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# Back to Work

Mark's prototype hearkens back to its industrial roots by Gail Deibler Finke

**W**ith rough-hewn wood, industrial accents, and open-plenum ceilings, a new unified look for Mark's embodies its heritage of rugged, durable clothing.

A victim of its own success, Mark's stores had grown too fast and too big. Originally based in workwear, the Canadian retailer had added brands and categories that gave customers a wide choice of casual and active garments, but often at the expense of finding their way through its nearly 400 cavernous stores.

As the footprints had grown (the average store had doubled in size over the past 10 years), the retailer had added more of the same fixtures without scaling up. Designed for smaller spaces, these fixtures cluttered up larger stores and sent customers hunting through oceans of racks and tables.

Enter Montreal-based Ruscio Studio, brought on to redesign a flagship in Winnipeg, Manitoba, as a new prototype for the brand across the country.

*The casual denim area has a personality of its own created by plywood shelves made to look like distressed wood, gondolas with oversized industrial wheels, tile floors reminiscent of concrete, and industrial pendant lights. The varying heights and styles of the displays invite customers to explore.*

## Scale, scalability, and shopability

"The scale was off," says Robert Ruscio, president and principal designer of Ruscio Studio. The design needed to be simplified, and changing the scale of the fixtures meant changes in logistics as well as looks. "The new fixtures needed to open up sightlines, but that means more folding on side units, so the retailer would need to re-merchandise," he says.

But the design directive was bigger than that. The stores had to be easier to shop, with a look that returned to what made the

## FEATURED MEMBERS

**Mark's** | Winnipeg, Manitoba

**Size:** 18,000 sf

**Design:** Ruscio Studio

**Fixtures:** Artitalia and Wm. Prager Ltd.

**Brick veneer:** Texture Plus

**Laminate:** Wilsonart

**Vinyl flooring:** Mannington Commercial

**Denim fixture design:** Factory Design Worx

**Photography:** Mark's





*Industrial touches in the womenswear department are softer and more playful. Wood in the display fixtures has a whitewashed finish, walls finished in brick veneer and painted off-white add character, while light fixtures made of oil drums painted fuchsia hang between wooden beams replicating the look of an old factory ceiling.*

retailer unique: its workwear roots.

Another challenge was to create a design that would translate to any space. The flagship space had a concrete ceiling that contributed to the industrial look, but designers steered clear of highlighting this feature, as would not be available in other stores. Most Mark's stores are in big-box locations with few or no unusual elements, so the design would have to create its own aesthetic through fixtures and materials, Ruscio says.

His team worked with the retailer and vendors to make sure that everyone was on the same page. "The most difficult part of this redesign was coordination," he says.

"The retailer was used to opening stores in a certain way. We had to get back to the basics, to internal communication, to make sure everyone had the same shared vision. That's always a challenge."

#### **Central fit**

The new design centers around a fitting room in Mark's signature orange. Departments, each with their own look, radiate from it—the fitting room is visible from every department and every department is visible from it.

Walls, fixtures, finishes, and graphics give each department a unique character, but each is a variation on the keywords

"rugged" and "industrial." Dropped ceiling treatments at department entrances include suspended light boxes, faux ceiling beams, and playful lighting. Beyond these department delineations, the spaces open up to focus on products.

The industrial-chic look required many specialty products, from rugged floor treatments to faux walls. For example, oil drums painted fuchsia became fun light fixtures in the women's wear department.

Ruscio says fixtures were designed to "animate the landscape" by varying heights and types to help avoid the look of a sea of racks and to keep the industrial look engaging, rather than alienating.



*Left: Fixtures with the look of reclaimed wood are made of new wood finished in a proprietary process developed by Artitalia Group and its wood mill partner. Unlike reclaimed wood, this wood will look the same for hundreds of fixtures when the redesign rolls out across Canada. Right: Inventive and intriguing, a display of vintage and custom lights in the men's denim department adds to the "heritage" feel and complements lighting mounted on metal poles.*





Ruscio Studio shares more on the redesign process <http://insights.retailenvironments.org/portfolio/marks/>



### Reclamation—real and faux

Many fixtures were created by Montreal’s Artitalia Group, a supplier for Mark’s for over 10 years. One such fixture, an oversized piece with vertical elements that had to be shipped in parts and assembled on-site by employees, is the focal unit for the store and looks as if it is all one piece. The fixtures were originally specified to feature hot-rolled metal and reclaimed wood, but the look had to be replicable.

“Consistency is important to Mark’s, and it’s impossible to achieve consistency with reclaimed wood when you roll out to hundreds of stores,” says Enzo Vardaro, VP of design and marketing for Artitalia.

Though he wouldn’t reveal details, Vardaro says Artitalia achieved the look of reclaimed wood by working directly with a mill to create a process that gives new wood an old look as it’s milled. “A lot of fabricators have methods to manually replicate the look from finished wood,” he says. “This is all done by machine.”

The wood for the fixtures in the Carhartt store-in-a-store area, on the other hand, is reclaimed. It’s pallet wood, which is a popular choice for industrial-style displays, Vardara says. Plumbing pipes and fasteners make up the table legs, racks, and other merchandise display elements.

### A new technique

Wood for the men’s and women’s denim departments, however, is produced a third way. Wm. Prager created fixtures designed by Mark’s and refined by Factory Design Worx based in Whitevale, Ont., Canada, says Jerry Mihailoff, design director. Those plans called for vintage, distressed wood (“all the retailers have been doing it for the past five years,” he says), but it took many tries to get a look the retailer liked that also fit the budget.

“It was a new direction for them and for us,” Mihailoff says. “We prototyped eight to 10 types of woods to get the final look. We started with pallet wood, but it wasn’t

*The Carhartt store-within-a-store features its own rugged look. Fixtures are made of reclaimed pallet wood and plumbing pipes and fasteners.*





Orange pendant lights with an organic vibe bring a friendly touch to the cashwrap, where the Marks logo is front and center. Gray tile floors and cement board cladding keep the look industrial chic.

the look they wanted. Then we tried planking—birch, poplar, fir—but that’s significantly more expensive.”

The final choice was plywood with sawn grooves that mimic the look of planking. A dark, barnwood finish for the men’s denim area and a whitewashed finish for the women’s denim area paired with raw angle iron (no challenge for Wm. Prager’s metal manufacturing equipment) created the right look and feel. The company has since refined the technique to create 4-ft.-by-8-ft. sheets of faux “planks” to use on walls at other Mark’s stores, Mihailoff says.

Creating new techniques and products is not unusual for Wm. Prager, which has worked with Mark’s for nearly 20 years. “Mark’s is a progressive, innovative company,” Mihailoff says. “They’re always looking for the newest and the best quality for the products and their displays. They’re also a bit old school in that they value exper-

ience as a cornerstone to developing new displays and fixtures.”

### Memorable result

“It’s really a new concept from A to Z,” Ruscio says. “Sometimes the client can be a design’s greatest demise, but Mark’s was very receptive. It required a lot of adrenaline from them, not knowing what the end result would be.”

That result is everything Mark’s hoped for and has been popular with customers, he says. “Everybody is looking for something new and memorable,” he says. “We created an environment that’s true to brand and memorable.”



**Gail Deibler Finke** is a Cincinnati-based writer specializing in design topics.



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