

# The perfect fit

Conscious of the need to develop a retail aesthetic worthy of housing the company's iconic products, New Balance's creative whizz Bob Neville got to work. The result of his endeavours is the extraordinary Bird Centre in Kunshan, a space entirely dedicated to experimentation.

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On a summer's evening in Shanghai, crowds pound the pavements of the main shopping street, Nanjing Road, where a who's who of international retailers compete for foot traffic. New Balance joined the line-up late last year, opening a two-storey flagship full of concrete fixtures, video screens and 3D foot scanners, just down the road from the 1920s Peace Hotel.

The juxtaposition of old and new is central to the brand's identity. A history of innovation began in 1906 with its groundbreaking bridge supports but the veteran Boston sportswear company wants it to be known that it still has plenty of bright ideas. Central to getting this message across, it has realised the importance of having its own physical presence on the high street, especially in new markets with potential for rapid growth.

Step forward Bob Neville. When the former Adidas executive took over as New Balance's global retail creative director in 2008 he noticed that the company was cobbling together its shop displays rather than taking the same painstaking approach to design and testing that goes into fashioning a shoe. Neville therefore created a dedicated space for trialling shop interiors – everything from tiling to typefaces – prior to rollout. Two years ago the third iteration of this experimental unit, known as the Bird Centre, opened inside a nondescript factory compound in Kunshan, about an hour's drive from Shanghai.

Entering the Bird Centre is like stepping onto a set inside a Hollywood lot. There's no natural light so Neville can completely control the environment. Part museum, part showroom, part workshop, the centrepiece is a full-scale three-storey replica of a New Balance flagship: Neville's signature aesthetic of white lettering on concrete

walls provides a clean backdrop for the colourful merchandise. "It's a place of experiment, it's a lot of fun," says Neville, standing next to one of his more decorative fixtures: a metallic stars and stripes that can be seen on the wall of the Shanghai outpost, flying the flag for the brand's "Made in the USA" line (*see box, opposite*).

Raised in Germany to a British family, the 53-year-old Hong Kong resident flies up to the Bird Centre most weeks with his small team. The Centre is not just a China play: Neville has used it to host the company's Korean licensee, who popped in to see the latest options for kids' displays, women's lounges and custom shoe bars. And the designs that are trialled here are rolled out at some 3,700 shops across the world, from London to Jakarta.

When we met Neville he had just shown head office a series of shop-in-shop designs for Dick's Sporting Goods (New Balance is setting up 50 concessions across the US). Executives in Boston experience a virtual-reality rendering of the retail spaces before a physical mock-up is flown over. This mix of tradition and technology is both the soul of the New Balance brand and, arguably, the future of high-street retail. — (M)

## What was New Balance's retail presence like when you joined?

It was predominantly a wholesale business; taking the brand to retail [by opening mono-brand shops] was part of the reason I was hired. A shop with your name above the door gets seen by a hell of a lot of people. In many instances you couldn't buy the out-of-home advertising to capture that number of eyeballs. Retail is a form of communication as well as a place to sell.

## How quickly do your designs appear in shops?

We have to be agile. We are opening shops all the time and we'll try out certain concepts in certain places to see what sort of feedback we get and what the sales are like. If it's resonating we'll commit to a rollout; if not we'll take it back to the drawing board. It has to be a live process.

## Do you possess the tools to turn around a bad location?

You can have a great box with all the parts but if it's in the middle of a desert, it's never going to work. There are deserts within any city that you never want to be in and that's the reason why significant city high streets charge the rates they do. We've got this incredible space here at the Bird Centre. It's not open to the public but even if we put a big sign up outside, no one would come in. You've got to fish where the fish are.

## What do you think retail will be like in the future?

There's a lot of physical space out there. Do I think those spaces will be filled with comfy seats and virtual-reality headsets? Maybe, but I think there will be more and more places where you experience brands, try products on, and then order online. There's always going to be a need for physical space. I don't want to say physical retail, because that's a very one-dimensional transactional type of environment. When it comes to physical shops, people need to have an enhanced experience. Today we can buy any brand anywhere in the world so shopping is no longer the domain of a box on the high street. It becomes a question of what value we are bringing to the retail experience and that's about bringing the brand to life in 3D.



**Standard bearer:**

New Balance continues to manufacture its premium “Made in the USA” and “Made in the UK” footwear at its own factories located in New England and Cumbria, respectively. Both of these lines have their own distinctive aesthetic – the “Made in the USA” models, for example, tend to be sturdier – and they represent the offerings you’ll see in high-end retailers. While the company plays up these collections, it still makes most of its shoes in Asia and has been caught up in the political debate about off-shoring production.

**How is technology enhancing your shops in a meaningful way?**

Rather than being a gimmick, augmented reality is becoming a lot more relevant. Technology can add value to a physical space. Stride ID and Volumental [3D foot scanners] are great ways of using technology to provide a visible benefit for customers. They’re also in line with what we’ve done for years and that’s enabling people to move better. There’s a real service aspect [to technology]. We are putting shoes on people’s feet. Does everything fit? Does it function? Some environments are becoming very sterile but I strongly believe that people love human interaction, touching things and feeling comfortable. Technology should enhance that experience.

**Do you have a shopping experience that’s a particular favourite?**

There’s a watch-repair shop I go to in New Zealand that is just so old school. There’s a high counter with lots of people wearing magnifying eyewear and working on watches. It looks so out of place and it shouldn’t be able to survive but they have business coming out of their ears because it’s such a rich, visceral experience.

**What can China tell us about the future of retail?**

China is massive and you can’t approach it as one market. But it’s a great place to test and learn, given the speed at which things happen. We’ve had a number of successes here that have gone on to be global. Mono-branded spaces are really important and I don’t see that dying out anytime soon. It’s definitely not a linear path going forward in terms of what brands and the high streets are going to do, or how they will look.