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a Designers used a soft stacked sandstone wall and a decorative planter to create a striking entrance for Ann Taylor's Manhasset lifestyle center store. b The specialty retailer's renewed emphasis on visual merchandising means more mannequin displays in the windows and throughout the store.



Home Improvement

Ann Taylor lays out the welcome mat to a more refined, residential environment

AFTER MORE THAN 50 YEARS, THE ANN TAYLOR organization is so confident in its brand status that it refers to an actual "Ann Taylor" when making design decisions for her.

Recently, they noticed that Ann was surrounding herself with some new, upscale acquaintances, ones with names like Dior, Armani, Valentino and Lacoste, who call Manhasset's Miracle Mile and Chicago's Magnificent Mile home. As with any successful career woman, the company began looking at her surroundings and wondering if her environment was out of touch with the woman she wanted to be.

They knew she had all the right pieces. They just needed a fresher, more modern appeal to give her a stronger visual identity. More like channeling an episode of "Designer's Challenge," as opposed to "Extreme Home Makeover."

To take the brand to this next level, the retailer worked with designers from Callison (New York) to create a warmer and more enriched residential setting that would still allow Ann Taylor's sophisticated and classic side to shine through.

"We didn't change who Ann is; we just remodeled her house," says Linda Lombardi, the fashion retailer's vp, store planning and design. "She deserved something better, so we updated her furniture, gave her a new modern look."

Ann Taylor opens the door to a new store setting infused with residential touches at Americana Manhasset lifestyle center on New York's Long Island (left and above) and at Chicago's Water Tower Place.

a The residential touches in Chicago extend into the redesigned fitting rooms where shoppers find vintage wallcoverings, plush carpeting and pendant lighting on dimmer switches. **b** A new fixturing system focuses on displaying accessories and merchandise together in a lifestyle-focused presentation.



As with any good remodeling effort, the changes are fresh and comforting, not shocking and unsettling, to long-time customers who have expectations when

visiting Ann's abode. "They're classic ideas that our customer is familiar with," says Victor Johnson, senior manager, visual presentation. "We just breathed new life into them."

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The doors to the new Ann Taylor experience have recently been thrown open in two very different venues: the sprawling, upscale Americana Manhasset lifestyle center on New York's suburban Long Island and the decidedly urban, vertical Water Tower Place on Chicago's Michigan Avenue.

Despite the different venues, the new store elements fit comfortably into both. The only differences are the façades. While wide window bays flank either side of the doorway at each store, differing residential touches were used to accent the entrances based on the locale. So a circular pendant light hangs above the entryway at Water Tower Place, while outdoors in Manhasset, a sculpted planter and doors on either side of a stacked stone wall lead to the refreshed interior.

Inside, the first thing Ann Taylor wants a shopper to notice is how warm and familiar it all feels.

Wood and glass etageres, pocket curtains, pendant lighting and upholstered seating recall decor items that shoppers would find in their own homes. Refined finishes and textures dominate the new styling package, including walnut flooring, brushed chrome and satin nickel fixtures, columns wrapped in silver leaf wallcoverings and a stacked stone focal wall near the cashwrap and entryways.

Lombardi says the lighting package also uses pendants and light covers to wash the store with more ambient highs and lows. "We're a specialty store chain and I wanted to make the experience special," she says.

That V.I.P. treatment extends to the fitting rooms, where Ann Taylor seems to invite her shoppers into a guest bedroom decorated with vintage wallcoverings, plush carpeting, pendant lighting on dimmer switches and crystal doorknobs.

"The difference is that now each room feels a little more designed and dressed up," says Lombardi.

SUBTLE, SOPHISTICATED TOUCHES

A renewed emphasis on visual merchandising and storytelling plays an equally powerful part inside this new Ann Taylor experience. "Beyond the store design, we wanted to have a richer, more nuanced visual package," says Johnson.

A new mannequin program, including custom designs from Adel Rootstein and Fusion Specialties, focuses on using more mannequins and in different ways. "Mannequins are the most



a The Manhasset store's refined finishes and textures, including soft sheer draperies and columns wrapped in silver-leaf wallcoverings, are at home among mannequins gathered in relaxed, social settings. **b** "It's fun to be back in the display mood of 'Let me get her to stop in front of the window,'" says visual presentation manager Victor Johnson, on Ann Taylor's Water Tower Place storefront.



powerful way to present apparel," says Johnson. "I think we take them for granted, but they sell merchandise better than anything else."

In Manhasset, a feature platform of mannequins in the season's latest fashions is a signature element that the retailer plans to introduce in other specialty locations. In other areas of the store, mannequins are positioned in niches to tell a story, almost like ladies at a party who have gathered in the kitchen to dish.

The retailer's new lifestyle merchandising philosophy also influenced the redesign of the fixturing package. Merchandise is displayed in a variety of formats, including hanging, folded and faceouts. The varying heights of the displays lend more visual interest to the store. There are also more places to display coordinating accessories with apparel, giving the retailer an opportunity to present a lifestyle approach to dressing as opposed to item dressing.

When Lombardi and Johnson look around at Ann Taylor's remodeled space, they say they don't see trendy or radical design fads but rather traditional trademark elements of Ann Taylor that have just been refreshed. As an example, Johnson says, in the early 1990s the retailer incorporated ceramic and wood trim on the store shelving. Today, he's exploring a similar option to add more texture into the space "so that it's not all merchandise all the time," he says. "Small touches like that add so much."

Lombardi describes the changes as fundamental to good retailing. "We haven't reinvented the wheel," she says. "This is about designing and decorating it up because that's what Ann is really about. She's about those subtle, sophisticated touches."

It's where she lives. ●

PROJECT SUPPLIERS

Client
Ann Taylor, New York

Design and Architecture
Callison, New York

General Contractor
Crane Construction Co. LLC,
Northbrook, Ill.

Fixtures
Fleetwood Fixtures, Reading, Pa.

Flooring
Architectural Systems Inc., New York

Furniture
Hamilton Furniture, West Palm Beach,
Fla.

Lighting
Cooley Monato Studio, New York

Mannequins/Farms
Adel Rootstein Mannequins, New York
Fusion Specialties Inc., Broomfield,
Colo.

Signage/Graphics
Midtown Signage, New York

Wallcoverings and Materials
Philip Jeffries, New York
Osborne & Little, London

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