

Retail's New British Accent

Carl Gardner visits London's West End, to take a look at Superdry, one of the UK's new generation of stylishly moody retail chains, where the lighting design is key to the brand's instore identity

Recent years have seen the emergence of a new generation of mid-market retailers of casual fashion wear for younger men and women, which put a new emphasis on moody, high contrast shop interiors, coupled with slightly 'retro' styling. One of the most interesting, in lighting design terms, is Superdry, a UK-owned brand

which in only eight years has opened almost 50 stores across the UK, plus outlets in over 20 countries around the world, including Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, the USA, Australia and Taiwan. It recently opened a new London flagship store on the ground floor in the old Austin Reed building on the bottom curve of Regent



The huge Superdry logo sculpture in the central atrium with large fluorescent batten feature lights on the walls behind



There is limited LED lighting in oval vitrine display cases (above) but most other lighting is provided by well-controlled, track-mounted metal halide spotlights (below)



Street – and three more floors are to follow. Its interior design is by Super Group and Sen Ken Ken with lighting design by Paul Nulty Lighting Design.

In the case of one of Superdry's competitors, the US-originated chain, Hollister, there have been complaints that its high contrast pools of lighting are almost a hazard for those with less acute sight – and suspicions that the treatment is intended, in part, as a form of 'visual apartheid' to keep out older customers. So Paul Nulty had to tread a fine line in the lighting for Superdry – and in large part he has succeeded. Yes, the store still has a certain dark and moody ambience, but as someone with ageing eyesight, I didn't find it oppressive – and it was certainly navigable, which is not always the case with Hollister. And there were certainly quite a few older customers who probably weren't just there to check out the lighting!

Accenting the Positive

The main thing that strikes someone like me, who has written about retail lighting for more than 20 years, is the way that modern retail lighting (or at least at the younger end of the market) is no longer based around the old combination of ambient (or circulation) lighting + accent/display lighting. While the M&S's and John Lewis's of this world still do things this way, at Superdry virtually everything is done with the accent lighting – and any ambient/ circulation lighting is simply the result of spill light from the merchandise. Another advantage of this approach, which largely relies on rows of suspended track-

mounted spotlights (in this case by Nordic) is that the dark, unadorned ceiling behind the lights, with its clutter of services, is largely unseen.

To work, such a stark, directional lighting approach puts a high premium on two things – high-quality, compact, energy-efficient light sources, with good colour rendering, and good optical control, to avoid glare. To answer the second requirement, all the spots are kitted out with barn-door louvres, which enable instant on-site beam trimming, especially after relatively frequent merchandise re-jigs. Another benefit is that the look of barn-doors fits with the hard-edged, semi-industrial aesthetic of the brand.

However, it is improvements in the latest generation of low wattage ceramic metal halide lamps that are key to this new trend

– and Nulty confirms that virtually all the spotlighting is done with narrow-beam 20W CDM lamps. 'We considered LEDs,' he admits, 'but the capital investment versus savings doesn't yet stack up for periods of less than five years.' And as we know retail is a fast-moving sector. Certainly, you can't conceive of working in the same way with the old retail display work-horse, tungsten halogen – customers would fry and energy bills would be sky-high. Here, the resulting energy consumption is 14.7W/m² which would be pretty respectable for many offices.

To be fair, track-mounted spots don't exhaust the lighting elements in the store. Dimmed down tungsten makes its appearance in some rather whacky pendant fittings, in which a series of inverted glass jars are used as lamp-holders/shades. LEDs are used in a few



Metal halide spotlighting provides good vertical display illuminance to the merchandise

diminutive, shelf-mounted mini-spots lighting the apparel from close-range (again not something that could be done with tungsten halogen) – and in the oval vitrine display cases. Finally, some soft LED lighting also spills out from beneath the display tables at the rear of the store, which are in fact antique flat-bed railway bogeys mounted on sections of rail.

Atrium of Delight

However, it is the central atrium-stairwell, which will eventually take customers to the upper and lower floors, where some more unusual lighting features draw the eye. Soaring girders and a massive 'Superdry' logo sculpture, made from welded box sections in rusting steel, run upwards through the floors – and on the back walls of the new stairs, spotlight mannequins are interspersed with hefty, 200mm diameter, vertical linear fittings, reclaimed from the Eastern bloc, each equipped with twin T8 1800mm fluorescent battens. More recycled, industrial-style light fittings come in the form of huge, barrel-like 10kW searchlights reclaimed from the Suez Canal, suspended from the atrium walls, to light the signage from above. Each one is fitted with a slightly more eco-friendly 35W CDM source inside frosted bezels.

With the exception of these pieces of industrial antiquity, the lighting treatment throughout is pretty simple, with all the emphasis on the merchandise – something determined, at least in part, by the short, 14-week project time. The resulting ensemble is visually interesting, not to say intriguing – and one that points up an important trend in today's increasingly segmented (and highly competitive) retail sector. When all four floors are up and running, this new outlet could become a 'must-see' shopping destination which could help re-invigorate the slightly less popular end of Regent Street. **Contact Paul Nulty on 0207 401 3635.**



Dimmed down incandescent lighting is used in the quirky pendants, made from inverted glass jars as shades (above); and LED spotlights are integrated into the vertical shelving for close-up accent lighting (below).

