



A store like no other: planning restrictions have forced Abercrombie & Fitch to take an ultra-conservative approach to interior design

High-level system design and programming have given a flagship London fashion store a unique atmosphere, Dan Goldstein discovers

Designer sound



On the light track: Meyer Sound's diminutive MM4 enclosure

Legendary American fashion designer Tom Ford, formerly of Gucci, says he is "sad" that Abercrombie & Fitch has opened a flagship store in London's Savile Row. In a recent interview with London-based magazine *GQ Style*, Ford complained that the arrival of the US chain risks making the city's legendary home of gentlemen's tailoring houses "like any other street".

But you try telling that to the thousands of happy fashionistas who stormed the 18th-century former townhouse on the store's first day of trading two months ago, and who kept the tills ringing long into the night – despite the fact that the shop charges exactly twice that of its US counterparts for many of its clothes.

Not that you could actually hear any of those tills. Like A&F's other flagship stores in Los Angeles and New York, the London shop has been fitted out with one of the most powerful sound systems installed in a retail

explains: "The building is Grade I listed, and all our petitions for acoustical treatment were turned down by English Heritage. Those people were down our throats all the way – and that was a new thing for us."

Happily, through a combination of clever, discreet speaker positioning and the remarkable consistency of the Meyer boxes, Schwartz has succeeded in creating a soundscape which perfectly reflects Abercrombie's brand values – without upsetting the architectural powers-that-be. Sub-woofers have been hidden within cavities at the bottom of the store's custom-made wooden display cases, mid-high boxes bolted onto structural ironwork (which is almost identical in colour), and many of those diminutive MM4s positioned alongside lighting fixtures on the store's ceiling tracks.

"The building has a chequered history: it was built as a private house in 1725, then it

even bigger part in reinforcing the label's brand identity."

The music itself, which is supplied to the store by a third-party programming company, comprises a four-hour loop which, in contrast to many retail outlets, is played out at pretty much the same level throughout the day. The content is updated regularly to ensure the ambience remains fresh, though the tracks themselves may not be brand, spanning new.

The rack room in the store's basement houses the QSC CX702 amps which power the MM4s (all the other enclosures are self-powered), plus Rane RPM series digital processors which effectively divide the store into upper and lower 'zones', should the management feel the need to set alternative levels (or, conceivably, content) for the womenswear and menswear collections.

For Roger Harpum, UK Sales Manager for Meyer Sound, the project has enormous promotional value, as the company diversifies from its core markets of touring and large-venue installations.

"Abercrombie & Fitch is really important for us as a reference site for the retail market," says Harpum. "It demonstrates to both installers and end users that the right sound system can transform a store's atmospherics and profitability."

For Schwartz, whose role embraces video as well as audio system design, making the step from independent consultancy to retail technology guru is already paying dividends, even though he only made the switch at the start of this year.

"No other store in the world has an in-house department dedicated to audio and video," he reflects. "Working for Abercrombie & Fitch, I have access to technology I couldn't dream of as a sound contractor. But that's the kind of commitment this company makes."

And if, like Tom Ford, you remain sceptical about the store's appeal, then as the old saying goes: you really need to hear this for yourself. ■

'Visually this store is totally unlike any other of our sites, because the look and the feel are very traditional. That means audio has to play an even bigger part in reinforcing the label's brand identity' David Schwartz,

Abercrombie & Fitch

store anywhere. Using a grand total of 57 Meyer Sound UPM-1P UltraCompact Wide Coverage Loudspeakers, 38 UMS-1P UltraCompact Subwoofers and 31 MM4 Miniature Wide-Range Loudspeakers (the last from the company's application-tailored Industrial Series), the shop pumps out a wall-to-wall diet of feelgood European house and techno music, at levels which would put a good number of modestly sized nightclubs to shame.

The audio system design is the work of David Schwartz, a New York-based specialist who specified Meyer Sound for Abercrombie's NYC flagship as an independent consultant, and whose design there so impressed the retailer's management that they hired him as a full-time employee. The London project was more demanding because, as Schwartz

became a bank, and the previous tenant was Jil Sander," reveals Schwartz.

"The challenge for the interior design team – and for all of us involved in the project – was to ensure that, if and when the store changes hands again, everything we have installed can be removed and leave the fabric of the building intact."

All fine and dandy in theory, but not necessarily what the doctor ordered when the location demands upright tradition, while the clientèle – which typically sits in the age range of between 18 and 24 – favours trendy informality.

"Visually this store is totally unlike any Abercrombie & Fitch site, because the look and the feel are very traditional," says Schwartz. "That means audio has to play an



Imposing: the 18th-century building on the corner of Savile Row was formerly a bank



Top of the pile: Meyer UPM-1P loudspeakers hidden above piles of T-shirts



Big bottom: UMS-1P subwoofers sit under stonewashed denim