

Lap of Luxury

Burdifilek's renovation of part of the Holt Renfrew department store in Toronto is a case of old-world elegance in a new-world envelope.

Words: Tim McKeough

Photos: Ben Rahn





A Palette of Whites: tones of snow, pearl and alabaster play out in sculptural forms and textured materials.

The scene that meets you on the floor featuring designer collections is icily cool. In this newly renovated section of Toronto's Holt Renfrew department store, walls, floors and ceilings are all bright whites and blached patterns, and frosty screens obscure much of what lies beyond. Although it's not an austere white box, colour has definitely been edged out in favour of texture. In this retail interior – where plaster walls mimic the swish of fabric, dividers are made from dangling rods, and three-dimensional Lucite screens resemble exploding fields of pixels – layer upon layer of white and translucent materials are revealed as you move deeper inside.

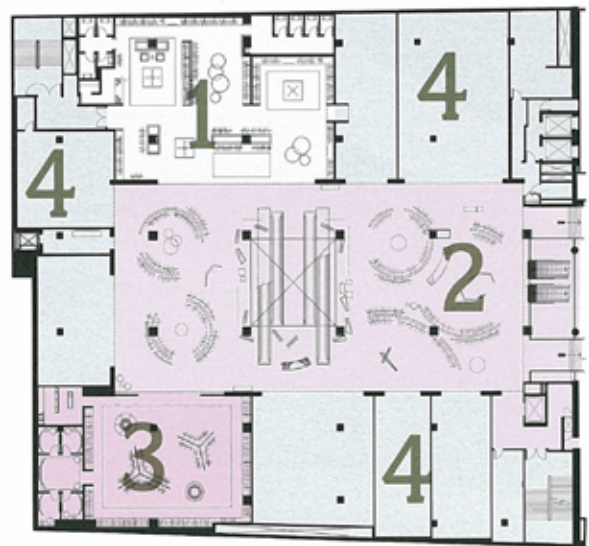
'We wanted to create beautiful volumes, and we wanted all of them to have a sculptural appeal,' says Diego Burdi, a co-founder of Burdifilek, the local interior-design firm responsible for the space. He says that he and partner Paul Filek 'looked at the ceiling and sliced into it one way and looked at the walls and carved them out. It's all about a play of texture, shape, form and light.' Their primary goal was 'a really wonderful frame for the art – which is the product'.

The interior is not an austere white box, but colour has definitely been edged out in favour of texture

Burdifilek began working with Holt Renfrew, Canada's leading luxury retailer, five years ago when the store's management hired the firm to renovate the ground floor of its flagship store, where shoppers can find jewellery, accessories and menswear. The client and the designers have been a team ever since. Their latest joint project is the overhaul of the second-floor Designer Collections department of the store, as well as personal shopping suites located on the third floor of an adjoining building. 'We were aiming for a completely different essence in this space,' says Burdi, comparing the latest phase with the initial renovation. 'It's disconnected from the main floor, and we wanted a whole different world.' At the same time, Burdifilek was well aware of the retailer's desire to appeal to a younger clientele. 'People in their twenties and thirties have parents who have been shopping at this store for years,' explains Burdi, 'so we asked ourselves how we could craft a new environment for a new demographic.'

Shoppers stepping off the escalator surely note, before anything else, that the expansive, nearly 1500-m² space has been delicately sliced and subdivided by thousands of white rods hanging in circular patterns from the ceiling. Burdifilek used 40,000 powder-coated aluminium rods for the airy partitions. 'By compartmentalizing the interior into circular areas, we've enabled the store to put different collections in different zones,' says Burdi. 'It's easy to walk around and find your way, but there's still a sense of discovery in the space.'

As shoppers approach the exclusive European collections, materials shift, but the idea of ethereal screens,



Plan of the 1500-m² Designer Collections department of the Holt Renfrew store in Toronto renovated by Burdifilek.

1. Designer collections
2. Piazza
3. Evening wear
4. Ancillary spaces

An impressive 40,000 pristine white rods hang from circular ceiling coves, swaying gently and creating an ethereal backdrop for merchandise on display.



Burdifiek
Department Store
Toronto

Screens composed of clear and sandblasted Lucite cubes cascade from openings in the ceiling. Bathed in white light, these installations lend a celestial feel to the space.



which obscure the view only partially, remains constant. Cutting across the area are semi-solid walls made from blocks of clear and sandblasted Lucite. The 61-cm-thick walls were made by laying the blocks both lengthwise and crosswise to produce a strong framework. Nearby, opaque walls holding racks of garments are ridged with vertical fins that have a porcelain finish. Throughout the space, a collection of custom tables, also designed by Burdifilek, further the sculptural feel of the department. Most have heavy slabs of 5-cm-thick smoked Lucite for tabletops and bases ranging from massive boulders of solid oak brushed with 18-karat gold leaf to those made from curving, aubergine-stained wood.

The space finishes in a section for evening-wear, where the overall environment becomes a little darker. Metallic lacquered panels clad the walls, while the floor is covered in honed marble and lavender carpet, which adds an air of intrigue. Curling waves of plaster – sculpted in place by hand and meant to evoke the swagged drapery of Paris salons – are just visible through opalescent glass, and the walls are lit from below. Hovering overhead is a modern take on the traditional chandelier, made from 300 square-profile brass tubes tipped with tiny light bulbs. The intention, says Burdi, was to ‘create an old-world elegance in a new-world envelope’.

‘It’s all about a play of texture, shape, form and light, plus the creation of a wonderful frame for the product’

Diego Burdi

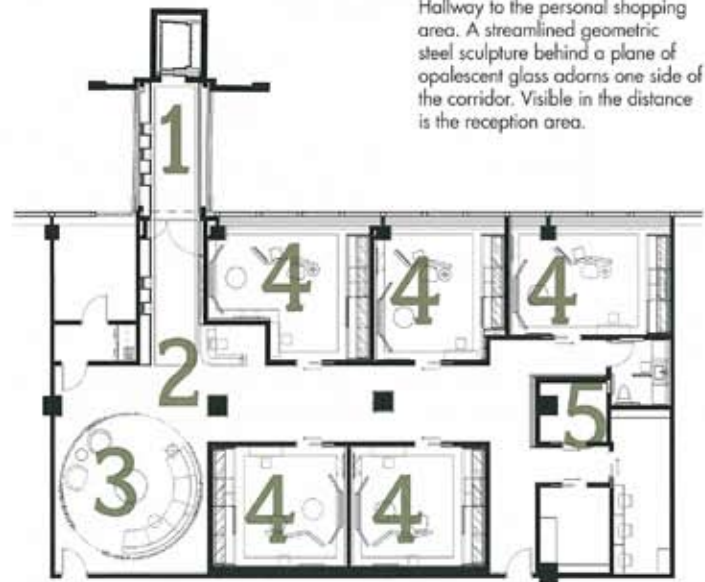
Things get cosier in the private shopping suites, which are reached via a shuttle lift from the second floor. The entrance hallway is flanked by another sculptural screen, this time formed by bent metal bars inserted in an air gap between layers of translucent-white and acid-etched glass. Hovering niches in the screen provide a place to showcase jewellery, perfume and other products. The hallway empties into a circular seating area wrapped by polished, square-profile, stainless-steel rods and furnished with a custom sectional sofa.

From there, shoppers move on to one of five individual suites. Each features a different custom carpeting and original artwork, as well as individual controls for lighting, climate and music. All five suites have clothing-display closets meant to resemble mini stages, where stylists can prepare outfits before a client’s arrival, as well as folding lacquer screens that create a place to change.

Since opening last September, both the women’s floor and the private shopping suites have been successful. ‘There’s been an unbelievable reaction, and sales have been incredible because of it,’ says Peter Moore, Holt Renfrew’s director of design and construction. Keenly aware of the power a bold new interior design can inject into a store, Moore says the flagship is actually under continual renovation, with different sections being overhauled in different years.



Hallway to the personal shopping area. A streamlined geometric steel sculpture behind a plane of opalescent glass adorns one side of the corridor. Visible in the distance is the reception area.



Plan of floor containing private shopping suites.

1. Entry
2. Reception
3. Lounge
4. Suite
5. WC

Burdifilek
Department Store
Toronto

View into one of the private shopping suites. Each suite is fitted with custom wool carpets and lacquer screens.



White Is for Experimentation

Diego Burdi and Paul Filek of
Burdifilek

'Conceptually, we wanted to seamlessly merge sculptural installation and architecture while creating a luxury retail space that doesn't detract from but elevates the premium fashion labels. Using tonalities of white allowed us to fully experiment with raw form and pure shape and to successfully explore a new global retail concept. White is a commanding and powerful colour. The commitment to using it at this level generates an acute awareness of shape, texture and environment.'

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Next up? It's back to the ground floor. Burdifilek is already at work redesigning the handbag and jewellery departments it finished just a few years ago, preparing for their expansion into newly acquired space. 'It's continually under construction. They're a phenomenal client in that way,' says Burdi. 'They're always looking to improve, and they always give us an amazing canvas to paint on.' In Burdifilek's world, it seems that art is an ongoing theme.

The reception area is a dramatically lit circular space contoured by thousands of steel rods hanging from the ceiling.

