



# An American export

American Apparel bursts into Canada's mall market

By Erin M. Loewe, Contributor

Los Angeles-based American Apparel Inc. is best-known for its sweatshop-free T-shirts and casual apparel, if not for its racy advertising and even racier antics of its founder, Dov Charney. The company opened its first retail

store in 2003 and hasn't looked back since. In October 2008, American Apparel reported that sales for stores open for more than 12 months increased 22 percent since the previous year. Until recently, most American Apparel stores were

street locations in urban areas. But in 2008, the company partnered with Montreal-based Ruscio Studio Inc. to create an updated design suitable for major mall locations in Canada.

The first store outfitted with the new design concept was in the Sherway Gardens Mall in Toronto, which opened last August. Until the 2,265-sq.-ft. store debuted, American Apparel stores sported exposed fluorescent lighting, wall-to-wall grid-wall and random merchandising to maximize the space available for product. "The mall design coordinators were very cooperative and motivated to make sure our mall locations offered the same experience to the customers as our street locations," says Dan Abenheim, American Apparel's Canadian retail director. "Neither of us wanted a 'mall version' of an American Apparel shop. Our mall locations, as our street locations, utilize our standard grid display system and graphic design installations, which are conceived and produced by our award-winning creative team in our factory headquarters in downtown Los Angeles."

According to Robert Ruscio, senior designer of Ruscio Studio, it was necessary to balance mall appeal and polish with brand identity. This meant ensuring that the mall design coordinators and American Apparel understood each other's objectives. "It's a delicate operation, really, because you don't want to reduce or modify the essence of the brand, but at the same time you have to bring certain elements that will give it more of a mall look," he explains. A major aspect of the new design was breaking up the long rows of gridwall with panel dividers, which allows the store to keep flexibility while making the gridwall less evident.

In addition, Ruscio says bold lifestyle graphics played an important role in the overall look of the store, but in a slightly different way. "In previous stores, the graphics tended to be all over the place," he says. "With this concept, we were a little more disciplined and presented them in a much more organized way above the merchandise walls."

Furthermore, a floor-to-ceiling backlit lifestyle graphic dominates the store's façade. "It really pulls people in and acts as a beacon in the mall area," says Sasha D'Aigle, intermediate designer, Ruscio Studio. Besides being a recognizable brand element from American Apparel, the graphic window also conceals the cashwrap area.

Abenheim says in the end, the point of entry was not treated too differently from a street shop. "This was our way to keep it authentic, and it was a successful choice," he notes. "A shopper who



Photos: Luca Ruscio, Montreal



Above: Flexible rolling fixtures and wall panels break up the wall-to-wall gridwall present in previous street-side stores.



Right: Colorful basics stand out among the store's neutral color palette.

sees our super-graphics and mannequins in the windows recognizes the scheme immediately. It is a simple treatment, but at this point it is our signature look."

The designers and American Apparel wanted to keep the store's palette neutral to allow the merchandise to shine. Whitewashed oak floors, white grids and white panels are punctuated by red fixtures and lighting. Intimate apparel is neatly tucked inside a large red "bunk" fixture in the center of the store, while red fluorescent bulbs frame the tops of each merchandise area on both sides of the store.

Another place the lighting takes on a touch of red is in the 130-bulb fluorescent "chandelier" that traces the center of the ceiling. "We kept the fluorescent look that American Apparel seems to like, but we created something that had a little bit of a pattern," Ruscio explains. "We put some gels in there to create color, and it ended up being another way to remain true to the brand."

The design team had to make adjustments to

the fitting room area as well. Besides using low-heat LEDs to illuminate, Ruscio says they tried to make the area more private than the typical American Apparel store. "We had to make them have doors, not just curtains, so you can't see someone changing half-naked," he explains. "Some shoppers might have been turned off by the old fitting room design."

According to Abenheim, the company plans to open another five to eight stores in Canada during 2009, spread among mall and street locations. Ruscio says that overall, response to the new mall concept has been positive from both customers and employees. "If you really look at the design, it's still distinctive, and you still know that it's American Apparel," he says. "It just goes to show how a brand can coexist very easily in a space without having the space overwhelming the brand itself. This is a great example of how American Apparel has a very strong image, and it can easily reign in a space." **DDi**

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## project file

**American Apparel**  
25 The West Mall  
Toronto

**CONTRACT DESIGN FIRM/ARCHITECT**  
Ruscio Studio Inc.  
Montreal

Robert Ruscio, senior designer  
Sasha D'Aigle, intermediate designer and project manager  
Nadia Palumbo, intermediate designer and project manager  
Nancy Iglesias, architectural technician  
Fadi Abou-Saver, architectural technician

**GENERAL CONTACTORS**  
Pace Construction  
Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

**ENGINEERS**  
Dallaire Consultants  
Saint-Lambert, Quebec, Canada

**OUTSIDE DESIGN CONSULTANTS**  
Les Ventes Futura  
Eclairage Inc.  
Sainte-Thérèse, Quebec, Canada

**FLOORING**  
Euro Woodworking  
Toronto

**LIGHTING**  
Cooper Industries Inc. (Corelite)  
Houston

Juno Lighting Inc.  
Des Plaines, Ill.

Pioneer Lighting Inc.  
Toronto

Prudential Lighting Corp.  
Los Angeles

Lee Filters Inc.  
Woodland Hills, Calif.

**FIXTURES**  
Hollaender Mfg. Co. (speed rail grids and racks)  
Cincinnati

**SIGNING/GRAPHICS**  
Ruscio Studio Inc.  
Montreal

Jessica Fiorella, graphic designer  
Noé Sardet, graphic designer

**STOREFRONT LIGHT BOX**  
Media Graph Inc.  
Montreal

Information in the project file is provided by the retailer and/or design firm.