

A FITTING EXPERIENCE —Italy

Preface

Ideally situated to match German efficiency with Italian craft, retail design firm Schweitzer has forged a name delivering store concepts from design to build. Monocle disappears to the mountains to discover how the magic is made.

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The sleepy, snowy valleys of northern Italy possibly aren't the first place you'd expect to find one of the retail sector's most enterprising companies. Yet about 20 minutes drive north of Bolzano sits the sprawling headquarters of shopfitter Schweitzer, in the quiet town of Naturno, surrounded by mountains. "We have a beautiful location here in the South Tyrol," says CEO Bernhard Schweitzer, grandson of founder Leo. "But it is in the middle of nowhere."

And yet an impressive list of high-profile clients such as Victoria's Secret, Waitrose, Le Bon Marché and Nespresso have all made the journey to the remote Naturno, as it's known to many locals. Tucked up at the top of Italy, German is more commonly spoken than the national tongue and it is this cultural mix that perhaps explains Schweitzer's success in the retail landscape. In its 87-year history the company has made a name for itself by blending German efficiency for production with an Italian flair for design and craft.

Schweitzer works on between 10 to 15 retail projects at any one time. Its scope ranges from 10,000 to 15,000 sq m behemoths to small shop-in-shops. Not so remarkable, you may think. But it's not just the sketching and strategy that Schweitzer takes care of (and they do that, but largely in Zürich, as we'll discover). The



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company also undertakes top-to-bottom, front-end to back-end manufacturing of entire stores. Rails, coat hangers, cashier desks, signage: Schweitzer has the capabilities to take care of just about everything on behalf of a retailer in this valley – and then has the network and Rolodex of contractors to roll the concept out on a global scale.

"A retailer doesn't want to care about rebuilding his store," says Bernhard. "So we started very early to do general contracting. We organised flooring, ceilings and electricity. We understood that a retailer wants to concentrate on his business and not be thinking he has to find someone to do a floor or whatever."

This top-to-tail service stretches back to the company's origins. Bernhard's grandfather, Leo, was a wholesaler of



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Schweitzer's greatest hits

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KaDeWe
Berlin

Charged with redesigning the fourth floor of Berlin department store KaDeWe, Schweitzer implemented a loft-style aesthetic in the home and living department, with a special apartment area dedicated to showing a rotation of collections. Schweitzer also worked on the refit of the third floor accessories section.

- 01 Carpentry division of the Schweitzer factory
- 02 Chairs ready for lacquering
- 03 Communal area in Schweitzer HQ
- 04 Workbench
- 05 Store furniture in the making
- 06 Bernhard Schweitzer
- 07 Fixtures packed away for shipping
- 08 Interstore Design's Werner Matzoll
- 09 Workers assembling elements for shopfitting

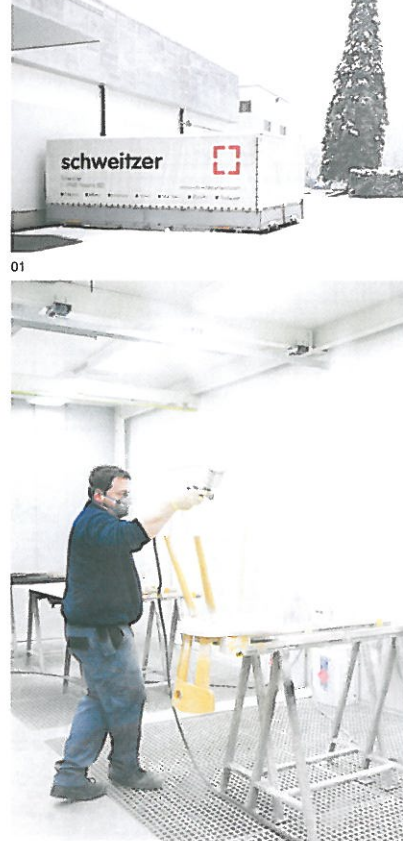
Frigidaire appliances, dealing with local hotels, restaurants and general stores. He noted most clients preferred covering the bulky items in wood, so set up a small workshop to make counters and panels to meet their needs; and then shelves to match. "Inside these general stores there were some home textiles and garments," says Bernhard. "So he also organised a small workshop for metal pieces too." And so it went.

Fast-forward three generations and 87 years and that spirit of second guessing the clients' needs is still alive and well at Schweitzer. Today, the company is with its clients every step of the way with its "design and build" service, as is revealed in one secretive wing in the headquarters. Here, a 1,200 sq m area is devoted to mocking up store concepts. These are locked away behind closed doors, with "only a clear list of people who can enter", clarifies Bernhard.

Retailers decamp to the mountains here, sometimes for months at a time, in their own dedicated office on site, to work on a prototype. When MONOCLE visits, one blockbuster client has agreed to take over half the space for two years to work on its next concept. To keep up with the eternally competitive retail sector, it's a necessity. "Now we have to prepare another two, because more want to have the same services," says Bernhard.

Yet, for many clients, the Schweitzer journey does not begin here in Naturno but across the Alps in Zürich. In 1987, Bernhard's father opened Interstore Design, a studio dedicated to meeting and visualising retailers' needs. It started life in Naturno (where it still has an office) but was moved to Zürich two years ago. Le Bon Marché's La Grand Epicerie food hall in Paris and Berlin's KaDeWe recent redesign were all masterminded there.

To this day, Interstore Design and Schweitzer are kept at arm's length.



- 01 Container outside the snow-covered Schweitzer factory
- 02 Chairs being lacquered
- 03 Interstore Design studio in Naturno
- 04 Shopfitting sketches realised by Interstore designers
- 05 The mock-up of Schweitzer's stand for trade fair Euroshop
- 06 Metal work for fittings
- 07 Store furniture ready to go

At the Naturno satellite office, MONOCLE meets designer Werner Matzoll, who started working at the wood workshop 15 years ago before progressing to Interstore Design. He supports this claim: "They are kept quite separate. It's important to keep quality," he says. "Interstore Design's concern is the vision; Schweitzer's is how to do it at the best cost. It creates a good dynamic."

Having two companies straddled across the Alps, one dedicated to design and one to industrial-scale production, is what makes the Schweitzer operation so special. A particularly Germanic efficiency for working on this scale mixed with an Italian flair for aesthetics is the added bonus. As Matzoll says wryly, "We work like Germans but live like Italians." — (M)

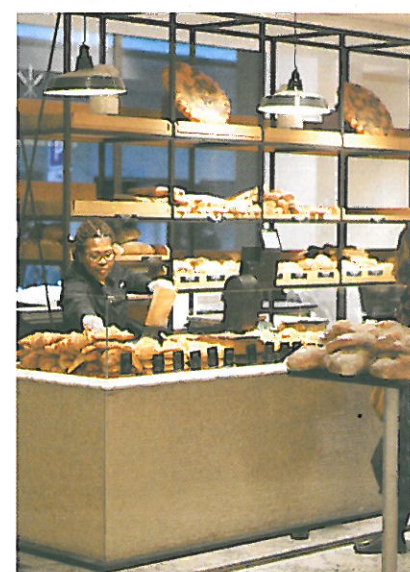
02 Waitrose Canary Wharf, London

Schweitzer was responsible for the entire design and build of UK food retailer Waitrose's Canary Wharf three-floor flagship. It was the culmination of six years collaborating together on various formats and saw the retailer bring homewares and clothing into its remit for the first time. This particular concept took nine months to develop.



03 Le Bon Marché Paris

During the concept phase, Interstore Design employees spent two days a week in Paris developing their plan for the redesign of Le Bon Marché's food hall. The end result picks up on the traditions of typical French markets, *boulangeries* and *pâtisseries*; typically Parisian Art Nouveau mosaics decorate counters.



The Schweitzer service

Stage 1

The concept

Most projects will begin with a client meeting to discuss the objectives of the new concept. For bespoke 'design and build' projects, Interstore Design will then set out the mission, create a concept, work on look and feel, and design everything from layout to furniture. This process can take as little as three months or as long as two years.

Stage 2

The mock-up

These plans are then sent to Schweitzer in Naturno, where a team creates a prototype of the store and mocks it up in one of the top-secret hangars at HQ. Interstore Design art directs throughout. When Monocle visits, Schweitzer's stand at retail trade fair Euroshop is being refined in the space. It's been eight months in the planning.

Stage 3

The client

Clients will often take up residence at the office, going back and forth on the direction with the team here. All prototypes can be knocked up next door in the wood and metal production factories. If a cabinet is too high or a rail too long, it can be rectified almost immediately by the Schweitzer team on the factory floor.

Stage 4

The production

Once signed off, Schweitzer undertakes production of the store fittings in Naturno. A team of 20 works in the metal production factory, producing rails, hangars and signage. Passing through the powder-coating room, next door is where wood items are produced from scratch, including shelving, counters, stools and tables. Everything from lacquering to veneering is done in-house.

Stage 5

The roll-out

For large-scale roll-outs for store chains, a new site in Hungary is dedicated to industrial-scale production.

