

By JENNY SCHRANK Photos by JEFFREY TOTARO

# Beyond Black White

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Your favorite monochromatic specialty retailer just got a tan. White House | Black Market lets its hair down for a new laid-back Resort concept in Southern California

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n real estate, the mantra always has been “location, location, location.” In today’s hospitality and retail industries, it is all about localization, localization, localization. If customers can get what they want, when they want it, wherever they want it (like online at the click of a button), then how can brands elevate the bricks-and-mortar retail experience in order to make it relevant and enticing to their shoppers?

For White House | Black Market (WH|BM), the answer was to dig deeper into the psyche of their shopper to truly understand “her” lifestyle. The opportunity to localize the shopping experience presented itself at Santa Monica Place, the Southern California home to a sophisticated shopper. WH|BM has been a part of Santa Monica Place since the shopping center was renovated in 2010. As the company debated relocating within the open-air mall, the team

also contemplated a different approach to their retail experience. It was decided that it was the right time and place to try something new.

“We’ve had many internal conversations about being relevant in more ‘casual’ markets through our branding and store design,” says Lexy Onofrio, senior vice president of marketing and visual for WH|BM. “We asked ourselves: how can we fit into a specific locale by customizing details within the store and the digital content?”

The in-house store design and construction team of parent company Chico’s FAS Inc., in partnership with the WH|BM brand team, delved into the market experience by traveling to observe life—the hotels, restaurants and people on the street—in Malibu, Santa Monica, Venice Beach, etc. They were trying to discover and uncover a lifestyle that could be translated into the WH|BM retail environment in order to reach out and connect more personally with their shoppers. From this process emerged the “Resort” concept.

“The main thing we didn’t want to lose is that sense of place, where customers come in and know that you are in a WH|BM store,” describes

→ Merchandising displays showcase the versatility of the product.

→ [Opposite, top] The “X” detail in the floor and ceiling allows the team to explore new merchandising patterns.

→ [Opposite, bottom] The black-and-white striped storefront creates a dramatic and familiar entry point.





Victor Johnson, senior director, store environment for WH|BM. “We wanted a different feeling, but not a fresh start.”

A new store prototype already had been introduced in Orlando, Fla., and since the fall of 2014 new frontline stores have followed those design standards. While the Orlando prototype represents

the future of WH|BM, the team wanted something different for Santa Monica. This concept has a climate-specific point of view, so while it is not the right retail experience to roll out across the country, the team is finalizing a second location in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The fresh feeling for the Resort concept begins

with basic elements and principles of design—space and balance. In the traditional store, there is a commitment to symmetry, and space is broken into rooms with distinct architecture. The finishes and details reinforce that structure. From floor to ceiling, everything is on a grid in the typical store, but the team wanted to shake themselves off the grid for the Santa Monica boutique.

The new concept needed to be open, airy and warmer in order to communicate the resort feel. An “X” detail introduced in the floor and ceiling became the way out of the grid. This effort to shake things up also occurs at the storefront. Instead of distinct front doors positioned symmetrically along the elevation, the entry point was positioned off-center with a large retractable door that eliminates any barriers to the entrance.

Merchandise is then placed along the “X” and on an angle, rather than lining the walls. A variety of displays—including rattan nesting pieces with sandblasted glass tops, chrome mirror bases with a mix of painted glass, smoked glass and white stone tops, and 8-ft. merchandising tables—showcase the versatility of the product across different lifestyles.



“It gave us a fresh eye on how to present our product,” Johnson says. “We didn’t want to back ourselves into a corner. We are always merchandising shops. We wanted to keep it more open and show how our assortment works together.”

The team found new ways to play with the brand’s iconic details and finishes in order to infuse the warmth needed to achieve a true resort appeal. “Black and white are part of the WH|BM heritage, but it is a classic design detail that people and stores have made distinctly their own,” Johnson explains. “We had to think about what we could do that wouldn’t look like anyone else. We needed our own piece of the black-and-white pie.”

For Johnson, the striped storefront was the biggest gamble, yet the element he is most proud of. The façade is created with a break metal that is built in a triangular shape and then painted. The result is a ridge effect within each stripe that adds texture and an undulating movement. This drama and depth is then softened by the integration of wood, which is a distinct material selection for the Resort concept, and then layered with a metal ellipse detail. (The ellipse shape was an element introduced in the Orlando prototype.) Together, these elements create a comfortable balance between the familiar WH|BM brand experience and the new Resort concept.

Black-and-white finishes were important throughout the store; however, the typical white Carrara and black marble were too formal for this application. Instead, terrazzo was specified for the entry vestibule, at the central ellipse inlay feature and in fitting rooms, while a specialty material, Ardes, was selected for the primary flooring. It creates a gray field, a poured material that looks like light concrete. Wood also was integrated for the “X” detail in the floor and mimicked with beams in the ceiling.

In the fitting rooms, the iconic black-and-white palette is presented in striped curtains that create a cabana feel. This “beachy” theme is continued with the use of sea glass bricks on the back feature wall.

“The stripe element is strong and bold, so we needed to add warmth and sparkle through the sea



glass, wood and layering of the ellipse detail, as well as black-and-white imagery,” Johnson describes. “It takes us to a whole new place. It feels like us, but we are doing something different.”

The team continued to pay homage to the Southern California lifestyle by introducing familiar symbols, such as the surfboard. The surfboard and a fully integrated digital table come together to create a unique styling station. “Surf – Discover – Shop” is a motto of sorts for this area. The styling station and video screens at the entrance and along the perimeter infuse technology in a new way. These digital elements offer flexibility with visual communication and elevate the interaction between the WH|BM team and the shopper.

“The digital piece allows us to control in real time what we are saying to the customers,” Johnson says. “We can speak to a product launch or a promotion, all at the click of a button. We can use mailer imagery, photography or local images to refresh the interior. We are still learning how to take advantage of this technology, but it is one of our wayfinding tactics in this new boutique environment.”

WH|BM revisited the store layout, materials, product, presentation and added digital touchpoints to engage the consumer and create an atmosphere that fits her lifestyle. “The Resort boutique creates a bricks-and-mortar experience that relates to a unique consumer from a lifestyle perspective, especially considering recent major shifts in digital shopping and marketing,” Onofrio describes. “We want the Santa Monica boutique to be a place where she wants to spend her time, surrounded by great product, a warm environment and digital stimuli that encourage her to purchase.”



↑ [Top] Elements of the new WH|BM prototype are combined with “beachy” details to create the Resort concept.

↑ [Bottom] Black-and-white striped curtains transform the typical fitting room into personal cabanas.