

The one-storey Oxford Street store shares its turf with Sports Direct and Nike Town

## SEEKING ASYLUM

*The new Footasylum store on Oxford Street is an exercise in creating a space that may sell sports shoes, but which veers from the sector's norms. By John Ryan*

**W**hen is a store intended not to look like a store? When the name over the door is Footasylum. Located at the eastern end of Oxford Street, it looks like a cross between a Tube station and some kind of brick-built shed with a gabled roof. The latter design trope has been done well, albeit solely in planks of wood, by Footpatrol, the upscale training shoe emporium that has something of the sauna about it and which is on nearby Berwick Street.

### FOOTASYLUM, OXFORD STREET

**Opened** May 21  
**Number of floors** One  
**Ambiance** Brick. Outhouse-cum-sauna  
**Number of Footasylum stores** 30  
**Founded** 2005  
**Head office** Rochdale

Footpatrol opened in its current terrestrial form back in 2010, while the new Footasylum has been open for a little over a month. And this one is right in the thick of things, while Footpatrol is tucked away in the trendy environs of backstreet Soho. In fact, Footasylum, a one-storey proposition, could hardly be in a more high-profile site, given the fact that it is next door to Sports Direct's Oxford Street flagship, which opened a day after Footasylum welcomed its first customers. It is, of course, ▶



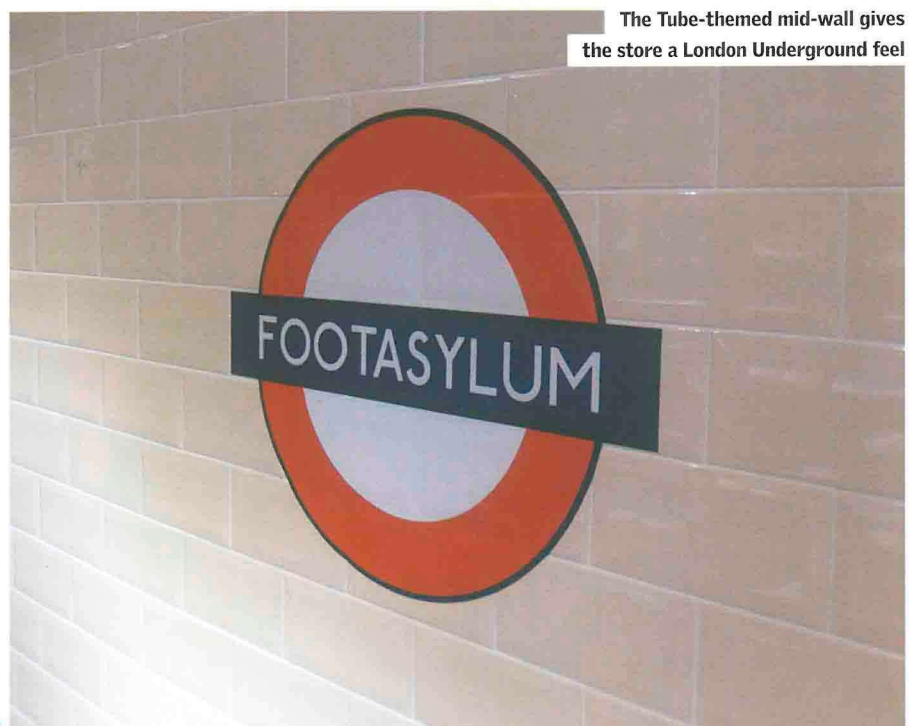
very much smaller, but then it would be, given that Sports Direct is on the site of the former HMV behemoth.

#### HEAD TO HEAD

The two stores are competing for the same customer, however, and the fact that Footasylum has gone head to head shows that its management think there is room for what it does, in spite of the giant next door. And, certainly, while both stores are in the business of shifting sports clothing and shoes, they could hardly be more different. Entering the Sports Direct store is a matter of choosing which part of the open frontage you will use to cross the threshold. For Footasylum, just one part of the frontage serves as the store portal, while the rest is devoted, currently, to windows that promote the benefits of sports shoes from Adidas and Nike, as well as informing shoppers that free wi-fi awaits within.

For those choosing to enter, the initial view is actually quite dark. There are wooden floors, the aforementioned gabled ▶

The Tube-themed mid-wall gives the store a London Underground feel



ceiling into which groups of spotlights are embedded, and a left-hand perimeter wall, partially hidden by the display equipment, which is composed of brick.

Unusually, although the left-hand wall is merchandised by brand, this is the sports shop equivalent of a branded house – where you shop the retailer rather than the brand (think Liberty or Selfridges) – as the branded areas are too small to make an overarching impact. In the middle of this part of the shop, there is a central dividing wall that cleaves the interior in two, which has wooden benches of the variety that are reminiscent of a changing room; and to the right, the central wall is home to more shoes.

Beyond this, and before the cash desk at the back of the shop, the wall is tiled, like a Tube station, with a London Underground-style sign, stating the retailer's name. There is a wooden bench beneath the sign, again of the kind that Tube travellers might be familiar with, but it is a mild puzzle why, given that this is a small shop and space is at a premium, it was



*The cash desk is about linking the physical and digital worlds, making the point that Footasylum is a player in the online world*

felt appropriate to use a portion of the available selling area in this manner.

At the back of the shop and next to the cash desk, where a sign encourages shoppers to go online and to reference Footasylum by attaching #showusyoursneaks to shoe selfies, there is a large mirror. This gives the benefit of making the interior feel larger

than it is and standing at the entrance to the store it certainly works.

The cash desk is about linking the physical and digital worlds, making the point that Footasylum is a player in the online world. Beyond the central wall and to the right of the shop there are more shoes and a small range of casual, sports-related clothing.

And that's about it. Allowing for the size of its neighbour and the fact that monobrand monolith Nike Town is just along the street, it might be tempting to think this one would feel the pressure. Yet on the day of visiting there were plenty of browsers and a fair few shoppers.

When Footasylum last reported, for the year to February 28, 2013, its post-tax profit stood at £1.4m, against £56,370 for 2012 and margins were up. On the evidence of Oxford Street, there is every reason to suppose that the numbers, now based on a 29-strong store portfolio, will be equally robust. Not everything has to be huge on Oxford Street to have an impact and to turn a profit. ●

