

Camille Walala reimagines Oxford Street: pedestrianised, plant-filled and people- focused

Speculative project is artist's love letter to
London after 23 years in the city



It's the early days of lockdown and Camille Walala and creative producer Julia Jomaa are cycling the empty streets of the capital. In the absence of traffic and bustle, London has become an extraordinarily peaceful place, and the two of them start to wonder whether the city of the future might look similar.

Now, eight months later, Camille unveils the results of this speculation: a series of images depicting Oxford Street as it has never been seen before. Pedestrianised, exploding with colour and full of imaginative street furniture designed to be interacted with in multiple ways, Camille's Oxford Street is a place of joy, surprise and asymmetry – an antidote to the flatness and homogeneity that often characterise the standard high street.

In a letter accompanying the series, Camille reflects on her 23 years living in London, and credits the capital with sparking and shaping her career as an artist. This project, she explains, is in essence an expression of her love and gratitude for the city, as well as a serious proposal for a new, more enriching urban landscape.



Full of colourful, bold architectural structures and 3D surfaces, the images present a vision of an urban thoroughfare that exists for more than practical purposes, inviting numerous forms of interaction. It's a place for gathering and meeting, resting and rambling – evoking the multiple community functions of the agora, or public square, in ancient Greece. Walala imagines the space as somewhere the natural and the human-made can coexist and complement each other, weaving water and verdant plant life into her speculative streetscape.

This new Oxford Street is unpredictable and eccentric, full of unexpected nooks and hidden crannies, dotted with architectural islands where 3D shapes and 2D surfaces intersect at different scales, volumes segueing into surfaces – not unlike the way in which the physical and digital dimensions of modern life merge into one another.

A freely available AR app allows viewers to experience the images from their smartphones. The buildings and streets of Oxford Street are shown in a three

dimensional view, with a scaling option allowing people to see the series in different sizes through their screen set against the backdrop of their own home.



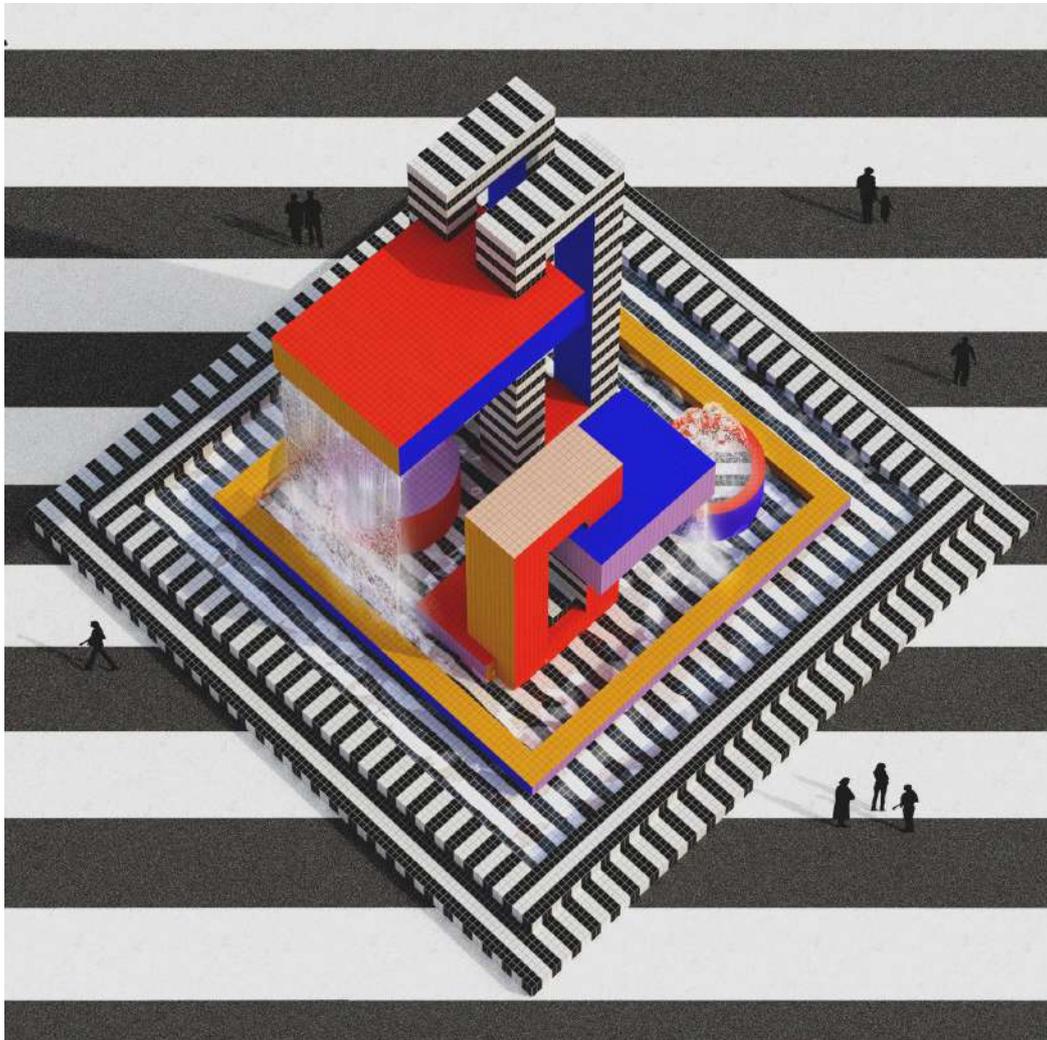
As a project conceived and delivered in lockdown, the Oxford Street series comes at a time when mental health is also an important strand in the national discourse. With many people suffering, struggling and under unprecedented pressure, Camille argues that now is the time to think seriously about how we want to live in future, and to discuss how our urban environments can contribute to – or detract from – our own happiness.

The pedestrianisation of Oxford Street is, of course, a hot topic in city-planning circles and plans have gone back and forth for years. Camille Walala's contribution

to the debate serves as a reminder that the imaginations of artists should be taken seriously when it comes to planning urban landscapes and discussing how we live and work.



Camille Walala has used art to make interventions in the urban fabric ever since she created the now-iconic full-facade mural of Old Street's 'Dream Come True' building in 2015 – the defining moment in her career as an artist. Driven by the belief that eruptions of colour and pattern can inspire positivity, elevate people's emotions and boost mood, she has been engaged in a series of increasingly ambitious and high-profile public-space projects in recent years. These have included using street furniture and planters to transform South Molton Street into an outdoor 'Walala Lounge' – the success of which helped shape her thinking for this project – and in August this year, the Walala Parade in East London, a grassroots community-improvement project supported by the Mayor's office that saw her transform the façades of a parade of shops on High Road Leyton. This experience further convinced Camille of art's power to influence communities and instil joy, and inspired her to further explore what constitutes enriching urban space and to actively work towards her vision of a better city.



As with all Camille's work, with their exuberant embrace of colour and rejection of blunt functionality, the images of this brave new Oxford Street decidedly belong to what has recently been termed 'the New London Fabulous', a phrase used to describe a rising generation of designers, including Camille Walala alongside Adam Nathaniel Furman, Yinka Ilori, and Morag Myerscough, who reject restraint and minimalism in favour of a highly aesthetic, sensual style that mixes cultures and embraces colour, pattern and ornament. In her vision for Oxford Street, Camille connects this emerging aesthetic movement with the larger conversation about mental health, architecture and society.

Camille Walala: a letter to London



Studio shots and portrait by Dunja Opalko

I have been in love with London for 23 years, ever since I first came here from France in 1997. Back then, my English wasn't great and I wasn't really sure what I was doing with my life – in time, London fixed both of these things.

I was supposed to go home after three months, but the city had me hooked. London has an energy and creativity unlike anywhere else in the world. In East London, the people I met seemed full of vision and possibility – in that sort of atmosphere, you get the feeling that anything might happen. In London, I've always felt free.

It hasn't always been easy, however. There were times in the early days when I came close to packing up and leaving, but in 2012 – London's great year of optimism – my career as an artist suddenly began to take shape. I found myself with more and more opportunities to develop my practice and ideas – to play with pattern and colour at larger and larger scales. If I'd lived somewhere else, if I'd not been rooted in London's creative scene, surrounded by the people I was, I don't know if I'd even have become an artist.



So I feel nothing but love and gratitude for the city that shaped me, and my desire to give something back to it has grown more intense in the last few years. Earlier this year, I began to think more and more about the power that artists have to create – not just individual artworks – but entire environments that are positive and inspiring, and I started exploring ways that my own work could improve the urban landscape.

In August, working on Walala Parade in Leyton – the community-led, crowd-funded transformation of an entire street – was especially inspiring for me. It was wonderful to play a part in something that had such a dramatic positive effect on the urban landscape. I am convinced that, together, we can do much more like this, and make our cities wonderful, engaging places that are as emotionally enriching as they are practically functional.

At the beginning of lockdown earlier this year, I was cycling around the city with my partner, Julia. We were struck by the silence of the streets, the sense of peace that had descended on London in the absence of the traffic, and we started talking about how cities might be fundamentally different. We decided to devote some of our time in lockdown to this speculative project – a visualisation of a better, brighter city. Iconic, but notoriously busy, Oxford Street was the obvious starting point – what might it be like if there were no cars but more greenery? What if there were spaces and structures that people could interact with however they liked? What if Oxford Street made you happy?

This project is my what-if portrait of the city of tomorrow, and my own projection of what the London I love might one day look like. In times such as these, when the future is uncertain, strain on mental health is high, and many of us are facing tough challenges in our lives, I believe it's crucial to hang on to what hope we can for the future, and to spread joy in the present. That's what I've tried to do with my vision for Oxford Street, and that's, ultimately, what all my art is for. This city has taught me that.

So, thank you London, this one's for you.
Camille Walala



Notes to editors

For images, interviews or further information, please contact Chris Hayes at chris@zetteler.co.uk.

The images were produced by Camille Walala with Omni Visual, an architect-led digital product visualisation studio.

Camille Walala

Based in East London, Camille Walala is a French artist who takes joy seriously. Over the last decade, she has become renowned for making ambitious and large-scale interventions in public spaces around the world, using the human made landscape as a vessel for disseminating positivity. Born in 1975, Camille spent her childhood between her parents' homes in France before moving to London in 1997 – the beginning of her 23-year love affair with the city.

camillewalala.com

[instagram.com/camillewalala](https://www.instagram.com/camillewalala)



Omni Visual

Founded by George Proud, Omni Visual is an architect-led digital product visualisation studio, offering services from planar images to immersive environments and everything in-between.

[instagram.com/omni.visual](https://www.instagram.com/omni.visual)

Timeline of key London works

1997 – 2009 Moving to London initially to improve her English, Camille spent time working and pursuing her creative interests. She first studied a creative subject at University at age 29 in Brighton, graduating in 2009.

2012 Ran a Walala-styled cafe as part of the Land Of Kings festival in Dalston, and also adorned the floors and ceilings of XOYO nightclub.

2015 Dream Come True Building, Old Street

2017 Villa Walala installation; London Design Festival headline commission, Broadgate

2017 Walala x PLAY installation at NOW Gallery, Greenwich Peninsula

2019 Walala Lounge; London Design Festival headline commission, South Molton Street

2020 Two murals, at Rich Mix and Canary Wharf, for London Mural Festival

2020 Les Jumeaux; zebra crossings and murals at White City Plaza

2020 Walala Parade; full-parade murals on High Road Leyton