



Field Notes

Holiday Edition

F·A·O SCHWARZ.
— NEW YORK —

LOCATION: Rockefeller Center, NYC
VISIT DATE: December, 2025
FORMAT: Flagship Store
ADJACENT STORES: J.Crew, TUMI, Nintendo, Catbird
COMPETITION: Lego, American Girl Store, CAMP, Toys “R” Us (Macy’s)
WEBSITE: faoschwarz.com
SOCIAL: @faoschwarz

About the Brand: Founded in 1862, FAO Schwarz is one of New York’s most enduring retail institutions. After a three-year closure period (2015-20-8), the brand has survived retail collapse cycles by repositioning itself not as a toy store, but as a destination of wonder—a heritage experience built around play, personalization, and human interaction.

Cultural Feel: FAO Schwarz during the holidays is joyful overstimulation done right.

The experience began before entry, with a ~30-minute line, which thankfully moved pretty steadily to keep shoppers in anticipation. Once inside, the sensory flood was immediate: employees in costume, toys packed into every nook and cranny, sound layered on sound, children testing products in real time, and associates acting more like hype hosts than retail staff.

The magic was intentional. Chaotic, but friendly. Dense, but playful. This was a circular store format meant for meandering. After all, you don’t just shop FAO Schwarz, you explore it.

RATINGS

CULTURE



COMMERCE



STORE BASICS

STORE DESIGN & NAVIGATION

The store focused on shop-in-shop storytelling, with each zone offering its own micro-experience. Movement was constant. The store was built for touch, play, and performance, and designed to move customers through the space without making them feel rushed.

Ground Floor Highlights:

- FAO-branded classic toys and plush animals at the entrance
- Bluey shop-in-shop
- Build-A-Bear experience
- Jellycat Diner (appointment-based, with fully in- character associates)
- Bauble Bar (charms, bag accessories, customized friendship jewelry)

Second & Third Floor Highlights:

- Dress-up and dolls
- Barbie customization and special editions
- Baby doll gifting and& personalization
- Funko Pop wall
- Interactive piano and Zoltan Speaks animatronic from Big
- Candy shop (unexpected, but delightful adjacency)





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AESTHETICS

- Whimsical, colorful, and layered
- High visual density without feeling cheap
- Circular pathways encourage discovery while also improving the flow of store traffic
- Surprise elements appear mid-journey rather than front-loaded

Notably absent: heavy digital overlays. FAO Schwarz clearly trusted its beloved brand and the magic of in-store exploration to do the heavy lifting.

EXPERIENTIAL ‘WOWs’

Associate-as-Performer Model: Staff used microphones to call out features, hype crowds, and actively demonstrate toys. One associate playfully launched a paper airplane into a guest’s face—startling, funny, unforgettable.

Jellycat Diner: A full role-play experience where staff “cooked” plush food, bagged it, and performed the ritual. Spectators could enjoy the experience without committing to an investment, making it inclusive and theatrical.

Personalization Everywhere: Nearly every shop-in-shop offers customization—Barbies, stuffed bears, and baby gifts, reinforcing emotional value over transactional speed.

Surprise and Delight Infrastructure: Hidden moments, unexpected interactions, and tactile play zones reward curiosity.





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EXPERIENTIAL NOTABLES

STORYTELLING

FAO Schwarz doesn't rely on narrative campaigns but on immersive play. The brand story was communicated through action: testing toys, interacting with staff, and watching other children delight. This is heritage retail that understands memory-making is part of the product.

MERCHANDISE ASSORTMENT

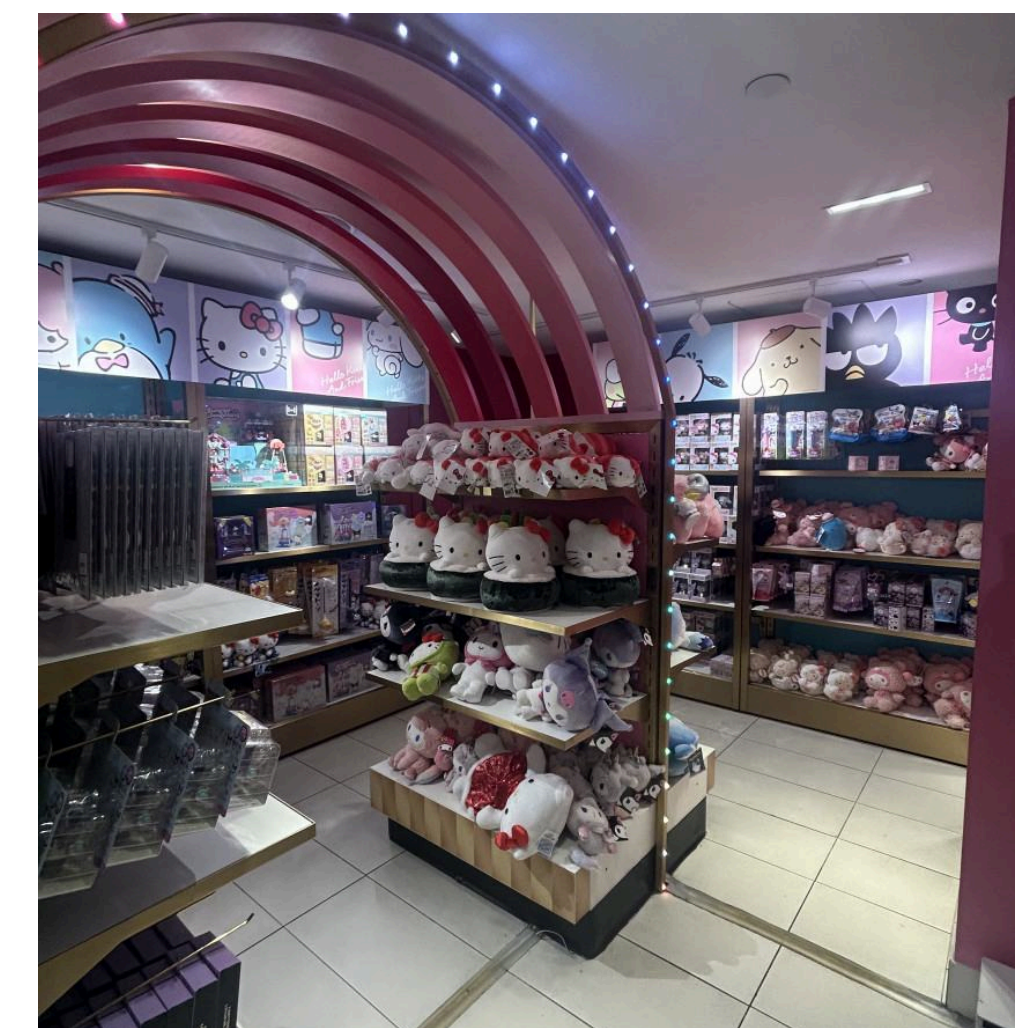
- Products offered broad age coverage, serving infants to adults.
- Assortment focused on premium, giftable SKUs, not trend chasing.
- Notable miss: Peanuts holiday window display, which felt flat and underdeveloped compared to in-store richness.
- *Wicked* merchandise appeared sidelined, suggesting trend fatigue or a lapsed promotional window.

HUMAN INTERACTION

- High-energy associates acted as guides, not clerks.
- Staff drove engagement without pressure.
- Long lines everywhere, but spirits stayed high due to entertainment value and the magic of the experience
- One missed opportunity was to provide parents of young children a simpler experience; strollers parked haphazardly in a back corner of the store.

TECHNOLOGY ELEMENTS

- There was minimal tech throughout the experience, which allowed guest to focus solely on touching and playing.
- Infrastructure prioritized functional tools, such as the Build-A-Bear experience, Jellycat appointment system, and product customization.
- No AI, and no screens for screens' sake





THE SENSES MATRIX

SIGHT

- Visual density, movement, and surprises at every turn.
- Colorful, immersive displays.
- No dead zones, with products in every area of the store.

SOUND

- Joyful cacophony, with associates on mics, toys activating, and kids laughing.
- Loud and overstimulating, but full of whimsy.

TOUCH

- Everything was meant to be handled. Play was encouraged, not policed.

PALATE

- The third floor candy shop added an unexpected sensory surprise, though not a primary draw.

SIXTH SENSE

- This store was built on trust in physical experience. FAO Schwarz knows it doesn't need tech theatrics, and the confidence shows.