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### Shoe envy

*Footwear retailer R.sole takes sneaker presentation to a new level*

**Erin M. Loewe, Contributor**



APRIL 01, 2007 -- Once reserved for gym class and sports activities, sneakers are now mainstays in everyday fashion. Thanks to a pop culture enamored with youth and being hip, casual comfort is considered cool. So-called "sneaker heads" may also wear these shoes for comfort and fashion, but many collect limited-edition lines from brands including Nike and Adidas as if they were works of art—rarely, if ever, wearing them.

R.sole is a new retail venture of the Pener family, who are well known in the Midwest for the Kansas City, Mo.-based Man of Fashion stores. R.sole co-owner Barry Pener has been working with shoe manufacturers for more than 30 years. Over the past few years, Pener became aware of the niche market for specialty sneakers—a market that has grown with Internet accessibility.

"I used to go to these little sneaker head stores in New



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York and L.A. when they first opened to buy shoes for myself, because they were importing them from Japan and other places overseas," Pener says. "But these kids are everywhere. Say a shoe comes out on a Saturday. If it's really special, the store might sell it for \$150, but it will be on eBay an hour later for \$450, because the kids in Chicago and Atlanta can't get them. So I just thought it was time to do something different."

The Pener family turned to New York-based Tobin+Parnes Design Enterprises to ensure the coveted specialty sneakers would be displayed in a hip and attractive environment. Carol Tobin, a founding principal at Tobin+Parnes, said the Peners came to her firm looking to create a store with an art gallery aesthetic. "They wanted to exhibit these sneakers they considered works of art in a way that would really emphasize the beauty, detail and design of the sneakers," she says.

The first store opened in St. Louis in May 2006 near Washington University's campus. The 1,972-sq.-ft. space uses color, lighting and fixtures to create a gallery-meets-nightclub retail atmosphere. "We wanted something exciting, something where the audio-visual component was alive so people weren't just seeing moving lights, but they were hearing music, maybe seeing a video of some music star doing something with the sneakers," Tobin explains.

Tobin's design team spent many months fine tuning the prototypes, presenting three versions to the Peners. The "black box" was the favorite hands down. In that version, the floor, walls and ceiling were all dark gray. Within such a dark environment, Tobin said, the biggest challenge was to display merchandise with visual excitement and draw customers into the store.

### Texas Green Program

APRIL 18, 2007 -- Regional chain H.E. Butt Grocery Co., San Antonio, is participating in a program in which Central Texas counties and retailers are launching environmental initiatives to encourage residents to think green, according to Progressivegrocer.com. ♦

### New Wave Group To Acquire Cutter & Buck

APRIL 18, 2007 -- Swedish company New Wave Group AB announced plans to acquire Cutter & Buck for \$156.5 million in cash, according to Dnrnews.com. ♦

### Hancock Fabrics to Auction 121 Retail Leases

APRIL 18, 2007 -- Baldwin, Miss.-based Hancock Fabrics Inc. has retained Keen Realty LLC under an order of the United States Bankruptcy Court, to market and assist with the disposition of two fee-owned retail properties and 121 of the company's retail leasehold interests located nationally. ♦

### J.C. Penney Names Castella, Rooney to Fill Evans' Post

APRIL 18, 2007 -- According to Hfnmag.com., Plano, Texas-based J.C.

The first opportunity for this draw was from the exterior. Vlad Zadneprianski, senior associate at Tobin+Parnes, created a "non-sale sale" façade to set the tone of the store's design by covering the front window with a translucent film, cutting out squares and rectangles every so often to let people sneak a peek.

To overcome some of the obstacles posed by the dark interior, Tobin+Parnes worked with lighting consultants from Design One Corp., New York, to make the displays pop but not overpower the merchandise. Tobin compares the lighting objective with that of a high-end jewelry store. "Jewels are in showcases displayed with beautiful different kinds of lighting that really enhances the colors, shine, etc.," Tobin says. "So we were trying to take that aesthetic and make it viable for shoes without putting them behind glass." Ultimately, the design team used lighting behind some of the walls to make the shoes look as if they were floating.

Another challenge with the "black box" was finding a way to break up the dark plane. The team created a "moving geometry" by punching parts of the wall out and recessing some parts—a unique way to attract peoples' eyes toward the sneakers without using the standard slatwall or puck display system.

Instead of creating black niches, the team used backlit frosted acrylic with colored LEDs to call attention to the shoes. "We were concerned that the changing of the LED lighting would cast its color on the shoe, therefore changing the color of the shoe," Tobin explained. After much testing, the team found the best way to protect the integrity of the shoes was to install tiny puck lights over the nose of each within the acrylic niches. The pure, white light allowed the LEDs to change color without affecting the colors on the

Penney Co. Inc. has named Kevin Rooney, a former Target executive, vice president of product development and design for hard home, and appointed Steve Castella vice president of product development and design for soft home at J.C. Penney. ➤

### Consumers to Spend Almost \$16 Billion for Mother's Day

APRIL 18, 2007 -- This Mother's Day, May 13th, consumers plan to spend \$15.73 billion on gifts like jewelry, flowers, clothing and even trips to the spa. ➤

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shoes.

The wall lighting is backed up with a smattering of floor tiles made of tempered glass with colored LED lights behind them. These also change color, directing customers to the back of the store and the cashwrap, which doubles as a DJ stand when the store is used for events.

The lighting systems in the walls and the floor posed a challenge, since all of the color changes needed to happen simultaneously. Zadneprianski explains that all of the color changes are managed with DMX-512 interface, a communication language also used for theater lighting that enables all of the fixtures to "talk" to the control unit. "To minimize headaches, we just programmed the system to have eight or 10 color-changing effects," he says. "There's a color wave/rainbow effect, strobe effect, transitions from one color to another; it's all pre-programmed."

Another striking feature of R.sole is the rotating panel fixtures that line one side of the store. They can lock into many angles within 360 degrees—flat in alignment, angled the same direction or angled to create a partial triangle. "We wanted to feel there was movement and flexibility in the store, not only visually but for the merchandiser as well," Tobin explains.

Because R.sole is being rolled out, the design team strived to make all of the displays flexible and modular so they could be adapted for many stores. The St. Louis store was installed in an existing location, so the designers opted to integrate the concrete floor into the "black box" by coating it with a special colored cement topping.

The new concept is reportedly a hit with customers as well as shoe manufacturers. "The shoe companies love it too," Pener says. "They're like: 'You're

really giving credibility to the shoe.' And that's what it was all about—giving respect to the shoe."

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