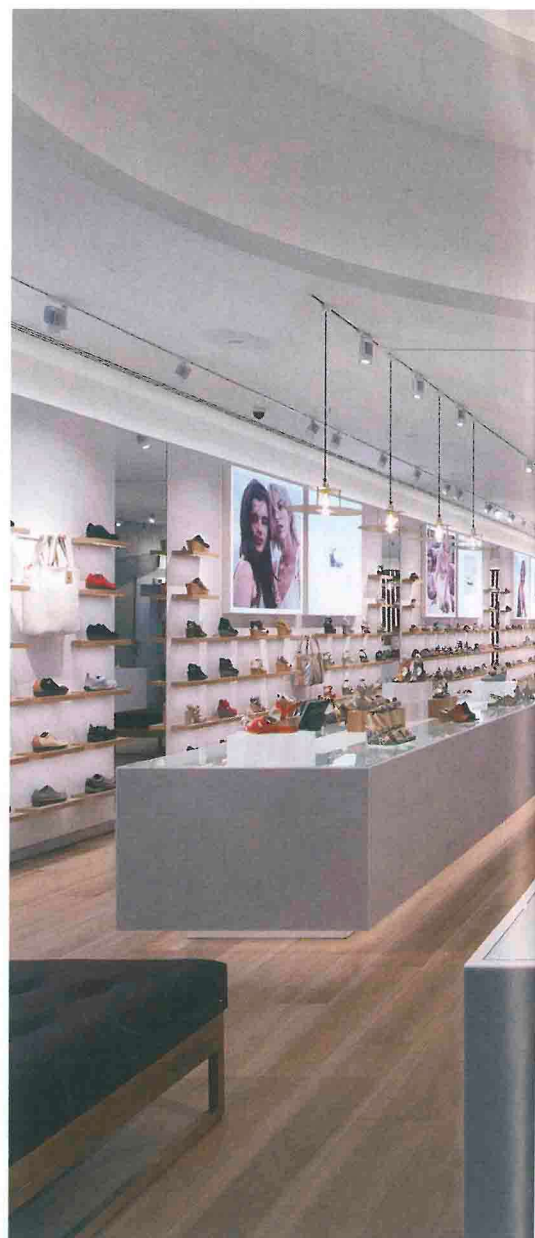


STORES

Shoe box

The refurbished Clarks shop in central Manchester provides a glimpse of the direction of travel for the footwear giant, writes stores editor **John Ryan**



Any child with diligent parents is likely to have gone through the back-to-school visit to Clarks.

This involved careful measurement of feet and 'sensible' shoes that would see the infant prodigy through another school term or two without requiring the services of a doctor to sort out corns, bunions and suchlike. And back in the day, that was about it for many.

Things have moved on, however. In the 1990s there was the sales boost provided by the band Oasis, who helped make Clarks the home of the desert boot.

There has been a move towards making the retailer a destination for fashion shoppers with an eye to keeping foot problems at bay.

The recent arrival of Mike Shearwood at the helm of the business has put this process centre-stage, and for those wishing to get a

sense of the direction of travel at Clarks, a trip to Manchester is in order.

The store that sits on Market Street and forms part of the exterior of the Arndale Centre has undergone a complete makeover, and shoppers visiting are presented with an emporium that has all of the elements that might be expected of a fashion retailer.

Standing on the pedestrianised section of Market Street, the Clarks vista is a fairly minimalist one.

Floor-to-ceiling glazing affords views deep into the interior, and a series of white plinths, five in each of the two windows, display shoes with white track spotlights overhead.

That's it as far as the shop front is concerned, and for most shoppers the inclination will be to stare into the interior, having been attracted by the modern proposition of the windows.

Stepping inside

Those choosing to enter will immediately see the back of the store, thanks to a feature cash desk fashioned from dark wood and with a wall behind it that uses the same material in an arrangement of slats with illuminated panels in between. The effect is akin to that of a posh hotel reception desk and is probably the first thing that will be noted in this interior.

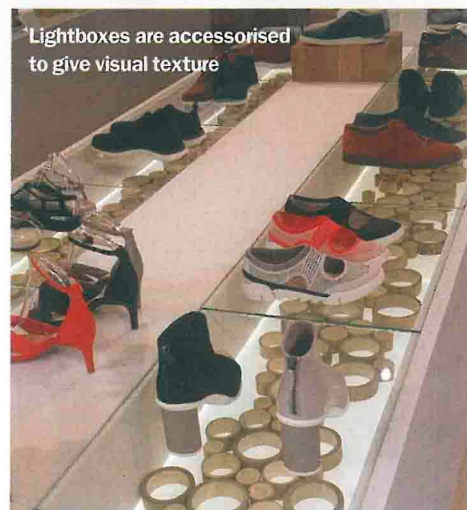
Between the front door and the cash desk lies the rest of the shop, however, and two words serve to describe the storescape: 'low-rise'. Men's shoes are on the right and women's to the left with the split between the genders being roughly one-third to two-thirds respectively.

This means that the men's offer extends from the front door to around the midway point of this floor, while the women's collection reaches the cash desk at the rear. Both use the same mid-shop and perimeter equipment, consisting of

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Clarks in Manchester
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Clarks
Market Street,
Manchester
Store status Prototype
Number of floors Two
Ambience Fashionable
Technology Tablets for staff



Extensive use has been made of light-boxes with mood shots and screens showing lifestyle videos

long glass-topped box tables for the former and lines of single-shoe shelves for the latter.

Upscale approach

The tables are accessorised with items put beneath the glass, intended to add visual texture to the displays, without being too much of a distraction from the products that sit on top.

This is an upscale approach and considerably ahead of the straightforward (and cheaper) tables that tend to characterise mid-market shoe environments.

The perimeter is the real showstopper, however. Extensive use has been made of both lightboxes, with mood shots and screens showing lifestyle videos – just as you’d expect of a fashion store interior.

On the matter of materials and colour palette, the floors are wood-planked and the use of white mid-shop tables and natural wood shelves around the perimeter keeps things neutral across the floor.

Staff are everywhere and all of them carry a tablet, enabling them to check on what’s available in the stockroom.

But what about kids’ shoes – surely the reason, for many, of a visit to Clarks?

Relaxed children’s area

A staircase on the right-hand side towards the rear of the shop leads up to a floor dedicated to children’s footwear.

There are in fact fewer surprises on this level, as much of what is on view, from the circular perimeter displays to the digital feet measurers, can be seen elsewhere.

That said, the floor is large and uncluttered, giving a more relaxed feel to the environment. It is also a complete change of mood from the ground floor and perhaps promotes a sense of ownership for visiting children.

The Manchester store is a “prototype”, according to Shearwood, but it’s hard not to see that it is likely to become a blueprint.

On the day of visiting it was busy and the till was ticking over reassuringly. Clarks is changing – and if it follows this route, for the better. **RW**