

# Stepping Out

*if the shoe fits, wear it, but if the retail space doesn't fit, create a space that fits the shoe.* That was the architects' challenge when configuring Aquatalia's flagship brick-and-mortar retail location. The luxury shoe company moved into a space on Manhattan's Madison Avenue this past fall. Expressing the brand focus on functional luxury, the environment highlights the upscale footwear and leather accessories with rich but not overwrought materials.

"Aquatalia is about wearability. The design of the shoes is intended to be timeless and practical, but also fashionable and full of details that don't outdate the product. The store is intended to be the same," says Edmundo Castillo, creative director at Aquatalia.

With no wall graphics announcing the brand, the story is the product. The lack of overt branding allows the materials and product to represent the brand.

"We wanted to create something that was displaying the product in the best possible backdrop," says Michael Neumann, AIA, principal and founder of design firm MNA. "Everybody wanted to make sure that the product is the hero. You should go into the store and say, 'Wow, these shoes look amazing!'"

## Making an entrance

In the narrow space with its cavernous entryway, new design features create an open feel and natural flow. As shoppers enter, a drop ceiling guides them to descend a few steps to a floor level 4 ft. below grade.

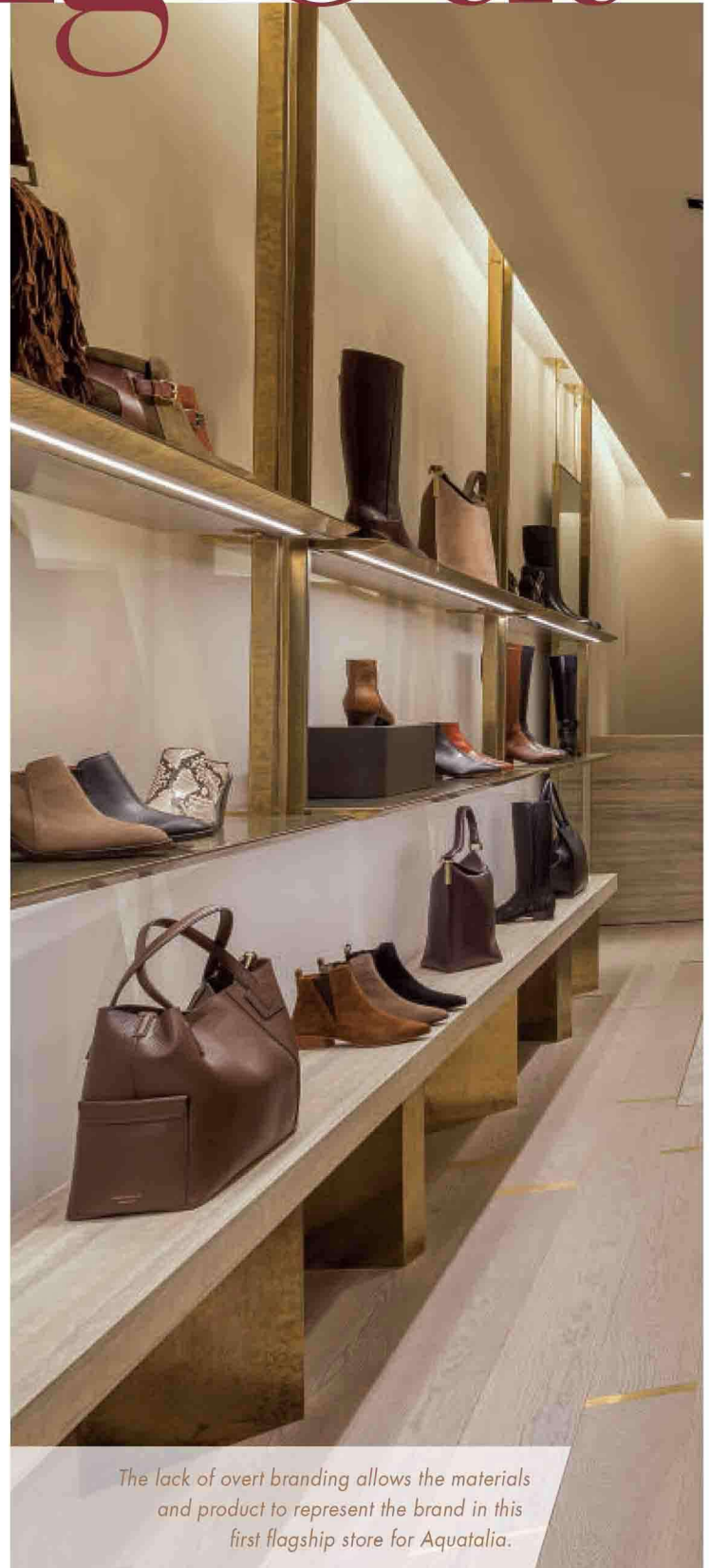
"The biggest challenge of all was how do you make your entrance façade have any presence whatsoever," says Neumann.

The solution: a faceted concept. Faceted walls, which are fragmented into geometric forms, angle in to conceal site obstacles and direct the space.

"We took the perimeter walls and broke them down into panels," explains Greg Pray, the MNA designer who served as project manager. "They fold in and out down the space, almost like an accordion but subtler."

## Integrating flexibility

To promote a linear path as well as draw the eye to the back of the store, MNA collaborated with JPMA Global to design a modular geometric wall as the focal point of the entire space. The puzzle-like feature wall comprises interlocking shapes that can be moved and configured in a number of ways to create unique product displays.



*The lack of overt branding allows the materials and product to represent the brand in this first flagship store for Aquatalia.*

# in Style

LUXURY ITALIAN SHOE BRAND  
MAKES RETAIL DEBUT WITH  
UNDERSTATED, VERSATILE SPACE  
BY HILARY DANINHIRSCH



## FEATURED **shop** MEMBERS

**Aquatalia** | New York City

**Size:** 1,800 sf

**Completion:** 9/8/2016

**Retailer:** Global Brands Group

**Photos:** Thaddeus Rombauer Photography

### Featured Shop! Members

**MNA:** architecture, AOR, design

**JPMA Global:** fixtures, furniture, flooring

“One of the key words in retail is flexibility, but also change—how to create different excitement at different times,” says Neumann. The adjustable wall extends and retracts, allowing shoe collections to be exhibited against a variety of backdrops in a myriad of vignettes.

“We made up many display scenarios for that wall. You could have a series of blocks in a row displaying shoes, or put them in an asymmetrical pattern. And each block has internal lighting with an electric surface connection, so when you pop those volumes in, they illuminate it,” Neumann adds. The integrated LED lighting highlights product on each oak-faced, brass-sided form.

The shelves also serve as a subtle branding detail, adding an element of brand identity for when the company opens more stores, adds Castillo.

### Lighting the way

In addition to drawing attention to the shoes on the feature wall, lighting plays a significant role elsewhere throughout the store. Light breaks up the space so that the flow of light is coming in from different directions.

“The skylight at the rear is a faux skylight like a hung light panel. We worked with the lighting designer to achieve a day-lighting look that you can see from the street,” says Pray. The skylight also dis-

tinguishes the area and draws attention to the feature wall.

Concealed floor lighting casts a subtle, yet dramatic glow up the custom, hand-troweled, lime plaster walls and on suspended shelves of antique brass. The shelves are internally lit as well.

“As part of the idea of the space being one beautiful faceted composition, we wanted the ceiling to be as clean as possible, especially as your eye is almost parallel with the ceiling at the entry. That ceiling had to be designed as an art piece,” says Neumann.

The low ceiling necessitated subtle placement of lighting, so all lighting is concealed. For example, track lights are concealed in recessed troughs with staggered brass valances forming an asymmetrical pattern from front to back.

### Mixing materials

Materials are luxurious and richly textured or naturally patterned, yet detailing is modern. Enabling display of the product in an array of backdrops, the store features natural stone in different tones and metalwork in various finishes. These materials included lime plaster for all of the walls, black oxidized metals, and patinated brass, for example.

“We did an asymmetrical composition of volumes in these different materials

that flowed from the front to the back of the space, and that included vertical elements like columns and horizontal elements,” Neumann says.

The display shelves meld honed silver travertine and tarnished brass. They feature an angled edge that echoes facets of the walls. The walls are softly polychromed in tones of gray, while the flooring is silver-stained oak punctuated with brass fillets.

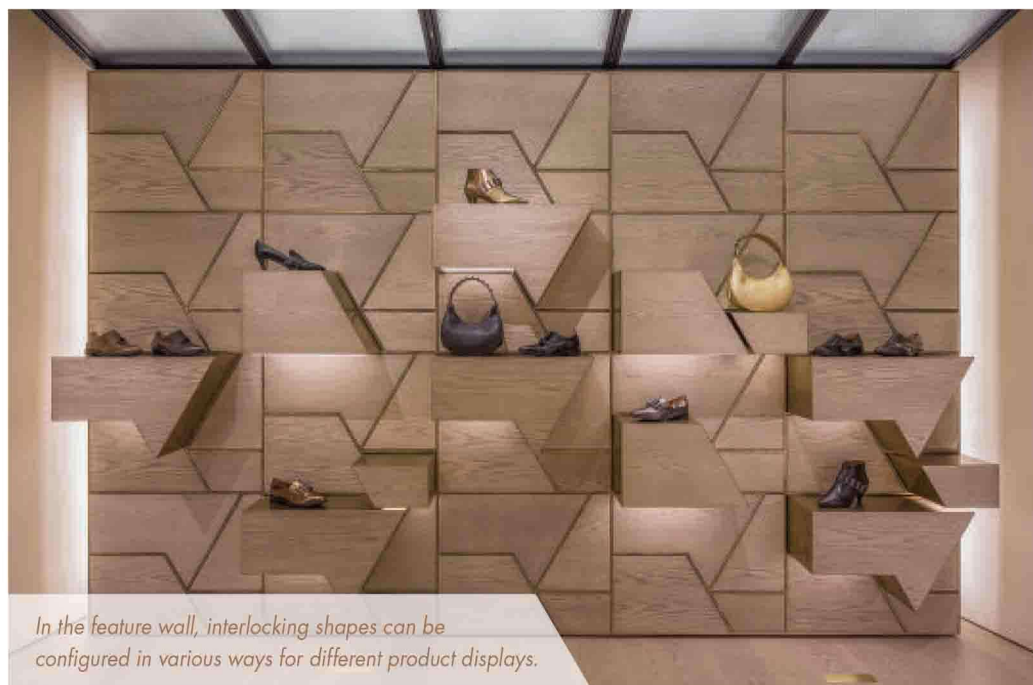
“It is an engineered floor made in a custom color, so all furniture and colors matched. We put in special brass inlays of different sizes in different locations, which creates an attraction of the eye to the floor, not to the ceiling,” says Joseph Belli, SVP at JPMA Global.

### Providing for change

The overall environment is warm and welcoming. “The subtle details add texture to the walls and floors, while the colors allow the product to stand. The goal was to be able to evolve the product season after season without clashing with the store,” Castillo says.

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*Hilary Daninhirsch is an award-winning freelance writer who covers project features and other trade articles.*



*In the feature wall, interlocking shapes can be configured in various ways for different product displays.*