

WINNING
MINING
TOUCH

A background image of a mannequin wearing a white shirt and an orange vest, with a brown hat, set against a brown textured background. The text 'WINNING MINING TOUCH' is overlaid in large white letters.



It's called Touch_Lab_ as customers are invited to feel the softness of pure merino clothing. This new Icebreaker store at Wellington airport picked up a BeST Design Award for its fittingly tactile interior.



Above The side exterior faces onto a bustling Fuel Café.

Left An unconventional use of wool in the store design for Touch_Lab_, Icebreaker's first stand-alone store located in Wellington airport.

It's not often you find yourself walking on a thick, shag-pile carpet when you enter a retail store – but then, it's not often you find a retail store that breaks the mould quite like this one.

The merino sheep that graze the rugged Southern Alps of New Zealand are in many ways the inspiration behind the award-winning Icebreaker Touch_Lab_ clothing store at Wellington International Airport.

"Our garments are made from 100 per cent merino which is very soft," explains Icebreaker's design director, Robert Achten. "Touch plays a key role for new customers experiencing the product. When you put it on, it feels like nothing else."

DESIGN BRIEF

The Wellington store is Icebreaker's very first standalone outlet — until now the clothing has been sold through outdoor stores – and the company wanted the new Touch_Lab_ interior to reflect the softness of their product.

To help create a unique, tactile retail experience, Achten and Icebreaker

CEO Jeremy Moon approached Gerald Parsonson and Sam Donald of Parsonson Architects in Wellington.

"It was an open brief, working in a collaborative fashion with Gerald and Sam," recalls Achten. "It was a lot of fun working with them – they are very purist designers and very considerate of the fine details."

“The message around the carpet is a crucial part of the store design.”

First and foremost, he says, the aim was to create something different and unconventional that would grab the attention of passers-by and bring them in. "Our core desire was to do something that would invite inspection and create an air of mystery."

SEWN AND STITCHED

This was primarily achieved with the unconventional use of wool. "A design was developed considering the idea of a 'sewn' shop that could be cut, curved and stitched," explains Donald.

The concept is expressed by alternate straight and curved carpet panels that



Left The cutting-edge interior of Touch_Lab_ features curving carpet-clad panels.

Right The designer took advantage of the corner site, cutting and curving planes of woollen carpet to encourage passers-by to walk in to the cocooning environment.

run the length of the store, creating a backdrop for Icebreaker-clad white torsos on simple metal rods. Not only do the woollen panels reflect the pure and natural Icebreaker brand message, but they are also spaced to afford tempting glimpses – and easy side access – into the store.

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This is particularly successful, given that the panels face on to the walkway for airline passengers arriving on national flights.

“For those arriving from a flight into Wellington, the organic presence of the sliced carpet forms is viewed directly,” says Donald. “Light spills out between the unusually shaped gaps from the lighter interior into the darker

arrival corridor, accentuating the varying forms and inviting exploration.”

Within the store itself, the shag-pile carpet continues the tactile theme – its undyed look giving it freshly shorn appeal. “The message around the carpet is a crucial part of the store design,” says Achten. “We wanted an inviting space that had warmth, and the carpet is more like something you’d expect to have in your own home than in a retail environment.

“The way the carpeting goes up the sides of the store and over you makes you want to reach out and touch it, and it’s quite cocooning.”

Cocooning, he adds, in a similar way to the garments themselves which are marketed as a complete layered clothing system – all the way from the ‘skin’ layers – or undergarments – to the ‘mid’ and ‘outer’ layers of tops and jackets, along with accessories such as socks and hats.

“The store is dynamic and engages by passers – yet it is enveloping and

intimate once you enter the space,” agrees Donald. “Ideas about layering and breathability, which have come from the product, have helped create something quite different.”

TOP OF THE CLASS

So different, in fact, that this ingenious interior instantly caught the eye of the judges at the prestigious 2006 Designers’ Institute of New Zealand BeST Design Awards – considered the foremost awards in this country for graphic, interior and product design.

Presenting Icebreaker Touch_Lab_ with the Retail Interior Award at the awards ceremony in August, the judges commented: “An elegant solution to the increasingly global challenge of creating a cutting-edge interior for people in transit. The designer has taken advantage of the corner site, cutting and curving planes of woollen carpet in order to display garments and invite passers-by into a pleasingly sensuous environment.”

“It’s hard to do something different with window displays and they have achieved this in a simple and striking fashion using carpet with rough-cut edges,” adds Paul Bellchambers of Planet Design Consultants, who was a member of the judging panel. “The materials used suggest the product they are selling – and the wavy, scissored lines are extremely eye-catching.”

Meanwhile, Touch_Lab_ is a winner for the architects because of its adventurous

“An elegant solution to the increasingly global challenge of creating a cutting-edge interior for people in transit.”

approach to retail design – and the fact that it challenges conventions. “It engages with the public and creates discussion, which has to be a good thing,” they say.



Left Touch_Lab_ is stylishly merchandised in keeping with the brand.



Right Carpet rolls out of the store creating a great invitation for passers-by to wander in and see what it's all about.



Above The attention to design detail is in the small things – like these wooden coathangers – wood being an important component of the 'material tool-box'.

PURE AND SIMPLE

The organic materials and shapes of the panels are in strong contrast to the crisp white geometric surfaces in-store. A compact space of just under 70m² called for a clean, uncluttered interior.

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"The fit-out palette is very calm and light, allowing the product and displays to be the main focus," says Donald. "The '100% pure' brand inspired the white walls and white shopfitting elements."

Aside from white, the only colours used here are an earthy neutral for the carpet, grey for the fascia, and a neon flash of orange for the exterior signage.

We made a conscious decision to extend the boundaries within the interior and create a space that's not

traditionally outdoor," says Robert Achten. "Outdoor stores tend to use a lot of wood, and brown is the natural colouration. Here, white shows off the product and suggests purity."

Wood, however, remains an important component of the 'material tool-box' at the Icebreaker Touch_Lab_; used sparingly, it enhances the natural feel. For example, the clothes hangers, are made of wood – proving the importance of concentrating on the details as well as on the overall picture.

Slatted timber, adds Achten, is an identifiable part of New Zealand's architectural language and New Zealand beech has been used in the changing room for both bench and wall cladding. It also creates a gentle entrance ramp, subtly marking the transition from airport to store.

"We wanted people to feel at ease coming in – almost to drift in," explains Achten. "They can enter at the front or the side – so the flow works both ways."

LOCATION, LOCATION

With good music emanating from the bustling Fuel café opposite the main entrance, and a classy Wishbone eaterie newly established across from the side entrance, this retail store couldn't have wished for a better site.

"It is a particularly good location for the idea – on a corner and with a high amount of traffic – and we have utilised the location to its full potential," says Achten. "It's also well-lit; even from the other side of the airport it almost glows, giving a feeling of warmth."

The brief for the store design, however, was devised regardless of location, he

adds, noting that further Touch_Labs_ have now opened in Queenstown and, most recently, as a store-within-a-store at the Snow + Rock Superstore in London's Covent Garden. Yet another is planned for Melbourne later in the year.

PURE NZ

Wherever its global setting, Icebreaker Touch_Lab_ remains quintessentially New Zealand. "The source of our fibre is the Southern Alps of New Zealand and that's the inspiration behind the design of the garments," explains Robert. "It's where we do our photo shoots and it's a key part of how we express the brand."

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Above Facing onto the airport walkway, the merchandise is clearly on display for passers-by to see and touch.

With an in-house team of 15 graphic, retail and clothing designers, Icebreaker is well-equipped to design its own retail imagery and signage graphics and to commission the distinctive photography that has become so familiar through its advertising.

While the in-store signage is, according to Achten "simple, elegant and designed to make things easy for customers" (and you can't get much simpler than 'woman' and 'man' to demarcate the store's two main sections).

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The photographic images serve quite a different purpose. They are there to stop you in your tracks and get you yearning for a slice of the action – depicting healthy outdoor types in Icebreaker clothing set against jaw-droppingly beautiful South Island mountain scenery.

'Born in the mountains, worn in the mountains' reads the slogan on Icebreaker's website, and a large backlit panel at the end of the store

epitomises this statement – showing a woman standing on a block of ice in the middle of an alpine lake, surrounded by snowcapped peaks.

"A lot of our sales go to tourists, particularly at airports," says Achten. "The pieces that do well here tend to be the lifestyle part of the range – the strong colours and nature prints – as it reaches the less technical buyer than would general outdoor stores.

"The message we express is very appropriate for those wanting to take home a piece of New Zealand."

It's a message with a magic touch. ■

By **Beverly Sellers**, an award-winning freelance writer based in Wellington.