

RETAIL

Ssense's offline move points to enduring appeal of physical retail

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Ssense's flagship is designed for flexibility. Image courtesy of Ssense

By SARAH JONES

Ecommerce platform Ssense is translating its digital shopping experience into a bricks-and-mortar flagship, becoming the latest luxury pure-play e-tailer to embrace a physical environment.

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Located in Montral, Ssense's outpost is intended to be a concrete complement to its ecommerce platform, complete with tech-infused customer services and editorial activations. While online retail is growing at a faster pace than the overall luxury market, upscale ecommerce platforms are finding a demand and opportunity for more traditional retail interactions.

Ssense was reached for comment.

Online to offline

Montral-based Ssense was founded in 2003. The retailer stocks merchandise from high-fashion labels such as Alexander McQueen, Burberry, Dior and Saint Laurent.

With a blend of content and commerce, Ssense aims to be a cultural platform that goes beyond retail.

Now, the retailer is bringing this approach to its first physical store. The 13,000-square-foot store at 418 rue Saint Sulpice is situated in a historic building from the 1800s.

David Chipperfield Architects designed a concrete building within a building for Ssense that retains the architecture's original faade while offering a modern look.



The flagship's design incorporates the existing faade. Image courtesy of Ssense

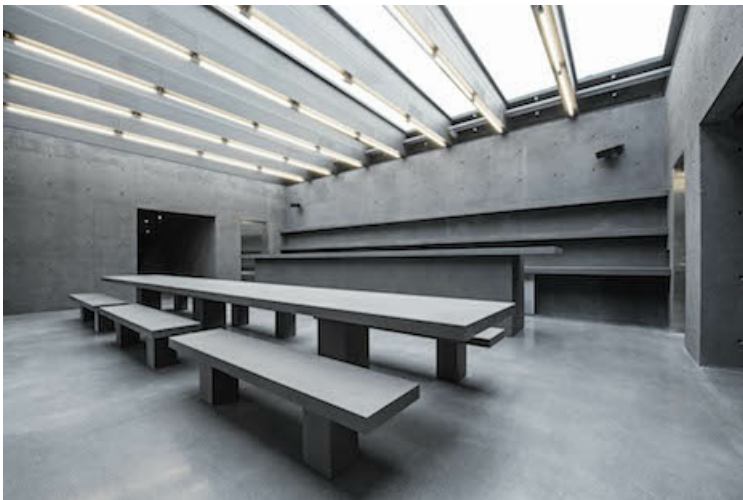
This structure also enables flexibility within the flagship. The concrete includes a grid with a hidden convertible socket system, allowing for adjustable placement of mechanical and technical features.

Reflecting the digital shopping experience on Ssense's Web site, the store features tech-infused services. The retailer's technology team built a platform and stylist application where consumers can book appointments for in-person consultations.

About 20,000 products are available for shoppers to request online and try on in-store within 24 hours. Eight fitting rooms are dedicated entirely to personal styling sessions.

To keep track of appointments, Ssense's team will use a vertical lift module. This technology is typically leveraged to manage warehouses.

Adding to the experiential retail approach, Ssense's flagship includes a caf. With seating for 34, the eatery offers dining under a fully glass ceiling.



Caf at Ssense's flagship. Image courtesy of Ssense

Along with shopping services, the flagship is bringing Ssense's online experience offline through content. The retailer will be hosting site-specific installations from Moncler, designer Virgil Abloh and LVMH Prize-winning label Wales Bonner, among others.

Ssense's first project, "Arca/Tormenta," will be presented in partnership with Prada. Electronic musician Arca performed live at the store on April 26, and the resulting aftermath of the event is left as an installation that was creative directed by the artist and Carlos Sez.

The display will be up through June 3, while consumers can also view the performance via a multi-camera video recording published online.

Prada worked with Arca to develop a four-piece capsule, which will be available at both the Ssense flagship and ecommerce site.

Bridging channels

Ssense is the latest luxury ecommerce player to make the move into physical retail.

In 2014, Moda Operandi opened a bricks-and-mortar showroom in London where customers can enter by appointment to shop a collection curated solely and uniquely for them. This showroom format has been incredibly profitable for Moda Operandi, and after opening another successful location in New York in 2016, the company has big plans to open more of them across the globe ([see story](#)).

Secondhand luxury sellers are also seeing a demand for bricks-and-mortar engagement.

Last fall, online consignment marketplace The RealReal brought its luxury shopping experience offline with the opening of its first permanent bricks-and-mortar storefront.

Located on Wooster Street in New York's SoHo neighborhood, the 6,000-square-foot boutique features a selection of merchandise that is updated daily, translating the evolving ecommerce browsing experience to the physical space. In addition to serving as a showcase of its goods, The RealReal's first in-store venture offers services for both shoppers and sellers ([see story](#)).

Brands that originate online come to physical retail with consumer data and technology expertise. Ssense notes that its flagship is in perpetual "beta" and has been a project in the works for 15 years.

For bricks-and-mortar retail to rebound, luxury brands must leverage digital and experiential touchpoints within the in-store environment.

During the Nov. 13 "From the Flagship to the Ghost Ship" panel at The New York Times' International Luxury Conference two retail "unicorns" discussed how they have embraced online selling. Despite this embrace, both speakers agreed that bricks-and-mortar still has a place in luxury because a physical boutique is a reinforcement of a brand's values, which can sometimes be difficult to translate online ([see story](#)).

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