



Passage to Panama

Luxury department store Felix B. Maduro drops its anchor in Panama's Soho Mall.

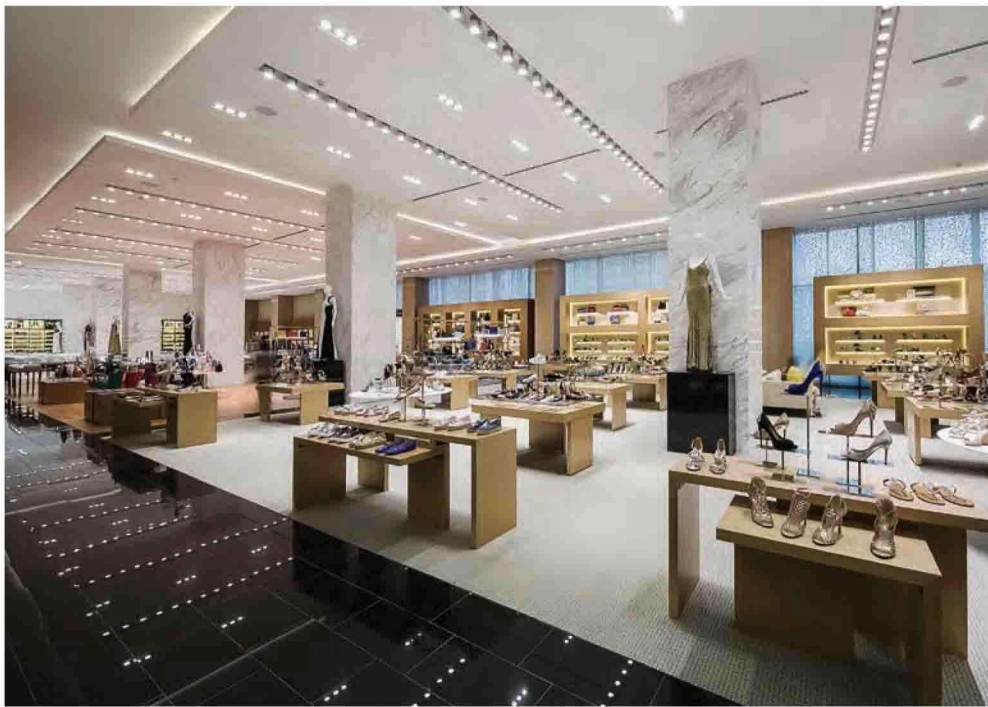
By Eric Feigenbaum, Editorial Advisor/New York Editor



HOSTING CENTRAL AMERICA'S LARGEST AND busiest airport, Tocumen Intl. Airport (PTY), this capital city is a true international hub: Located in a country whose narrow geography spans roughly 50 miles from coast to coast, semi-tropical Panama City is diverse in its culture and cuisine, boasting world-renowned dishes and attractions that combine Latin and Caribbean influences.

Taking advantage of Panama's standing as the second-most competitive economy in Latin America and the fastest-growing economy in Central America, the building of the \$360 million Soho Mall in Panama City was a strategic move.

Defined by a selection of high-end retail shops, the upscale Soho Mall is anchored by the sparkling new Felix B. Maduro, a four-level department store occupy-



ing the 120-store luxury mall's upper levels. With an eye toward making a statement in the new shopping center, the executive team at Felix partnered with New York-based Kevin Kennon Architects to design the store. The result is a sleek retail environment that's tailored to the demographic of Panama City's growing luxury market.

The façade welcomes visitors with a mix of natural stone and a feeling of openness. Polished black granite defines the circulation aisles, while each department is delineated by wood-look porcelain tile floors of varying colors. When first presented with the project, the design team didn't look for a single design solution, but rather, started by identifying all of the obvious obstacles that lay ahead.

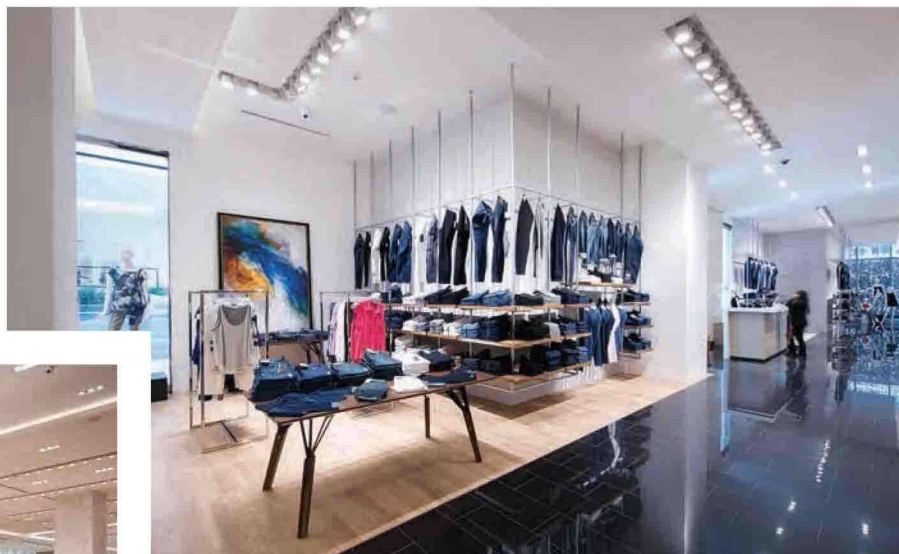
"The biggest challenge was space planning," says

Kevin Kennon, founder, ceo and design director, Kevin Kennon Architects. "There was no dedicated space in the mall allocated for an anchor department store."

Consequently, the store was cobbled together out of bits and pieces carved from the existing space; the only remaining element linking them together is the escalator. The main point of entry is on the second level of the mall, and the first level is strictly reserved for upscale boutiques. Built in a cruciform layout, the mall features five levels of high-end retail with the second level adjacent to the entrance of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.

The overall department store footprint, the con-

ABOVE Existing columns became canvases for mannequin presentations. Store planning was clean and precise with rectilinear sensibilities and without curves or additional lines; sightlines were established and enhanced by carefully positioned focal points.



ABOVE *The rectilinear aesthetic was carried throughout in the refined wood and metal fixtures.*

TOP RIGHT *Polished black granite defines the circulation aisles, while each department is delineated by wood-look porcelain floors of different colors.*

BOTTOM RIGHT *The store's restaurant offers views from its oversized windows and imagery consistent with the design found in the merchandise areas.*

glomerate of a number of smaller spaces, forms a "C" shape that was further reduced to an "L"-shaped layout after the stock and back-of-house were positioned. "The store had a discontinuous floor plate, and adding to the challenge, the columns did not align with one another, [so] there was no definable column grid, as [the] support columns carry a curved building above," adds Kennon. "There was a jungle of columns to deal with."

The various-shaped columns were impossible to hide, but to make the disparity less obvious, while leveraging the variance as an asset, the architects created a gallery effect, treating them as floor-to-ceiling sculptures made of diverse materials. "It became a large-scale art installation. We changed a negative into a positive," says Kennon. "The playfulness of the columns works, while keeping the sightlines open."

Another major challenge was to provide a clear circulation path in a shallow space. The distance

between the core and the perimeter is narrow, making it impossible to define the escalator well. The solution: The escalators are stacked in a linear row, helping to drive traffic. Additionally, a series of exciting focal points and perimeter statements were placed throughout. Columns became canvases for mannequin presentations, and linear digital graphics move sequentially like a stock market ticker, presenting a variety of branded perfume bottles in the beauty zone.

Along the escalator wall is a large-scale mural, which was inspired by the artwork of Kennon's 10-year-old son. With the help of computer-aided graphics, one of his drawings was adapted to create a giant charcoal color graphic in the wall treatment.

As Panama City continues to grow, Felix's position in the Soho Mall channels a new level of opulence in the Central American metropolis's burgeoning retail scene. ▀

PROJECT SUPPLIERS

RETAILER
Felix B. Maduro,
Panama City

ARCHITECTURE
Kevin Kennon Architects,
New York

FIXTURES
Avanti Fabricators,
Castle Rock, Colo.

FLOORING
Bentley Mills, Los Angeles
Nydre Floorings, Forest, Va.

LIGHTING
Horton Lees Brogden
Lighting Design, New York

MATERIALS/
WALLCOVERINGS
NatureTex, Irvine, Calif.

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