

DESIGN

# Book to the future

Bookshops are closing down like nobody's business. So do they need rethinking for the electronic age? **Rosanna de Lisle** asks four firms of architects and designers to create the bookshop of their dreams

WHEN ONLINE SHOPPING offers choice, convenience and competitive prices, why would anyone go to an actual shop? To try on clothes, perhaps. To sit on sofas or lie on beds. But if you're after music, film or books, you're more likely to go straight to the internet. In the digital age, bricks-and-mortar shops have to work much harder to attract our attention, let alone custom. Brands rip out and refit their stores every few years: interior design is, clearly, already crucial to their fortunes. But could design go further, and lure us away from our tablets and back onto the high street?

Curious to explore this territory, we asked four leading architecture and design practices to create a shop. Specifically, in the age of Amazon and e-books, a bookshop to save bookshops. Traditional book-selling has been hit particularly hard by the shift to online shopping. First the sales went digital – to Amazon. Then the product went digital – again, largely to Amazon, whose Kindle e-readers are configured only to read e-books in Kindle format. In Britain, the number of independent bookshops fell by a third between 2005 and the end of 2013, to 987; in America, it fell from 2,400 to 1,900 between 2002 and 2011, although there has been a modest revival since. Some of the reasons for this decline apply to the whole high street – the recession, edge-of-town superstores, crippling business rates – but Amazon has struck by far the mightiest blow.

Still, independent bookshops inspire great affection, and the best of them, such as Lutyens & Rubin-

stein in west London, run by literary agents, offer more astute personal advice than an algorithm ever could. What indies seldom do is integrate technology beyond the till, or sell e-books. They will surely need to innovate to survive.

We gave each practice – Gensler, 20.20, Burdiflek and Coffey Architects – the same brief. They were to design a general-interest bookshop, selling fiction, non-fiction and e-books, in store and online, on a typical European high-street site, with two floors of 1,000 square feet each. The budget was £100,000 – modest, we knew, but independent booksellers aren't minted and that figure was ring-fenced for the fit-out; they could assume there would be further funds for training staff or running events. The shop could be called Intelligent Life Books, or given another name.

We were expecting some arresting design and clever innovation, but got a lot more than that. If the brief was to redesign the bookshop, they reinvented it.

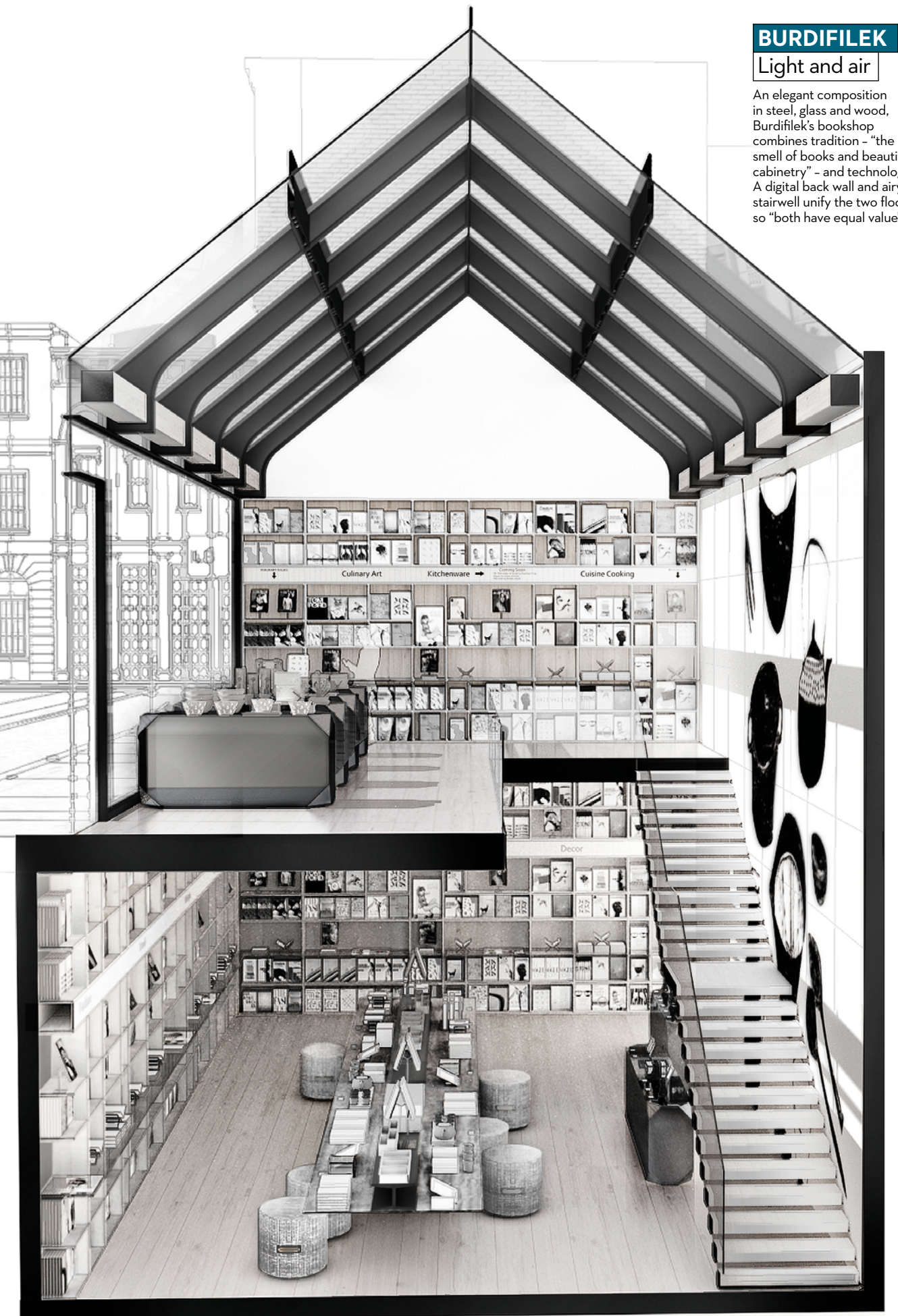
YOU MIGHT HAVE expected as much from Gensler, where the brief was taken on by Jon Tollit, who led the team that designed much of the Apple Store on Regent Street in central London. When it opened in 2004, the Apple Store made instant retail history by putting its products on tables for customers to use, removing tills and providing staff so knowledgeable that "you can ask anyone any question".

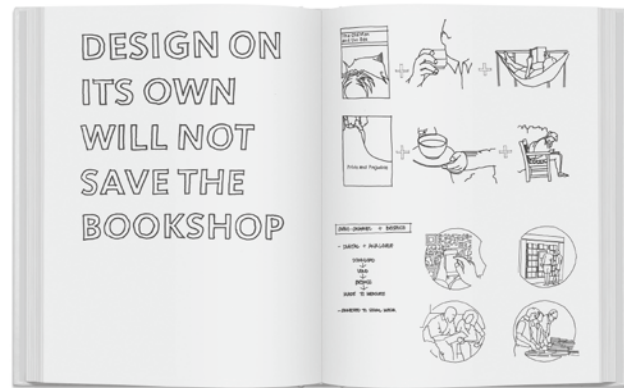
In January, I went to Gensler's London office – one of 46 around the world – to see the work in pro-

BURDIFILEK

Light and air

An elegant composition in steel, glass and wood, Burdiflek's bookshop combines tradition – "the smell of books and beautiful cabinetry" – and technology. A digital back wall and airy stairwell unify the two floors, so "both have equal value"



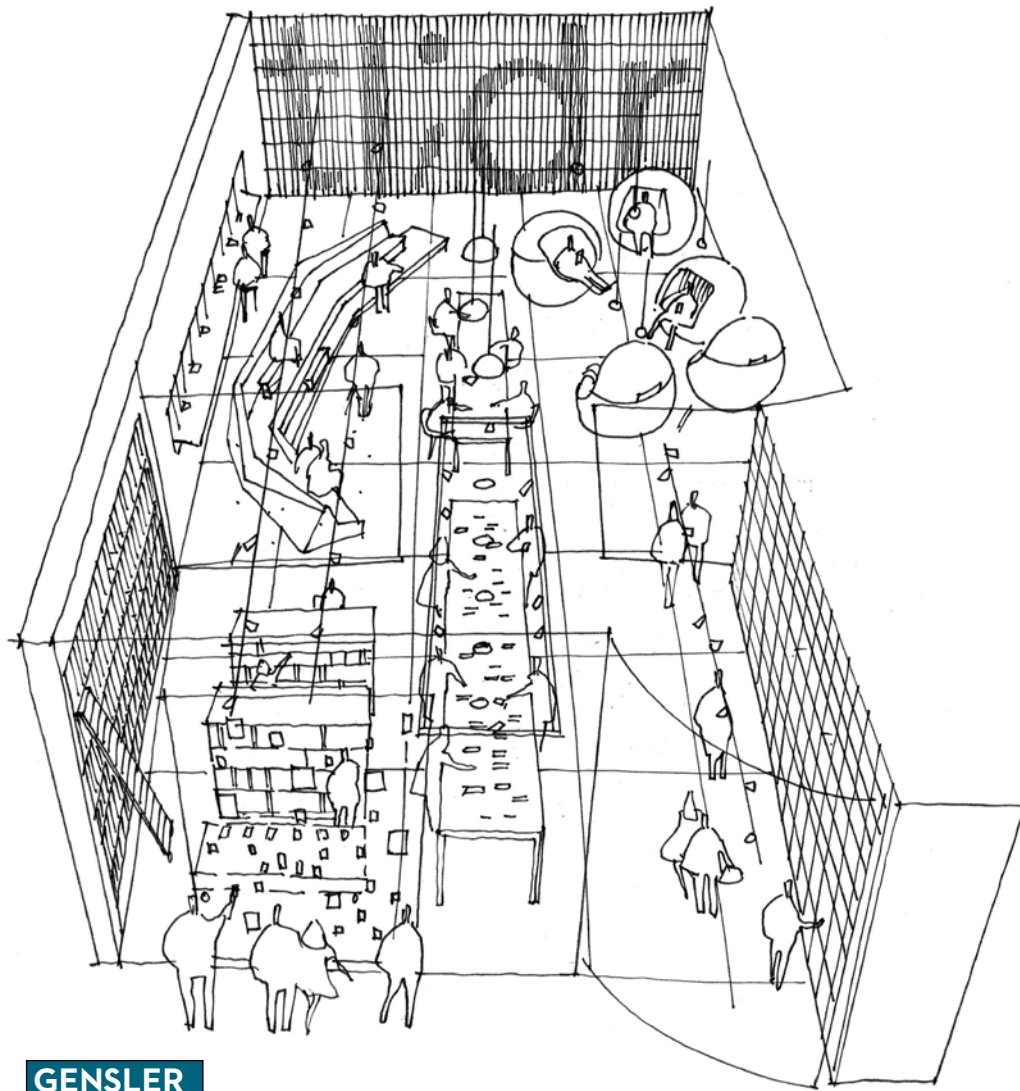


> gress. We began with Tollit's associate, Owain Roberts, laying out the firm's ideas in black and white, unfurling a long scroll of tracing paper on which he had mapped out the challenges facing booksellers with pen and ink, distilling them in drawings and diagrams of startling clarity.

Their analysis was stark: "Design on its own will not save the bookshop." But Roberts was undaunted. "If you leave the model as it is and redecorate, nothing's going to change. The solution needs to be much more fundamental: informed, strategic and daring." The bookshop, as Gensler saw it, had to anticipate every sort of literary need, from grabbing a paperback or download, to relaxed browsing, personally tailored reading-lists, self-publishing, book clubs, author events and even an enhanced experience of reading a book in the bookish equivalent of a flotation tank.

A week later, Roberts produces a bird's-eye view of Gensler's bookshop, another disarmingly simple drawing containing a lot of original ideas. The first surprise is that you don't have to enter the store to shop from it: the glass façade is a touchscreen that can be tapped on to download e-books from QR codes. The choice could be infinite – "the whole catalogue of the British Library," said Roberts, taking on Amazon with a sheet of smart glass.

A vending wall swings out onto the pavement, popping out a changing selection of paperbacks. Inside, new titles are laid out on a long table that marches down the space. To one side, there's a "Harry Potter wonderwall of discovery", to be explored by ladder (ignoring, for the moment, health and safety). While customers can be in and out of the shop in a matter of minutes, the back half of the store caters to those who can stay longer. Literary sommeliers advise on what to read next, or usher you into a pod for a multi-sensory experience: you curl up and read a hardback with an appropriate drink (tea for Austen, whisky for Hemingway), soundtrack or even smell. Readers wanting a more social experience gather on bleacher



### GENSLER Multi-part

All things to all readers: customers can download an e-book or buy a paperback in an instant at the front of Gensler's multi-faceted bookshop, or immerse themselves in a literary experience for hours at the back

seating ("simple timber steps with cushions") to take part in book clubs, hear an author give a talk or discuss self-publishing, which can be done via screens in the far left-hand corner.

At the back is a floor-to-ceiling wall of books, their spines arranged to spell tl;dr – short for "too long; didn't read". As Gensler's name for the shop, it's a confident bit of irony: if anywhere could excite a reluctant reader, distracted by social media, into buying a book, it would surely be this tech-smart bookshop. It's also a compelling bit of graphic design. "It's a very analogue way of signing," Roberts says, "but by using the product itself it becomes a sculptural installation. There's a big visual pull towards the back of the store."

One thing noticeably absent is the till. "You remove that negative element completely, so that precious floorspace is given over to experience rather than transaction." Also, if payment can be taken instantly by a staff member with a card reader, "you sell a lot more. You don't allow the customer to wander off and change their mind." Nor, with the touchscreen façade, does the store ever shut: "This space has an ability to be shopped and interacted with 24 hours a day."

As they've drawn it, tl;dr seems a destination store, somewhere you'd happily spend a Sunday afternoon, but Roberts and Tollit also produce diagrams

showing the concept as "a kit of parts" to "plug in and play" according to location and audience. At a railway station, tl;dr might be just a download-and-vending wall. In a hipster neighbourhood such as Hoxton or Williamsburg, it might feel more like a club. "It can grow, shrink and respond to the way people are shopping the store or it could pop up elsewhere." Putting a tl;dr vending machine at the end of Brighton Pier, for example, where it would sell "Brighton Rock", and promote the nearest fully equipped store.

With so many ideas for what the shop could do, it feels almost plodding to ask what it might be made of. The team haven't designed the fixtures and fittings in any detail, beyond knowing that they could be moved about to adapt the space for events. "The decoration is incidental to the activities taking place," Roberts argues. And the retail model is changing so fast that "the days when a fit-out would last five years are long gone". The current trend for pop-up shops is not just a consequence of the recession but a symptom of the need to experiment in response to changing shopping habits. "Fail quicker" is the buzz, Tollit says. "You don't want to invest huge amounts of time and money, and then fail. You fail quicker so that you can move on."

The point about not blowing the budget on architecture but instead focusing on programming the space was also made by 20.20, a strategic design consultancy with a humming, open-plan office in north London. It was 20.20 that turned Sainsbury's super-

markets orange and achieved the "Arsenalisation" of the Emirates stadium by wrapping it in huge images of players of the past. "People won't go into a shop because the ceiling's beautiful," Jon Lee, 20.20's creative director, told me. "They'll go in because the experience is relevant to their lifestyle. It's what you do in a space that's really important."

In 20.20's bookshop people could do all sorts of things: download reviews and e-books (which would be discounted if bought in person), buy printed books from a frequently edited selection, consult well-informed staff, have a coffee or sandwich, read in cubbyholes, listen to audio books, watch a performance by an author, rent a desk at which to write or illustrate, and self-publish on the in-house printing press. The shop would be called The Art of Storytelling, the thinking being that stories endure, no matter what form books take.

Lee and Jim Thompson, 20.20's managing director, talked persuasively about the nuts and bolts of their bookshop. Like many, it would have a café, but theirs came with a twist: a Yo! Sushi-style conveyor belt delivering short reads and reviews to consume with your coffee. This would act as a draw to the back of the shop – "you need some kind of anchor," Lee said – while mobile "mid-floor units" carry screens to advertise events, and books that fit a frequently changed theme, such as the ten best adventure stories. These units (at hip height, "because we all tend to look down") also offer some cover at the threshold – a >

*"People won't go into a shop because the ceiling's beautiful. It's what you do in a space that's important"*



### 20.20 A "wow" tree

20.20's tree structure tells people there are two storeys to explore (the stairs are tucked behind the back wall), where they can read in little sheds or listen to audiobooks on benches. Books are stacked in drawers (far left), one per author – "perhaps two for Dickens"



## BURDIFILEK

### Books-plus

> place for nervous shoppers to hover while they orientate themselves in an unfamiliar place.

To get them upstairs, there's a staircase. And a tree. "We always believe there should be some kind of 'wow' in a space that draws you in," Lee said. "So this central feature, representing a tree, links the two spaces through a hole in the floor, with lightbulbs dangling from the structure."

The books would be front-facing "to ping out the covers" against charcoal shelves. Strong visual merchandising, but wouldn't it mean fewer books? Not if some were kept in drawers, with one book on the front of the drawer and the rest of the author's work inside. The department store Liberty did something similar, putting "the shirt on the front, with a tie," Thompson said, "and you pulled the drawer out and all the sizes were stacked behind".

Like Gensler, 20.20 were unfazed by the tight budget. The tree, conveyor belt and drawers would eat up most of the money, Lee said, while "everything else is quite inexpensive and easy to produce". This strategy seems sound: woo customers through the door with a few striking features and then make it as easy as possible for them to buy something. As soon as they have their nose in a book, they're not going to mind if the floor isn't parquet.

In contrast to the British enthusiasm for pop-up stores in scruffy spaces, Burdifilek, a Canadian interior-design practice responsible for a swathe of sleek shops from Joe Fresh in New York to parts of Brown Thomas in Dublin, opted to go fiercely upmarket. Though they too felt the shop should do more than merely sell books. "If you just concentrate on books", said their creative director, Diego Burdi, on the line from Toronto, "you're rolling the dice."

Another angle on Burdifilek's shop, ILB, which, with its glass façade, "lives right on the street". The plinths carry "a very procured edit" of related things to buy – in this case kitchen equipment, tying in with a cookbook promotion

Burdifilek's bookstore (called ILB, for Intelligent Life Books) is more of a gallery, showcasing particular books alongside related merchandise. So for six weeks, the focus might be cookery, with the store selling pots and pans as well as cookbooks; then it might switch to Danish design. When I asked what would make money here, the books or the other products, Burdi said "I think it's both. It's a win-win."

Some book-lovers might find woks and whisks a diversification too far (though they might be happy to sit and flick through a book in an Arne Jacobsen Egg chair), but Burdi thinks there's a gap in the market. "It's like a concierge service: everything in one place," he says. "My frustration [at the moment] is that I buy the book, then I have to go to another store to buy the product. It's a luxury to see and touch the product. That's what the internet doesn't give you."

Current exhibits are displayed on plinths ("I don't want to call it a table, it's more of a sculpture, to make you focus on what's on top"), while the shelves that bookend the space offer both an edited choice of printed books and, via built-in touchscreens, infinitely more e-books and apps. The materials would be "inexpensive but noble": European walnut for the shelves, "a very wide-plank dry oak" for the floor, and "a flat white plaster finish, very gallery-like" for the walls.

Burdifilek gave their store a glass roof, drenching the ground floor with daylight, which drizzles down to the basement through a wider-than-necessary stairwell. The big opening steals selling space upstairs but works to entice the customer downstairs, where they will find general-interest books and a long reading table with stools that can be moved to make room for events. The void also allows a digital kinetic screen on the back wall to span both storeys. At night it "lights >

> up like a beautiful movie screen”, in effect dissolving the façade when the store is shut and intriguing the passer-by.

Gensler’s, 20.20’s and Burdifilek’s stores have some striking things in common. They all give you something to do with your hands, at table height, as soon as you enter. They all have a double-height feature that both identifies the brand and draws the customer deeper into the space. Gensler chose to put their store on one floor, but said the wall spelling tldr would work as well over two or more storeys. They all use hand-held card readers. The stores are flexible: the furniture can be moved and the books frequently changed or – a word that came up a lot – “curated”. Most significantly, all these future bookshops integrate technology both to expand the range of product (to rival Amazon in scope if not price) and to enable customers to do something in-store that they couldn’t do on a smartphone – to beat Amazon on experience.

Meanwhile, in the real world, London’s most famous bookshop, Foyles, is about to move a few doors down Charing Cross Road, into the building that was once Central St Martin’s art school. At almost

Coffey’s vision includes a bar and printing press, performing writers, floating robots (the silver discs hovering on the left), holograms and good old-fashioned paper, ink, leather and gold leaf

40,000 sq ft, it may be the last vast bookstore ever to be built. When this new flagship was on the drawing board, Foyles hosted two workshops with the *Bookseller* magazine, at which publishers, booksellers and even a few customers brainstormed ideas with the project’s architects, Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands. Many of the suggestions made for “Future Foyles” were noticeably similar to the ideas our four practices came up with – though none of them was aware of Foyles’ plans – from book ATMs to in-store apps, private booths, writers in residence and even a touchscreen storefront. Foyles was cagey about how many of the more technological of these ideas were going to make it into the new shop; what it would say is that it will stock as many physical books as the old site.

One idea you definitely won’t see at Foyles came from Coffey Architects. A small practice based in Clerkenwell, it doesn’t have the same record in innovative retail design as our other three practices, but, among a variety of projects, it has designed a library for the British Film Institute and reinvented the wheel that is the Victorian terraced house. Which is perhaps why Coffey took our brief somewhere else entirely – 50 years into the future, to a time when all books might be out of print. “Can you save the bookshop? Is there any point?” asks Phil Coffey cheerfully. He believes the digitisation of books will make bookshops redundant, but what can be saved is the cult of the book as a beautiful object. So his shop, if we can call it that, celebrates the arcane arts of printing and bookbinding. Called Craftword, it’s the antithesis of an e-book emporium: niche, retro, social, inky, bibulous, but with only a few books to buy off the shelf. The idea is that you make your own, with the help of floating robots – choosing the paper, ink, font, leather, even gold leaf – on antique presses and binders.

Wide steps double as seating and lead down to a bar and a stage, where a writer performs – “authors will become more like rock stars” – or a “book wizard” explains the craft of making books. The book you make might be one by the writer on stage, something you’ve written yourself, or any other text the robots conjure up. You’d do it to enjoy the pleasures e-books will have ceased to offer: the smell and feel of ink and paper, the heft of a hardback in your hands, a cover that’s a work of art. And the edition you take home would be unique.

“Downloads will leave a vacuum for beautiful things,” Coffey argued. And he insisted his concept “is not a flight of fancy. The beauty of the written word will be something you want to cherish.” A cheering thought for any booksellers working on their business plans for 2064. ■

