

INTERIORS: STORE FOCUS



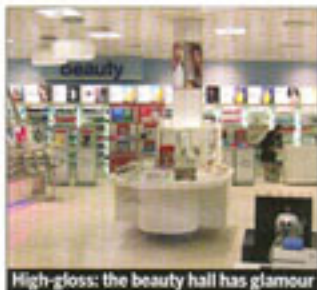
True-blue: the stylish store brings together the brand's many guises under one roof



Perfume prestige: scents on offer include high-end brands, such as Yves Saint Laurent



Little treasures: mother and baby can find plenty at Boots' top-floor destination



High-gloss: the beauty hall has glamour

INNER BEAUTY

As well as bringing together the best bits of its store formats, Boots' new store on London's Oxford Street has a warmer feel than the traditional health and beauty offer. **John Ryan** reports

Speak to almost any retailer christening a beauty hall in the West End of London and the words "this is probably the best forum for beauty in London", or something similar, are likely to be heard. Those charged with taking the press around the new Boots flagship on Oxford Street last week were no exception to this rule.

In truth, the four-floor, 29,065 sq ft (2,700 sq m) store does have a beauty hall that, while perhaps lacking the pizzazz of nearby Selfridges, is capable of giving most of its sector rivals a good run for their money. But this is only part of the story. According to Boots creative director Jon Tuner, this store represents "the best of Boots", a mantra repeated by all associated with its construction.

This translates into a raft of store features that shoppers may have come across before, but never all in the same place. Boots director of property services Tony Vasishtha is clear about the progress made. "The way I'd describe it is that we're on a journey and this is the latest stop on that journey. This is a much better Boots than we would have built a year ago,

he says. "It's visually stunning, but it's been hard work."

Vasishtha says a host of devices were used, aimed at attracting people onto different floors. "Getting people to shop all floors is always very difficult," he explains. Boots head of construction services Matthew Lyons agrees, saying: "It's the holy grail of multi-floor stores – to try and draw people upstairs."

Foremost among the visual strategies for achieving this is a backlit wall extending from the basement to the third floor, on the wall abutting the escalator. Developed by LAPD – responsible for elements of the new generation Marks & Spencer stores – this takes the form of a mixture of TVs and Boots graphics, incorporated into a grid of different colours.

It works. The eye is inexorably attracted to the escalator, if only by the moving images and generally higher light levels than you would normally see at a Boots store. If you take the step of riding the moving stairs to the top, you arrive at the first of a series of destinations, the baby department.

This floor benefits from large amounts of natural light because the

front end faces Oxford Street, with large plate-glass windows. The space is relatively large and in terms of product category covers most areas, from toys to baby equipment. "I don't think there's anything this big for baby along Oxford Street," says Vasishtha.

ROOM WITH A VIEW

It is on the third floor that the store's interior topography is at its most obvious. This Boots outlet is part of the Sedley Place development and the building was intended originally to house a commercial tenant rather than a retailer.

This goes some way towards explaining the glass floor on the left hand side of the floor, with views over Sedley Place and a couple of steel "sky-bridges" that link Boots with the adjacent building. Had it not been occupied by a retailer, the unit would not be out of place as a contemporary high street bank or office.

Vasishtha and Lyons had to work around the store shape – generally long and narrow – constructing an interior that would turn adversity to advantage. As on every floor,

finding your way around this one is straightforward, with large signage provided to assist wayfinding.

Come down a floor and you arrive in the pharmacy area. In keeping with the notion of this store being "the best of the best", there are a number of elements designed to make shopping easier. There is, for instance, a circular booth with a sliding door for "private consultations with the pharmacist". The aim is to take the embarrassment factor out of asking for over-the-counter remedies for problems of a personal nature.

On a smaller scale, the queuing system for the tills on this level has a low free-standing wall with a series of curved baffles, created by Tensator. This is aimed at preventing damage to customers and barrier alike.

Although this is the area most people would most readily associate with Boots, the floor is a considerable distance from the clinical white look so evident in recent years. The effect is one of greater warmth, something that Dana Armstrong, the consultant who worked with the Boots design team and design consultants, says is deliberate.



Going private: advice given at the booth

BUILDING BOOTS

Size: 29,065 sq ft (2,700 sq m)
Store design: In-house team and Boots roster of design companies
Shopfitting: Styles & Wood
Pharmacy fit-out: Havelock Europa
Light wall: LAPD
In-store music and messaging: DMX Music
Design consultant: Dana Armstrong
Sister destination store: Boots Glasgow Fort

"We've tried to modernise things, but still be friendly," she says. "Given the age ranges that Boots has to appeal to, you've got to be there for the whole of the community."

WOW FACTOR

It is the ground floor, however, that provides the wow factor. The Boots in-house team has worked with large perfumery houses, such as Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent, to create display counters specifically for the store. Vasishtha says: "I think it's significant that the premium houses are prepared to work on this when you consider where else they are on Oxford Street."

There is also a large No 7 counter – Boots' own brand – which looks and feels like any offering from the premium perfume houses. It takes pride of place in the centre. Vasishtha says: "We're heroing our brands, which means there's a better margin."

This is evident on the largest floor, the basement, which features a sun shop, men's shop and a film developing area – among other categories. If there is a criticism of the store it is that this floor looks as though it is merchandised at one

level. However, it is an exercise in making the maximum use of the space available. Or, as Vasishtha puts it, "the floor is about making money".

This is apparent from the supermarket-style checkouts and "please pay here" legend above them. These are all in one place, rather than dotted around the shop as at many other Boots outlets.

The store needs to make money. It is on one of the UK's most expensive retail streets and the leasehold that Boots has on the property demands an immediate and substantial return.

The jaw-dropping exterior, by Boots standards at least, should cause shoppers to stop and pause. If they venture in, they will find a modern and attractive shopping environment. But, is this the solution to the retailer's well-documented problems?

Armstrong is on message, saying: "No one thing will ever be the solution. It is certainly a step in the right direction, however." Vasishtha claims none of the elements that combine to make this store are in themselves expensive. Therefore, as store refreshments or refurbishments fall due, we should see more of its ilk. ☐