

FRAME

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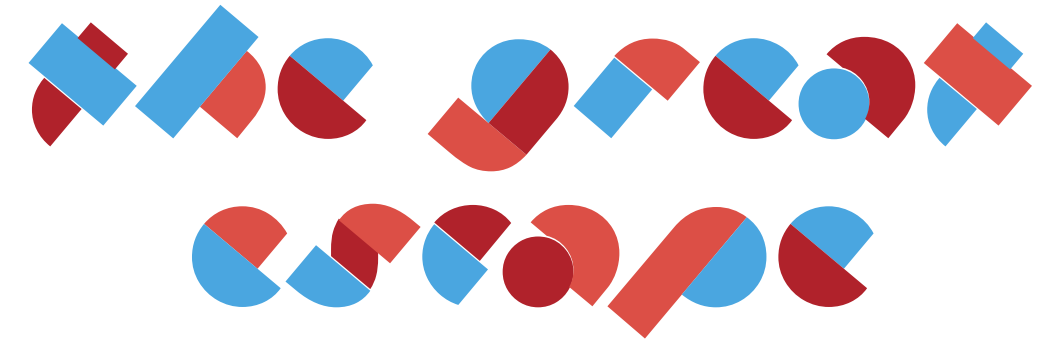
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Jasper Fry



Challenging times are breeding an expectation for the unexpected. Enter the escapist experience.

Words Tracey Ingram



EXPERIENTIAL ESCAPISM

Gen Z is embroiled in an affair with escapism. It's no wonder. A daily (doom)scroll through the news doesn't make the here and now seem all that appealing. In fact, the findings of a 2022 McKinsey study suggest Gen Z is the generation with the 'least positive life outlook': one in four respondents reported feeling emotionally distressed, almost twice as many as millennials and Gen X. In turn, writes Tatenda Musekiwa for Gen Z-led consultancy start-up The Red Flower Factory, they're turning to 'binge-watching TV, playing video games, in-person events, excessive messaging or immersing themselves in imaginary worlds' to provide 'a momentary escape from the real world's harshness'.

While not exactly kicking them when they're down, companies are certainly *cashing in* on them when they're down. After all, Gen Z is said to account for 40 per cent of all consumers (source: Forbes Insider Intelligence) with \$360 billion in buying power (source: Bloomberg). No surprise that scores of escapist experiences have emerged, all vying for attention in an increasingly saturated market. Just look at the rise of escape rooms – it's right there in the name – whose global market size was valued at \$7.9 billion in 2022 and is projected to reach \$31 billion by 2032, as reported by Allied Market Research.

What's more, Gen Z now *expects* brands to deliver transportive experiences. According to 'The Age of Re-Enchantment', a recent report by Wunderman Thompson, 65 per cent of Gen Z want to live in a world where brands think giving customers goosebumps is important. 'Uncertain times might imply a shift to a more practical attitude,' writes Wunderman Thompson Intelligence global director Marie Stafford, 'but instead people are yearning for emotion-inducing experiences that deliver feelings of joy and wonder, craving the spectacular, the surreal, and the otherworldly.' She believes by celebrating 'the thrilling, the uplifting, the awe-inspiring, and the magical', brands can help people transcend 'tough times and jolt them from long-standing malaise'.

SURPRISE!?

Even though the state of the world seems increasingly volatile, half of those surveyed by Wunderman Thompson said they'd like more surprise in their life, while 74 per cent agree that they enjoy an element of mystery and surprise in the things they do. But is the surprise factor getting harder and harder to achieve in the age of extreme documentation? Technology may provide a portal to another dimension – a form of escape – but it's also a surprise-killer. Not only are we constantly bombarded with footage of existing spaces and past experiences from every corner of the world, but our devices are collecting data, trying to learn our preferences but simultaneously locking us in an echo chamber. 'As efficiency-focused modern living can be both predictable and relentless, serendipity and surprise offer a route to anticipation and excitement for increasingly jaded consumers,' states 'The Age of Re-Enchantment'. The report reveals that two-thirds of millennials and Gen Zers are drawn to anything that taps into surrealism or dreamscapes, leading mainstream brands and retailers to lean on the weird and wonderful to 're-enchant' consumers.

The FRAME Awards Pop-Up Store of the Year is a case in point.

Random Studio's Le Bleu Jacquemus installation at Selfridges (see previous spread and page 44) is one of two winning projects that mention the absurdist films of Jacques Tati as sources of inspiration (SJB's 19 Waterloo Street on page 84 is the other). Visitors to Le Bleu Jacquemus were rewarded with surreal surprises when they actively engaged with the installations – one changing cabin seemed to get smaller as they opened door after door, while a towel flipped over the top of another upon pulling the door, as if they'd interrupted someone undressing. The pop-up may have been staged in a busy store on a busy London street, but the vast majority of people experienced it online. Successful brand reach, sure, but did those who visited in person after a digital viewing feel deflated or validated?

While it's impossible to say, this kind of cross-contamination is arguably not such an issue for a free trip to a department store. But what about a big concert for which fans have shelled out big bucks? Ric Lipson is a partner at Stufish, which recently collaborated with Es Devlin and U2 creative director >>

OPPOSITE Set inside a repurposed Boeing 747 at the Freeport A'Famosa Outlet in Melaka, Malaysia, Coach Airways – a fusion of retail and hospitality – provides visitors with an immersive experience through its holistic, nostalgic spatial narrative.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Random Studio's Jacques Tati-inspired Le Bleu Jacquemus pop-up at Selfridges rewarded visitors with surreal surprises when they actively engaged with the installations – one changing cabin, for example, seemed to get smaller as they opened door after door.



David Yeow

Gen Z now expects brands to deliver transportive experiences



Stufish collaborated with Es Devlin and Willie Williams on the set for U2's concert residency at new Las Vegas venue Sphere. Towering spherical screens displayed ever-changing high-resolution imagery that was visible from every angle, immersing the audience.



Bigger means better for escapist spatial experiences

OPPOSITE Shortlisted for the FRAME Awards Best Use of Light, Fabrique des Lumières is the largest immersive digital art centre in the Netherlands. D/Dock designed the interior of the venue, working with advanced technology to saturate visitors in works by the likes of Van Gogh.



Willie Williams on an immersive set for U2's concert residency at new Las Vegas venue Sphere. Ticket prices averaged \$951 a pop. When asked if he thinks the element of surprise is still important for shows, Lipson replied: 'There's a big difference between knowing what's coming and experiencing it in a live environment, surrounded by other people experiencing that moment. That's something that watching social media can never really emote. The volume of the music, the rumbling in your chest, the smell of the crowd, the scale of the venue, the smoke in the air, the light in your eyes – and then sharing the same experience with thousands of other audience members. Many people have now seen clips of the U2 Las Vegas show, but no one fully understands the experience until they're in the room.' He prioritizes engagement over surprise, as he believes the former solidifies an audience's memories. 'As designers and creators of shows, our job is to make these memories.'

SIZE MATTERS

If you haven't seen U2's show at Sphere, it does look spectacular – even on a tiny phone display. U2 may not be pulling in a Gen Z crowd, but Stufish believes the stage represents a 'visionary leap forward in concert design' that could set a new standard for the industry. Towering spherical screens dazzle with ever-changing 12k high-resolution imagery that's visible from every angle, immersing the audience. Stufish has been experimenting with immersive 360-degree experiences in other projects, too, including the set design at Buckingham Place for Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee celebration in 2022, which made the FRAME Awards shortlist. These examples highlight another aspect of surprise: technology is enabling experiences that simply weren't possible before. We've become accustomed to standard-sized digital screens, so bigger means better for escapist spatial experiences.

Perhaps that's why we're also witnessing a boom in immersive art exhibitions. Works from the who's who of art history are being drastically upscaled into digital exhibitions, rooms filled with advanced technology that projects images onto floors, ceilings and walls. Musing on the phenomenon for *The Guardian*, Peter Conrad writes: 'At a time when movies can be squeezed onto the screens of our electronic gadgets, here is a new way of losing ourselves again in the amplitude of what [British filmmaker, comedian, animator and actor] Terry Gilliam has called an "imaginarium" – the playground of someone else's fantasy.'

MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

These immersive exhibitions may be popping up everywhere, but are they a passing fad? While the wider immersive entertainment sector in the US alone was valued at \$61.8 billion in 2020 and is predicted to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 22.3 per cent over the next decade, according to a 2020 report by Pseudonym Productions, the immersive exhibition medium faces an uncertain future after years of growth, perhaps prompted in part by 'some scathing write-ups levelled at "passionless" and "overpriced" residencies', notes FRAME contributing editor, Kristofer Thomas.

Separating the escapist-experience wheat from the chaff might come down to meaning. 'As we peel back the layers of Gen Z's escapism, it becomes clear that this generation's pursuit of happiness and fulfilment goes hand in hand with their desire for connections and personal growth,' writes Musekiwa for The Red Flower Factory. Brands and events that fail to deliver might fail entirely, as forewarned by C Future City in Shenzhen. A few years ago, the developer set out to create a future-forward shopping destination full of immersive experiences for Gen Z, turning to teamLab, the posterchild for interactive digital installations, to create a digital amusement park and art for the mall's public spaces. When FRAME's editor in chief Robert Thiemann visited the mall recently, he found a retail desert. What went wrong? 'No matter how magical teamLab's work is, it ultimately lacks meaning,' reflects Thiemann. 'It's beautiful and astounding for a moment. But what value does it add to post-Covid consumers?' After all, Gen Z is big on authenticity. Brands and experiences that can't offer that will be seen as merely trying to escape themselves. ●