

# The New York Times

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## Built to Not Last

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Stores take the idea of planned obsolescence and turn it back on themselves.

Planned obsolescence has been a crucial part of the American consumer dynamic since at least the 1920's, when General Motors began to design one year's model with the goal of making last year's seem out of date. Forcing temporary status onto a durable product is a tactic now used in almost every retail category you can think of. In fact, it has become increasingly commonplace for entire retail environments. During the weeks just before the holidays this year, at least six stores opened south of Houston Street in New York City with the knowledge that each would soon be not just obsolete but absent.

Temporary stores were once an oddity - a maverick marketing practice designed to make a retailer stand out. The current glut of these stores seems to have converted the idea into just another trend, but the approaches vary as greatly as the range of brands that have tried the tactic in downtown New York lately: Kodak, Illy coffee, American Apparel, Wired magazine, the Japanese retailer Uniqlo and the Icelandic winter clothier 66 Degrees North. These join Target, Crown Royal Whisky, Meow Mix (the cat food), Song airlines, Comme des Garçons and others that have opened short-term stores in the last couple of years. These efforts are often positioned as blurring the line between retail space and art gallery, but that's nothing new; the late-19th-century rise of department stores had a lot to do with their museumlike grandiosity, and galleryish, nontemporary boutiques are legion. The question that temporary shops, in particular, ask over and over is: Is this a store or a stunt?

Uniqlo's ephemeral location in SoHo, open through late January, is crammed with products, while the huge, airy Kodak One Gallery (which, along with a companion temporary space in San Francisco, closed at the end of November) was geared to demonstrations and served as a kind of walk-in advertisement. **The Wired store, closing Dec. 24, displays the kinds of high-tech products that the magazine often reviews but seems more like a branding exercise;** the American Apparel Pop-Up Shop has held karaoke contests but still has the feel of an actual retailer.

That variety makes sense to Ron Pompei, whose firm, Pompei A.D., designed the 66 Degrees North store in SoHo (which closes at the end of December). One thing that all temporary stores have in common is that they can serve as laboratories. "They can do something really innovative," and build on it if it works, he says. "And they can also cut their losses if it's a flop." Pompei A.D. designed and organized one of the most ambitious temporary-store experiments back in 1999, for Levi's: occupying a space for six weeks in NoLiTa, east of SoHo, the brand held a variety of events, published a neighborhood guide and put up a related Web site.

For 66 Degrees North, Pompei traveled to Iceland, where the brand is well established, then framed the SoHo store as "an expression of Iceland." Photographs from the trip hover above the racks of coats and full-on Arctic explorer suits. A video loop runs on a

wide-screen television near a couch that sits on granulated black rubber meant to replicate the country's black sand. There are even brochures for Icelandic tours. "Iceland happens to be very cool right now," he adds. Still, the store is "not as exhibit-oriented" as some temporary shops, Pompei says, because the goal has less to do with burnishing an already well known brand than with testing the line's ability to support a retail store in the U.S. He points to Galleria Illy, scheduled to close in mid-December, as a contrast: it's an art venue, a cafe and a social space, and that makes sense for a more established name. (His firm was not involved.)

It's because the temporary store can play so many roles that Pompei figures that the practice will not disappear soon. What the temporary-store explosion really speaks to is how much the idea of forced obsolescence has shifted from the supply side to the demand side: shoppers don't have to be convinced of the merits of novelty; they insist on it. Perhaps that has been true all along, but lately it seems that consumers set the pace, and producers struggle to keep up. The temporary store is a response to that shift, one that will work until something else comes along and makes it seem obsolete.