

Bright ideas at The White Company

Norwich is the location for a new look from the retailer that deals in monochrome clothing and homewares. By John Ryan

Welcome to Norwich. A fine city." This is the sign that greets drivers arriving at the East Anglian capital and, heading for downtown, there is no sense of disappointment. This is indeed a bustling historic market city and was, apparently, the biggest city in England in the 11th century.

Today it no longer enjoys that status, but its centre is busy and full of shops, from the Disney Store to Dune as well as a brace of department stores. And now it has a newcomer in the shape of The White Company (TWC).

From the moment the shopper strolls along the oddly named Gentleman's Walk thoroughfare, it is hard to miss this one. In its previous life, the 4,000 sq ft, two-floor space was a branch of Currys and, prior to TWC signing, it had been empty for nearly a year.

Standing out

Six months after work started on fitting out the shop to the new tenant's specifications, TWC opened and it looks, among its historic neighbours, a little like the sort of thing you might expect to see in Beverley Hills, so preternaturally white is the frontage.

Because this was a fairly nondescript structure, gaining permission to render the frontage a brilliant white proved less problematic than if TWC had chosen another of the many 'fine' buildings in this part of the city. It succeeds in giving the clothing and homewares retailer real standout: this is a store that will not be ignored.

The frontage actually shows three levels, the first and second floors each boasting a row of four equally sized windows with black surrounds, mimicking the brand's black-bordered logo.

At ground-floor level, a large picture window sits to the left of the entrance displaying brightly lit white product.

THE WHITE COMPANY, NORWICH

Location City centre

Opened August 2014

Size 4,000 sq ft

Design Dalziel + Pow

Ambience Beverly Hills chic outside, cool domestic inside

As well as a dramatic exterior, this branch of TWC also has a new-look interior, following work with design consultancy Dalziel + Pow.

Why did the retailer feel the need to come up with something new? Will Kernan, chief executive officer, explains: "The high street is becoming more competitive. Our shopfits had not kept up with our range. We needed to develop new fixturing."

Apartment store

While many TWC stores are little more than white boxes, albeit upscale white boxes, this branch is nothing of the kind. Instead it is, in effect, a series of rooms and is more in keeping with an open-plan apartment than a regular four-sided structure.

There are pillars dotted around the ground floor, some of them structural, others purely aesthetic. The intention is to break up the space and create an impression of different zones, according to the design consultancy's eponymous creative director David Dalziel.

To reinforce this, the flooring changes at various points across the store to highlight the transition from one area to another – from oak herringbone to simple wooden planking to a limestone tile area, as might be expected in a domestic setting.

The move to create specific in-store areas is, to a large degree, a response to the way the retailer's range has developed. In the past, TWC was largely viewed as a destination shop for those seeking monochrome items for the home, and the bathroom played a major part in this. That has changed, however and, as Kernan points out, clothing now represents 40% of the retailer's sales.

Steve Morris, TWC retail director, picks up on the theme: "As we've now got a dedicated fragrance area and a dedicated Little White Company area [stocking childrenswear and children's



homewares], they needed their own space." On the subject of rising to the online challenge, he says: "There has to be a reason to get up off the sofa and come to the stores, and that's what we've tried to do."

Given that around two-fifths of WTC's sales come from direct channels rather than through the stores themselves, the rationale for in-store change is clear. However, the revamped approach in Norwich amounts to much more than simply

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The generously sized ground-floor fitting rooms lead into a relaxed and luxurious private shopping area



Children's ranges get their own space

◀ carving up the space to reflect the different departments.

The cash desks have been lowered substantially, making them less of a barrier than is the case at other TWC outlets, while computer-controlled mood lighting changes according to the time of day. Kernan says shoppers coming into the store early in the morning will be greeted by brightness. Later in the day this is lowered to create a more relaxed, late-afternoon feel.

“THERE HAS TO BE A REASON TO GET UP OFF THE SOFA AND COME TO THE STORES”

Steve Morris,
The White Company

The retailer worked with lighting manufacturer Reggiani to perfect this sequence, and staff can alter the mood themselves via a few keystrokes on the computer.

Projecting the right image

The shop's other notable – and noticeable – hi-tech elements are the projections. At various points around the store, on both floors, are small white projectors that look like white

hardback books. They throw images and words onto display items: “Snuggle up to me” on a pillow in the bedroom section; birds and clouds behind the shelving for newborn goods; “Hand-finished by us, for you” on a teapot. The images and slogans change frequently and their appearance is triggered by the movement of passing shoppers.

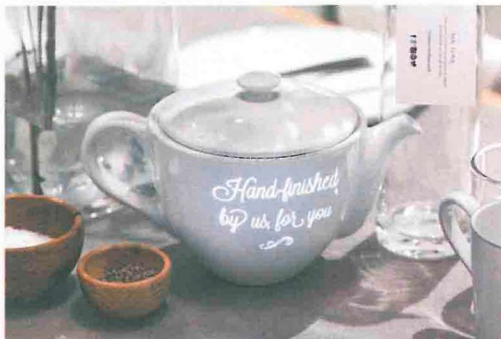
Kernan says the small projections communicate TWC's message more effectively than large screens would – and they are considerably cheaper.

They also seem a lot more on-brand. Big digital screens would look out of place in such a domestic setting.

Finally, mention should be made of the huge ground-floor fitting rooms beyond a hushed vestibule area. At the back there is a larger space featuring a fitting room, two chairs and a small table. This is the private shopping room, and the feeling is luxurious.

Kernan says that what is on view in Norwich is the first of a kind, and that large elements of the fitout will find their way into future TWC stores.

The retailer, however, is not planning significant expansion. “We have got 53 stores in the UK and I don't see us going to more than the mid-60s,” Kernan reveals. This is hardly a surprise. TWC has always been a niche offering. Meanwhile, the Norwich store is a real flagship for the chain. A fine shop for a fine city.



Projectors dotted around the store beam changing, movement-activated images and words onto objects

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