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Meet the European business fusing design and shopfitting

ALL THINGS TO ALL RETAILERS

Turning on the style at Emporio Armani in Manchester

The majority of shopfitters fit shops while the majority of shop designers design them. Northern Italian shopfitting giant Schweitzer does both. John Ryan reports

The store design business in the UK is pretty straightforward if you're a retailer and have the funds to create a new format. First, you'll probably hold a beauty parade of design consultancies, present the brief and hope that at least one of them comes up with something you like the look of.

Assuming that is the case, you'll then work with the consultancy and either get them to choose a shopfitter or select one yourself and hand over the drawings. Then it's a matter of standing back, exacting the requisite penalties for late delivery (should this occur) and hoping that what results bears more than a passing resemblance to what first attracted you to the design consultancy.

> *Schweitzer employs 600 staff and will have sales of £90m for the year - up 25% on 2011*

And that, give or take a few variations, is what characterises the UK store design and build sector. There are, however, a few exceptions to this series of generalisations and among them is Schweitzer. On the continent things are often different.

Schweitzer is a shopfitter and also a design outfit, but the two parts are not separable in any meaningful way. Based in the part of the Alps where the border says you should be in Italy, but everyone around you speaks German, its headquarters are just outside the spa resort of Merano, or Meran if you are of a Teutonic disposition.

Nike store in Covent Garden

The giant KaDeWe store in Berlin

Selgros in Eschborn, Germany

Big fish – Eschborn's Selgros

With massive mountains all around the village of Naturns (Naturno for Italian speakers – the same rules apply), Schweitzer has an idyllic setting. This is not by chance. Schweitzer is a third-generation enterprise and is still run by the founding family, who come from Naturns. There is a reason for the company being where it is therefore, but for retailers visiting it must be hard not to feel as if they are on some form of working vacation. And at the head of the whole thing is the man whose surname hangs over the door: Bernhard Schweitzer. Schweitzer took the reins from his father in 1999 and today he is responsible for a business that employs 600 people, will have sales of about €110m (£90m) for the current year and will show an increase of close to 25% on 2011 when the final reckoning takes place. This kind of turnover puts Schweitzer, the company, in the big league as far as shopfitting is concerned.

Argument for design

The design arm is, for the most part, not in Naturns however, which is where most of the prototyping and head office functions are housed. Instead, it is located across the Alps in Zurich. This may seem odd but, at first glance, odder still is the fact that if you buy design services from the house of Schweitzer, you generally do so from Interstore. This is the name given to Schweitzer's design company and if you want a complete store designed, or perhaps just a floor or two, look no further. The latter can actually be bigger than it sounds – currently the 16 people employed in the Zurich office have almost finished work on the third and fourth floors of KaDeWe, the massive department store in Berlin.

The third floor has now opened and the fourth is scheduled to welcome its first customers

The cavernous Salzburg Spar

imminently. The point, however, is that KaDeWe is not just buying a design from Interstore. An integral part of the arrangement is that the department store will also use Schweitzer to provide fittings, fixtures and shopfitting.

Interstore existed before Bernhard Schweitzer became boss, but it had languished and not been an essential element of the Schweitzer mix. Since 2000, however, one of the first things that Schweitzer did upon taking over control of the company was to 'reawaken' Interstore as an entity capable of opening doors that might traditionally have remained closed to a shopfitter.

Interstore in Zurich is managed by another Bernhard, Heiden, and 'Bennie' comments: "Interstore means that I can speak today with a client at every level." He is very clear about the relationship between Interstore and Schweitzer: "We sell Interstore first and then Schweitzer is coming in. We are not a design agency – we design and build."

Heiden says that as far as design is concerned, things are easier in the food business than in fashion because there is "a lot of technical stuff that we are well placed to deal with." This may account, in some measure, for the relationship between Schweitzer and Waitrose, which has been ongoing for more than half a decade.

Heiden says Interstore sits on the bespoke side of Schweitzer's operations – which is broadly what has taken place with Waitrose. When the supermarket opened its Marylebone High Street store in 2008 it had a raft of new elements, including a 'time of day' food-to-go counter, circular wine fixtures and a market-style entrance with fruit in wicker baskets. Much of what was on view had been purpose-built for the location and the store proved an immediate success with the well-to-do locals.

> *We are not a design agency – we design and build*
>
> **Bernhard Schweitzer**

Roughly a year later, the food hall in John Lewis followed. This was along similar lines but was different and again, the Interstore and Schweitzer combination was central. A roll-out of stores has since taken place, but while many of the stores may look the same, there are always elements that make them different from what has gone before and Schweitzer has been at the heart of this too.

Meat display at Spar in Salzburg

That relationship continues, but it is worth noting that as well as working with retailers on site-specific projects, Schweitzer also sits on the more usual side of the fence that sees equipment being manufactured and rolled out on a mass scale. It performs this service for players such as H&M and C&A, and the manufacturing takes place predominantly in Hungary where Schweitzer says operating costs are between 25% to 30% cheaper than in western Europe.

As with Waitrose though, this kind of operation is built on relationship and reliability. Schweitzer says at the start of a year, H&M will come to Naturns and discuss how much of the company's roll-out manufacturing capacity it can book. "We do 45 to 50 new stores per season," he says. He adds that with mature relationships "we are not discussing 80 pages of a contract. We're talking about what we can do next".

And with a pan-European client list that includes Nespresso, Burberry, Benetton, and Woolworths in Germany, this is an organisation whose tendrils extend across a broad field. It is also a business that understands that success in shopfitting depends on rather more than fitting shops. Helpful to have a place in the Italian Alps to invite your clients to as well, of course.

A BROAD FIELD

Schweitzer clients include: H&M, Waitrose, Spar, C&A, Nike, KaDeWe, Emporio Armani and Eschborn

Checkouts at Salzburg Spar