



Picture: Ian Macaulay

Teenage kicks

Youth footwear brand Skechers has taken its first step into Europe with a store based on its award winning US concept. Retail Interiors reports on the Californian firm's plans for rapid expansion with stylised environments that mix innovation, style and street.

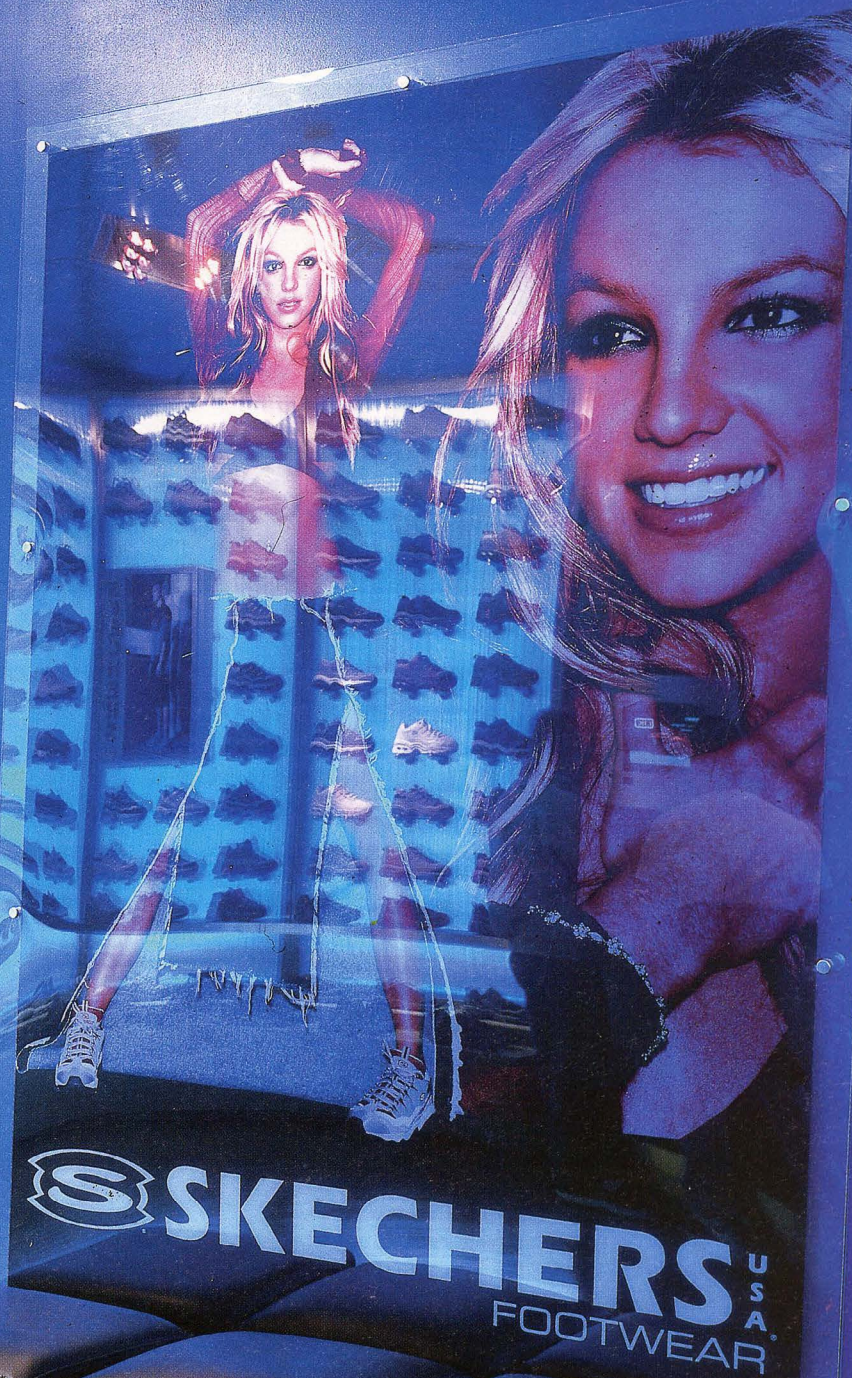
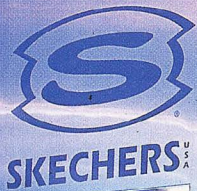
First steps in Europe: The window display features a cleverly angled graphic and footwear supported by sandblasted clear cylinders, the first of many instore allusions to floating.

The weather may have been distinctly un-Californian but Skechers was determined to throw a party despite the rain and cold when its first European store opened last month. Balloons and bellowing music announced the arrival of the fashion shoe retailer along London's Oxford Street, the first of three new sites – Obenhauser (which is also now open) and Paris, which follows shortly, complete the trio.

The stores are modelled on Skechers' multi-award winning store concept, launched last year at its Manhattan Beach home in California, on 34th Street, New York and at Universal City Walk near Universal Studios in Los Angeles. London embraces this mixture of street styling with a funkier, less industrial feel than earlier Skechers stores and a proliferation of technology and visual gimmicks which give the interior a decidedly vibrant feel. However the Oxford Street site also includes some refinements from the American model, the retailer determined to move each of its stores a step on from the last. The window display features a cleverly angled graphic and footwear supported by sandblasted clear cylinders, the first of numerous allusions to floating which are repeated throughout the 180sqm store (smaller than the average which comes in at nearer 300sqm). Passersby are further enticed by ground-imbedded LEDs.

Also included for the first time is a holographic trainer that appears to hover in mid air close to the entrance and is only visible from certain angles. "We saw it at GlobalShop last year," says Marlene Lento of California-based designer ME Productions, "and figured we just had to try and incorporate it. We explained what we wanted to do and without even seeing it for themselves Skechers said 'go for it'. That's what's good about working for them, they are prepared to go with ideas."

What immediately catches the eye, however, is the blue perimeter which encloses the space. It's a hallmark for Skechers, completed in the corporate colours by using blue gels on fluorescent lighting, mounted behind clear acrylic walling, a style which at once negates the need for high ambient lighting levels and creates a strong visual theme. The product range is mounted in conventional style, showing off as many variations from its range as possible. "Where we have changed from the earlier stores is that we have softened what was a pretty industrial look, creating something contemporary using raw material elements to give it a street feel," says Lento. "It's important that the store stays current, you're dealing with customers that are right up with the trends and they will know if you get it even slightly wrong."



Graphics of celebrity sign-ups Britney Spears and Matt Dillon instore plus in its marketing are driving Skechers sales and help to signpost product areas.

SKECHERS: OXFORD STREET, LONDON



Instore features: The latest evolution of the cash wrap with a floating logo on the screen behind, newly fabricated, curved display fixtures and a video wall at the rear of the store.

Skechers branding is overtly played out, the name punctuating the perimeter and the ellipsoid logo featuring on the ceiling (currently illuminated in blue though this may well change to white) and a floating graphic on a large screen behind the cash wrap. Indeed, the sales point, the fixtures, the furniture and other elements carry through the curves of the logo – you know you're in Skechers.

Technology is a vital component, the rear wall comprises a Pioneer video wall and the latest Playstation games can be trialled near the back of the store, the user standing underneath a sound umbrella which ramps up the noise of the game while obliterating the thundering music unmissable within the rest of the interior. The merchandise is arranged with mens footwear to the front, the more design oriented and consequently more expensive formal mens shoes further back in the narrower rear of the store. Womens shoes are also located at the back, the graphics providing visual signposting.

"Once you're inside it's quite an ethereal environment," reflects Lento. "The mixture of glowing walls, floating and curved elements and then the use of plain finishes and metal gives it almost a club-like feel. You have 360 degree lighting because of the perimeter. Then we've added all the high tech features, these are really important, it has to be all the latest things that the kids haven't seen before."

"When it came to the fixtures, after some deliberation we decided to use a local manufacturer and went to AMS," says Mark Budwhar, the contract manager with Toronto-based project supervisor Store Contract Management. "It's a new unit which is made out of aluminium laminate, not traditional and with self-edging. There was a fair amount of tri-

alling for the display systems but we were really happy with the quality of the work that AMS produced."

In fact the fixturing and the cash wrap are evolutions of the US designs, Lento explaining that the full floating effect for the original fascia of the latter has been simplified, with insets used to highlight product. "It was a very fast turnaround, about 12 weeks from commission to design, development and installation," says AMS business development director Tony Gale. "We went over to New York to look at the store but I'd say that 60% of what we've done in London is different. Skechers wants something unique each time: at London it's the floating logo, in Obenhauser it's the suspended 16-screen video wall behind the counter and in Paris it will be an illuminated cylindrical Playstation video tower that rises through a circular staircase."

Gale admits that the design requirements pushed back new parameters for AMS, requiring materials to be sourced from the

USA and Italy, development of a concrete-type compound in the UK and use of a new material for the fixturing and cash wrap ends that looks like solid stainless steel. "There was absolutely no cutting corners," he confirms. "Obviously we worked within a budget but Skechers was very particular, we spent a great deal of time and effort on quality and design content." Lento concurs: "It's a question of evaluating how each design works and building on it, though I should say that the changes are not to do with the European location, we felt all along that Skechers is very translatable."

If that proves the case then the move will be a happy one for the retailer, borne originally out of the management team at LA Gear. Annual sales topped \$675m last year, up 59% on the previous year, and plans for future sites are believed to include Berlin, Milan and Moscow. "I think they view these stores in very much the mould of a Nike Town," says Budwhar. "They are not just driving sales instore, they are acting as a brand showcase for the whole business."

Source [®]

Client: Skechers, Manhattan Beach, California
Location: Oxford Street, London
Design: ME Productions, Marina Del Rey, California
Project management: Store Contract Management, Toronto
Store fixturing: AMS
Video wall: Pioneer