

IN THE BLACK (*and* WHITE)

White House | Black Market kicks its store design up a high-style notch, paying special attention to its fitting rooms, interior architecture and namesake colors – external design firm not required.

By Lauren Mang, Contributing Writer



WHITE HOUSE | BLACK MARKET

This page The retailer's Toronto location inside the Yorkdale Shopping Centre demands attention with its triple-height storefront, striped fabric awnings, Carrara marble accents and oversized crystal chandelier.



If you've noticed a bit more activity from

White House | Black Market – revamped denim styles, advertisements touting those revamped denim styles, e.g. – it's no coincidence. The Fort Meyers, Fla.-based women's specialty apparel retailer, known as the place to snag white-and-black fashion, has been upping its game.

"We've put a lot of energy into elevated approaches to product, merchandising, marketing and customer service," says Victor Johnson, senior director of store environment for WHBM. But while the fashion retailer has worked hard on those elements, elements that Johnson believes all live together in store, and even made gradual strides in changing up its store design throughout the last few years, it had never holistically re-examined the entire boutique experience.

Thus, after extensive customer research identified areas where the WHBM stores could be altered for easier, more productive and fun shopping, a grand gut job began at the retailer's Plaza Las Americas location in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Here, features and materials such as an expanded fitting room lounge, interior architecture to divide the store into zones and finishes that owned the black-and-white pal-

Right VIP shoppers take note: The Mall at Millenia store in Orlando has two private and spacious fitting rooms filled with custom furniture and artwork just for you.

Opposite page The Mall at Millenia shop houses WHBM's tech bar where customers have access to products it doesn't always have in-store, such as petites and alternate colorways. "In the future," Johnson says, "we want to use the tech bar to explore even more interactive capabilities and custom content."





ette were tested for use in the WHBM Store of the Future prototype in Orlando's The Mall at Millenia.

As for hiring an external design firm to handle it all, Johnson says they had plenty of internal design talent already in place. "This way, we were able to avoid the trap of opening a high-concept prototype delivered by an external firm that we would never be able to value-engineer successfully enough to meet the brand's expectations."

The new WHBM store footprint goes beyond its previous rectangular box and includes built-in features such as arches and niches, which add visual interest and break up the sales floor into distinct rooms made for showcasing specific collections, new product launches and merchandise stories.

As for colors and materials, the team eschewed any use of gray and went no-holds-barred with a decadent mix of high-contrast black-and-white finishes, including Carrara marble accents, ceramic tile, dark walnut floors, striped drapery and a shimmery silver-leaf wallcovering. At its Orlando locale, the team added a stunning alternating black-and-white ceiling treatment. "It was tempting in the early stages of design to say 'We don't want to be too literal



This page and opposite So long, rectangular box. The refreshed WHBM store design (shown here in San Juan, Puerto Rico) includes built-in architectural features such as niches and arches to break up the store into distinct rooms ideal for showcasing different merchandising stories.



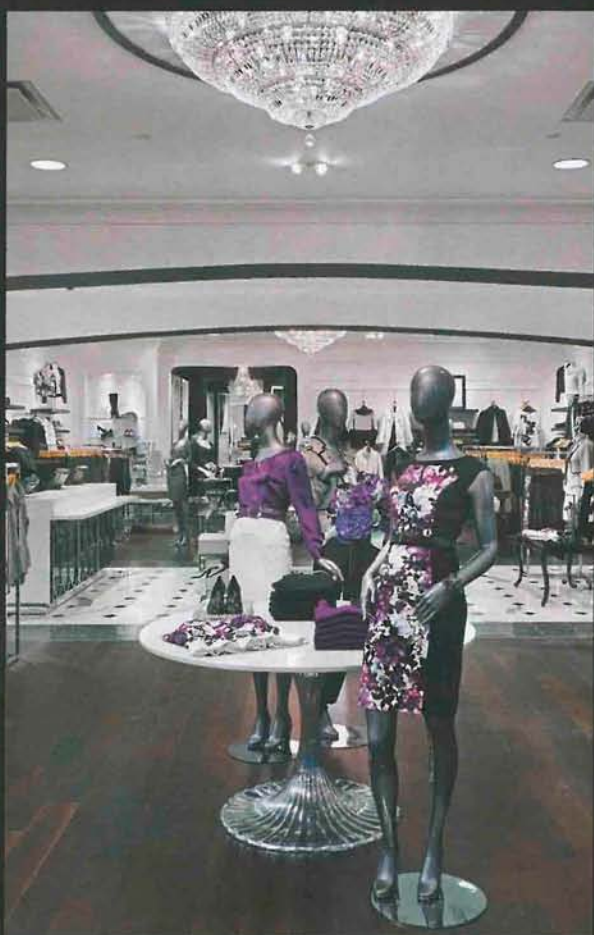
about black and white," Johnson says. "But as our creative process evolved, we realized that being literal was a major point of differentiation from our competitors. The finished store still has minor accents of silver and polished chrome, but anytime we tried gray, it just felt cold and indecisive."

One particular design challenge was finding a comfortable relationship between the sales floor and the fitting room. Previous dressing room iterations lacked space and wardrobing tools for sales associates; most of the retailer's small square footage was obviously devoted to housing product on the sales floor. This time around, the fitting room area is a more dynamic selling environment where sales associates can easily and immediately grab accessories like jewelry, shoes, scarves, belts and beyond to better outfit a customer. Two VIP fitting rooms, complete with ample space and custom furniture and artwork, were added to the Orlando location.

The retailer has opened three new stores in Toronto, which share much of the same interior finishes and features as its prototype with a few exceptions: a towering,



Above and opposite page WHBM worked to fully own the back-and-white color scheme in stores like this Toronto location. "The more high contrast the interior and storefront became," WHBM's Johnson says, "the more we felt like we were really owning it."



triple-height storefront featuring Carrara marble, polished chrome, high-gloss lacquer, a dramatic chandelier and a digital video monitor in the windows. WHBM's brand new look will also be rolled out into its new stores beginning fall 2014.

"Black and white is timeless," says Lexy Onofrio, the senior vp of visual/brand management for WHBM. "It never goes out of style. The new store design is a statement." ▴

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