21 decided that it was an appropriate location to set up its first European store.

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Then last month this shift seemed to be confirmed as [Dixons](#) decided that it was the right city to trial a revolutionary new format. The store is called Black, it's located on Birmingham's High Street and has a 15,000 sq ft selling area, spread over three floors. This is, as might be supposed, a technology store, but its frontage has been designed "so that you can't walk past the store: you have to walk in", in the words of Andrew Milliken, transformation director at Dixons, and the man in charge of format design and space planning.

He has a point. A triple-height glazed fascia bearing the word 'Black' and with a series of bright lights inside is hard to ignore. And if you do find yourself walking in, what waits is a store that is quite unlike that provided by any other purveyor of technology. This is more like a department store, as it has many of the facets that you might normally expect to see in that kind of emporium, including, and perhaps most obviously, mannequins and fashion-led visual merchandising.

The visual merchandising aspect of things manifests itself as soon as you stand at the entrance to the store. Rather than clocking the usual collection of computers, digital cameras and associated gadgets, what you see is a red, vintage Fiat Cinquecento (bought for a cool £10,000 and then completely refurbished, according to Milliken), a table with tiered chandelier-style strings of faux crystal beads and two female mannequins. The latter sport modish-looking mini dresses and one has a digital SLR camera slung casually round her neck. It's the kind of thing that might not look out of place in, say, [Topshop](#) or maybe [River Island](#).

There is also, of course, a technology offer consisting, to the left, of must-have 'Objects of desire', such as shiny electric coffee makers and a screen that invites you to mimic the antics of some dancing avatars on a screen, as well as a large range of digital cameras.

Look beyond this and it's cameras and computers all the way, but not in such a manner that this feels like an overtly masculine technology-led store. This has been achieved principally through the use of design tropes that are familiar to fashion stores, but pretty alien to technology retailers. Take the ceiling, for instance. This has been painted black, the usual modus operandi to bring the eye down from the ceiling and into the store, and a grid bearing spotlights has been suspended beneath this.

The effect created is a patchwork, with the emphasis being on lighting the individual merchandise displays, instead of the more usual serried ranks of white fluorescent lights that stretch away into the distance in edge-of-town technology sheds. Then there's the floor - grey terrazzo tiles and a considerable step up from the more vinyl-led environment associated with this end of the market.

Know it all

At the back of the store there's a desk bearing the words: 'Knowhow' - the replacement for 'The Tech Guys' that will be familiar to those who have visited a [PC World](#) in the last few years.

'Knowhow' is certainly a warmer, more user-friendly tone of voice than you'd expect to find in a technology store and Milliken says one of things that has been central to the creation of this store is that the in-store communication should not feel over-slick. This means that phrases such as 'fancy hooking up?' (routers,

home office networks and suchlike), 'smooth operator' (the slimmest, smartest, monitors) and 'sounds good' (audio accessories), all form part of the way that Black talks to its shoppers.

Now head upstairs, eschewing the stairs and using the shiny chromed lift that seems trimmed throughout with lime green lighting, and you arrive at the first floor, home to accessories and a very substantial 'how to' area. This area is at the front of the floor, looking out over the high street and is filled with comfy, contemporary-looking sofas and chairs. There are circular glass and black faux leather tables with a rainbow graphic at their centre, which, if pushed, allows a multi-socket spike to emerge, into which shoppers can plug their laptops.

Play time

Behind this are a series of 'play tables', which are small pieces of art in themselves. They have been constructed from four different kinds of material, creating the impression that you are looking at a piece of equipment that is composed of raw concrete, bleached wood and a smooth, cream Corian top.

Appearances are deceptive, of course, because if all of these materials were indeed deployed then this would be an unsustainable concept as far as any kind of roll-out might be concerned.

Nonetheless, their long length, with a strip of wood directing the gaze towards a single monitor, works well as an environment that would give [Apple](#) a run for its money.

And they may be extravagant in terms of a space in which stock is not displayed, but this store is as much about helping shoppers to understand how to use technology as it is about selling kit. There's even a children's version of these tables, complete with small chairs. Milliken comments: "Apple didn't want to do this kind of thing with us, so we did it ourselves."

In the basement, it's audio and TV and the reason for its location is straightforward. "There's no natural daylight and so it's perfect for us to be able to control the level of lighting in this part of the store," says Milliken.

As in a few select other [Currys](#) megastores, there is a room set aside as a sound and vision studio - which in this instance works rather better for no better reason than that it has a distinctly domestic feel to it. Much of the perimeter wall on this floor is covered in white tiles. These were in fact cheap red tiles that have been painted white to give the impression that you've walked into a basement.

This is a store where appearances matter and that manages to avoid that sense of being stuck within a faceless selling machine where you are being clinically processed. "This is for people who want the brands, the style, and the products, but they don't want to spend half an hour setting everything up," says Milliken.

Taken at this level, the store is a success and although it has cost marginally more to expedite than a similarly sized standard Currys store, once the initial design costs are stripped out, it is already sufficiently modular for a future roll-out to be a distinct possibility.

It remains a trial at the moment, but it would be a reckless gambler who took odds against something of this kind appearing in other locations in the near future.

Black, Birmingham

Size 15,000 sq ft

Design In-house and with consultancy Household and with two 'specialist' areas by Liberation

Format status A trial

Cost Undisclosed

Reason for visiting A style-led break from traditional technology retailing norms