

STORES

White Stuff's grand

Stores in shopping centres typically have a similar design. But the new White Stuff retro flagship in Bluewater is different.

John Ryan visits

Walk around any shopping centre and there are stores that look as if they belong in situ. They are the kind of places that have had their storefronts engineered to maximise the amount of glass that confronts the shopper and where the focus is on the window scheme and the store frontage is almost invisible.

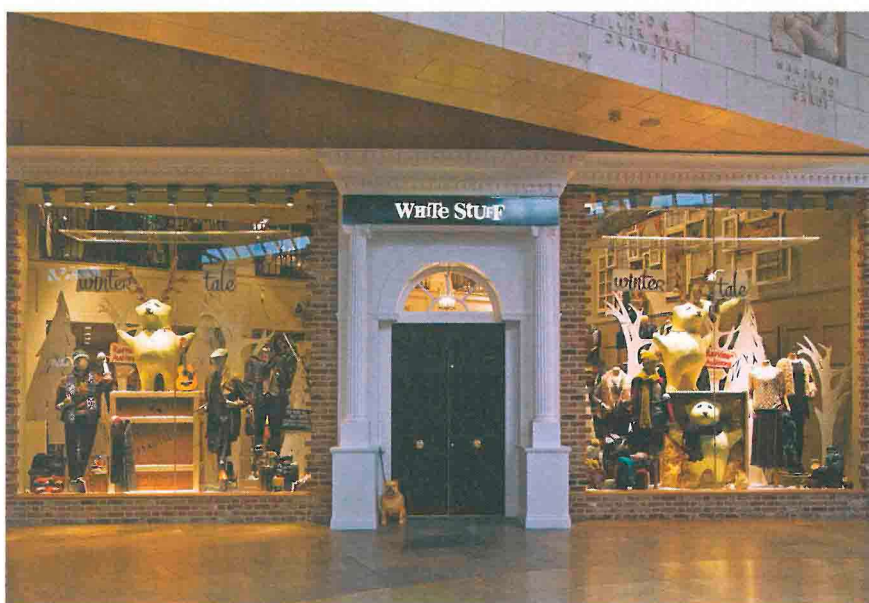
Taken to its logical extreme, there are even shops that dispense with the frontage altogether, preferring instead to offer the shopper an uninterrupted view into the interior.

There are exceptions to this rule, and one of them is White Stuff. The retailer is an eclectic purveyor of men's and women's fashions and every store is different. This is no mean feat when it is considered that the group now has 93 stores, six of which have opened this year with two more to go before December 31.

Until last week just two of its branches traded from shopping centres: in Milton Keynes and Southampton. Now its mall tally has risen with the opening of a two-floor 5,144 sq ft store in Bluewater.

White Stuff marketing director, Julian Baker says that the choice of the Kentish shopping centre was relatively easy: "We were looking for a new emporium [the largest store type in the White Stuff branch hierarchy] and the brand mix in Bluewater was excellent and they were offering us a great space."

The store in question was one of the ill-fated Gilly Hicks outposts and according to White Stuff head of interiors Louise Burnett when the underwear retailer shut its doors



WHITE STUFF, BLUEWATER
Opened November 19
Size 5,144 sq ft
Design In-house and AMD Architecture
Ambience Domestic
Standout feature The staircase

there was nothing left behind: "We were given an empty box, which meant that we could do what we wanted," she says.

Standing outside the shop it is clear it is a step away from the standard mall store format. Instead, there really is the feeling of a house. "I wanted to do something that would feel domestic. It's almost like a *Grand Designs* version of a Georgian house that's been knocked through," says Burnett.

There is a Georgian-style entrance with columns and a pediment and to either side of this there are indeed large windows, but they are surrounded by reclaimed brick that has been arranged to look as if the space has been "knocked through".

In spite of this, the focus is on a carefully visually merchandised window where the concentration is absolutely on the props rather than the stock.

Prime among them are white bears.

To see more pictures of this store go to
Retail-week.com/whitestuffbluewater



d design



One is in a packing crate while another stands on top of the box. The idea, according to Burnett, is that they are part of a winter tale in which the bears have turned up for a "reindeer audition".

This may sound a tad arch, but it is executed with a lightness of touch that raises a smile and it's hard not to want to take a look inside.

Walking through the door, the first thing shoppers will notice is the tessellated Victorian tile arrangement that

"I wanted to do something that would feel domestic"
Louise Burnett,
White Stuff

serves as a welcome mat. The homely note is struck from the outset and looking straight ahead the next feature that will be picked out is the staircase. This is mid-shop and looks a little like the sort of thing that Bing Crosby might have descended while singing *White Christmas* – almost US Colonial chic.

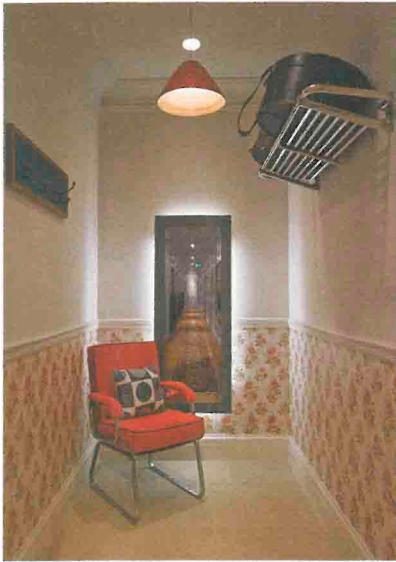
Keeping this idea in mind, Burnett and her team have put a 1970s-style floral carpet that runs up the middle portion of the staircase and is held in

place by gold stair-rods. The bannisters either side of this have been decked with Christmas foliage and twinkly lights – this is a picture of domesticity.

All of which is just the beginning. The ground floor is, for the most part, about womenswear and the more the shopper looks, the more is seen. Look up, for instance, and there is a cloth hare sitting inside a 1950s fairground spacecraft that has been suspended from the ceiling.

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► Beyond and around the upper perimeter there are glazed vintage window frames. Burnett says that this is about completing the domestic feel by putting windows where they might normally be in a house.

There is also a collection of 1970s retro telephones in various colours, all of which are part of making people feel “relaxed and comfortable”, according to Baker.

Head beneath the staircase and into the deeper reaches of the ground floor and more of the visual humour is apparent. There is something of the handmade feel of an Anthropologie store about what has been done, coupled with a make-and-mend aesthetic.

At the back of the floor there the cash desk has been styled as a sweet shop. Shoppers can take any sweets they fancy and are invited to leave a donation – the proceeds from

Everywhere the eye lands there is something to look at. This is not a standard mall store

which are given to a local charity.

Worth noting too is the oak floor, which is a complex pattern and once more contributes to the sense of this being more home than store.

Head upstairs and the floor changes to a simpler motif and a lighter wood has been used.

Welcome to the menswear area, which has a rather more linear feel with casual clothing to one side of the staircase well and formal to the other. Workbench clamps have been attached to one of the mid-shop tables, while Haynes manuals and Dinky toy cars have been turned

into perimeter murals – this is all about making men feel relaxed.

The playful theme continues – there is a 1970s television that has had its screen removed and been filled with old black leather footballs. “Football on the telly,” Baker remarks, although the visual gag doesn’t really need articulating.

As on the ground floor, there is a fair amount of roadkill, aka taxidermy, around the walls and it has been accessorised in order to avoid any sense of it being “too serious”, according to Burnett.

At the back of this floor, rather

than a confectionery outlet there is a bar. This has been kitted out with paraphernalia from local brewery Shepherd Neame, helping to give the enterprise a sense of place.

There is also a small cafe next to the balcony that overlooks the ground floor. The drinks are free and as downstairs, proceeds from an honesty box are donated to charity.

Finally, there is a faux Kentish barn, which has a small door and turns out to be a room where children can watch DVDs and suchlike.

It would be easy to rave about the attention to detail that has been lavished on this interior, but suffice it to say that everywhere the eye lands there is something to look at. This is not a standard mall store and shoppers and Bluewater are better for it. Some other retailers might do well to follow the example that has been set. ■