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## Guerillas of recession

Clare Press | January 28, 2009

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**TO misquote George Bernard Shaw: "Those who can, do. Those who cannot, preach." I speak from experience; I just quit my job at Vogue to focus on my fashion label, and for every friend who said "bravo!" two pointed out that we were headed for the mother of all recessions. Unemployment was about to explode, and anyone with any sense would refuse to spend on something so frivolous as a frock. Yeah, right.**

Shopping is an age-old joy. And discretionary spending has long supported economic growth, whether we're talking shoes, fashion, furniture or luxury travel. There will always be someone to spend extravagantly. Even now in the age of the crunch, architects of the new Versace hotel in Dubai are planning the world's first refrigerated beach. Try telling those who demand cold sand between their toes that consumerism is over.

But people are suckers for drama, and gloom and doom sell, too. As David Smith, economics editor of London's *The Sunday Times*, noted recently, every time there is a recession, someone writes a best-selling book about the coming catastrophe. In his piece, "Goodbye to all that", Smith references one commentator from the 1990s who predicted that that recession would result in "crack-crazed armed gangs" roaming the streets. Needless to say, "it did not happen".

This present downturn may prove to be the worst yet, but life goes on. Some businesses go bust, others boom, new challenges emerge and with them new ways of thinking. When the going gets tough, the tough get pop-upshops.

Smart retailers are searching out vacant spaces to set up shop temporarily. Without long leases to sign, they're reducing their risk, while giving themselves the chance to offload excess stock and win new customers in surprising new spaces. With limited time to make an impact, and without expensive shop-fits to fall back on, they have to get creative. The result is a rash of cool new gallery-style hangouts that's giving shoppers good reason to get excited again.

The Japanese innovators at *Commes des Garçons* were among the first to push the idea of a fashion destination that's here today, gone tomorrow, with their New York Guerilla Store in 2004: boom time, incidentally. Since then, they've opened temporary stores from LA to Singapore; their website lists the old ones as "disappeared". Indeed their cult London venture, *Dover Street Market*, started life as a temporary experiment, although it's here to stay now; in June it housed a pop-up Chanel boutique.

More brands are recognising the appeal of the limited-time-only retail event. To coincide with the Australian Open, the event's "official outfitter" Lacoste has opened a pop-up palace in Melbourne Central complete with an enormous Nintendo Wii station via which tennis fans can challenge their heroes on a virtual court, and hopefully spend up on branded clothing while they're at it.

"Fundamentally it's a way of making retail more dynamic, something we need at the moment," says Genevieve Smart, of Australian label *Ginger & Smart*. "It's (about) thinking on your toes, which is underground and exciting." With two permanent Sydney stores, in the city and Paddington, they added a pop-up 10 days before Christmas, this time at Newport on the city's northern beaches, after stumbling on a viable vacant shopfront near the action.

"Lots of our clients travel this way over the holidays," explains Smart, adding that the new store sells a mixture of current season and older stock. "It's about clever merchandising: looking at how an older piece, say a sequined dress from two seasons back, can complement summer stock. That can work in a new location where customers haven't seen it all before. And of course they're great prices, so the bargain thing is a factor."

Come the end of this month, the doors will shut, which Smart reckons is part of the appeal. "The surprise element is important. We got the idea from our travels. Our agents in Europe were telling us tales of

clever pop-ups and even temporary store swaps," says Smart, citing Karen Walker's East Village venture at the Den boutique space during New York Fashion Week last February. Smart had also heard about London hipster haunt Browns Focus trading places with ACNE in Stockholm for 10 days a couple of years back. So is an international swap-shop on the cards for Ginger & Smart? "I don't know about that, but we'd definitely do another pop-up. We're hatching plans, but the surprise element is important."

Surprise is key too when it comes to fashionable hangouts. In London, the cool crowd is storming the new Double Club in Islington; at least it is until next month

when it's all over, red rover. The virus is spreading, by word of mouth and social networking sites. In Sydney's Bondi, An Absolut World is a pop-up pool party at the Swiss Grand Hotel. Open for a summer of Sundays (would-be partygoers can register on a Facebook site to secure tickets), it will disappear in March.

Always on trend, Belinda Seper is taking note. She's just finished a gallery-style installation of Edit, the interiors concept she created with Sharyn Storrier Lyneham, at the Format showrooms in Sydney's Surry Hills and plans to take that show on the road to Melbourne. Meanwhile she is popping up with fashion.

In December, Seper was offered two vacant Sydney spaces for the holiday period, provided she could open at lightening speed.

"We had a very tight time frame in which to react, but I have a magnificent team and we just swung into action," she says.

On December 15 her office emailed local designers in her stable with a call-out for stock; the catch was it had to be delivered to the stores in Westfield Bondi Junction and the city's Queen Victoria Building by December 17. Come that weekend the very chic I-Spy stores were open for business, gorgeously groaning with designer pieces just in time for Christmas. And I swear you'd never know they hadn't always been there.

Seper says it's less about recession fighting, more about innovative marketing.

"As a retailer it allows me to break the formula, to try something new. As a customer, it's like the fashion circus coming to town. We pitch our tents, entertain you for a few wonderful weeks, and then we're gone."

As Smart points out, "you have to find the right opportunity, a space not rented for whatever reason, maybe there's a vacant month before a new lease starts".

Landlords would rather have a tenant than an empty shop, so smart negotiators can win attractive terms.

"Landlords are more open to short-term plans now," says Seper. "As confidence decreases, aversion to risk increases; it's the try-before-you-buy principle."

Deborah Sams, who with Mary Lou Ryan designs organic cotton casualwear label Bassike, concurs. Their "guerilla store" at Palm Beach is a holiday neighbour of Ginger & Smart's, and opened in November.

Many labels offload excess stock to externally run sales, but Sams says that's not for Bassike, which wholesales to select boutiques and runs its own online shop.

"We had stock to clear but only in a controlled environment; it had to be our vibe. We did this to test the market for our label. It's not about shifting sale stock. We had fabric; we re-cut things. We're now considering staying."

Sams says they were inspired by Commes des Garçons.

"You go to Tokyo in February and then again in November and everything has changed. The Japanese are clever retailers, and pop-up is definitely a trend," says Sams.

The duo lives near the beach, and noticed a vacant space on Palmy's Avalon Parade.

"We'd drive past and think 'We could do something there.' It had been a cafe and a gift shop, I think, but nothing stayed long."

The space was "a great shell, whitewashed with concrete floors" so set-up costs were minimal, as is the label's aesthetic. They got a friend to build hanging racks, and scoured for old furniture. It all worked, and they're now considering similar plans for Melbourne.

Perhaps the ultimate temporary shopping destination is Fashion Weekend, back this year, having done a roaring trade after Australian Fashion Week last May. A hundred designers are expected to set up micro-shops to cater to 10,000 visitors within Sydney's Royal Hall of Industries, with similar happenings being staged in Brisbane and Melbourne for the first time. Underground it ain't, but it may well be a smart recession-buster.

"This is not about the 'sale rail'; it's a more sophisticated concept," explains Jo Duncan, of Single Market Events, which has run similar events off the back of London Fashion Week for the past nine years.

"We enable designers to create their own mini-boutiques on site, with their own signage and design ideas. The last event in London was in September at the height of credit crunch fears and it was a huge success. "When people are watching what they spend, you need to give them a good reason to part with their money."

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