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CATHERINE'S FINE ACCESSORIES

TEXT BY MATT MUSGROVE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT BENSON



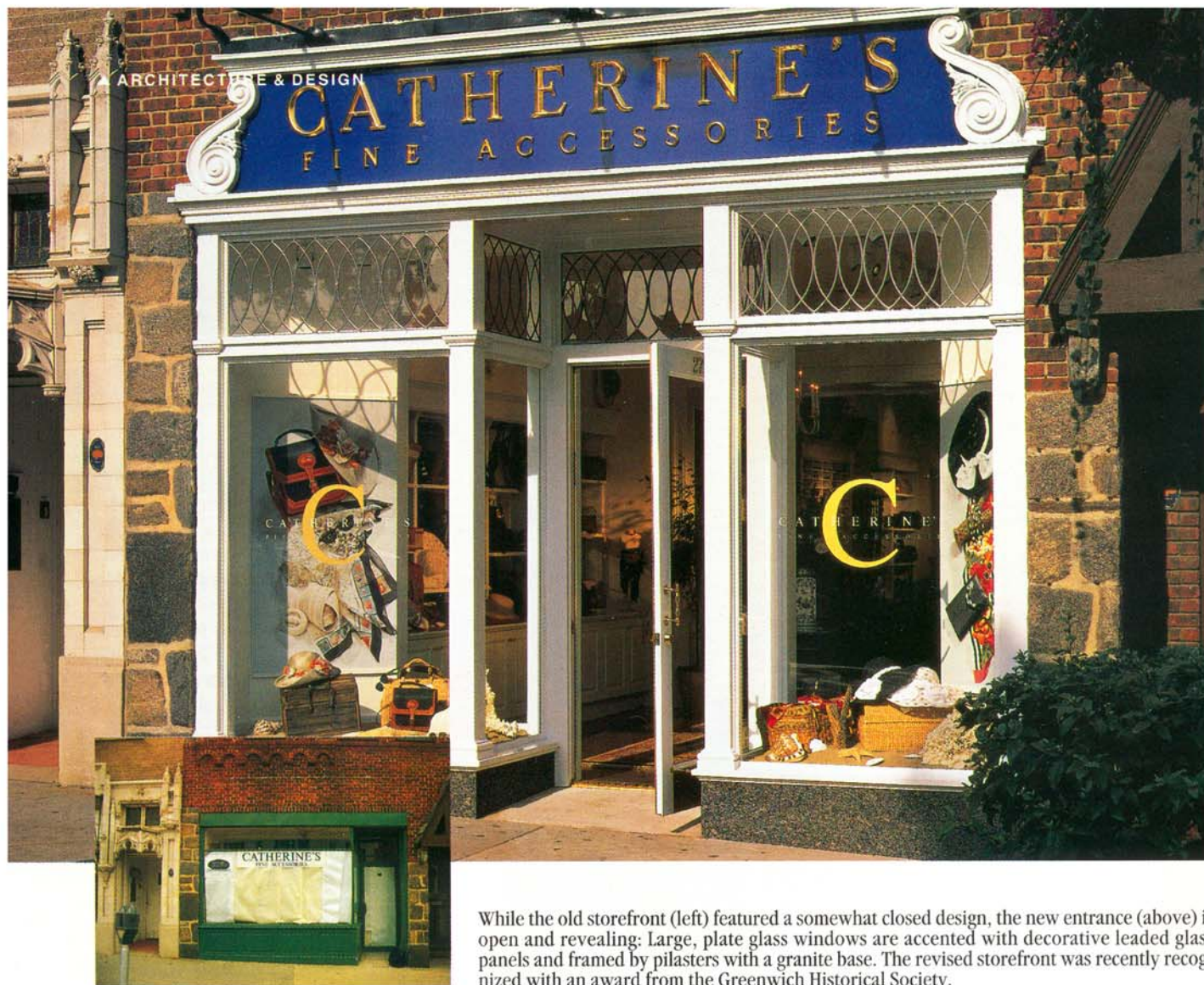
MUCH HAS ALREADY been made of the large chain-store onslaught during the last decade. The Wal-Marts and Home Depots of the world have methodically destroyed main street shopping districts in towns from coast to coast.

But there remains a few places where the entrepreneurial spirit thrives, areas where the shopping experience still carries a "chic" aura, where shopping is a hobby, a pastime, an *event*.

Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills is one such place. And back east, in the wealthiest state per capita, is Greenwich, Conn.'s revered shopping district, Greenwich Avenue. This one-way street is lined with exquisite specialty shops — some pricey, some not. Very few national chains infiltrate, and that's not by accident. The town of Greenwich, its Chamber of Commerce and the Greenwich Historical Society strongly encourage local, unique specialty retailers in the town's central shopping district.

One store that passed the Greenwich test, Catherine's Fine Accessories, opened in June of 1994 and has since experienced the success that comes with being a Greenwich Avenue specialty retailer. Catherine's, owned and operated by entrepreneur and former director of marketing for Estee Lauder, Laurie Berrang, has been featured in *Vogue* and *Women's Wear Daily* with a focus on Berrang's product line and the effective merchandise presentation strategies used on the retail floor at Catherine's, where women's accessories range from

Exclusive Greenwich Avenue, in the heart of Greenwich, Conn., is home to Catherine's Fine Accessories, a traditionally detailed accessories boutique. The 1,350-square-foot site once housed a bath shop, whose green beginnings (above) were transformed by architect Hilton-VanderHorn into a residential-like space (left): Green fixtures were painted white, and oak flooring was installed over the existing tile.



While the old storefront (left) featured a somewhat closed design, the new entrance (above) is open and revealing: Large, plate glass windows are accented with decorative leaded glass panels and framed by pilasters with a granite base. The revised storefront was recently recognized with an award from the Greenwich Historical Society.

hair products priced at \$5 to handbags tagged at \$500. But what is most important to Berrang is Catherine's recent award from the Greenwich Historical Society for its exceptional storefront. To have earned this distinction on Greenwich Avenue means something.

"Greenwich is one of few places where people still shop locally," Berrang says. "There is still a need for retail stores here. I specifically wanted to be on Greenwich Avenue; not to be on this street would be the death of any store. It's up there with Rodeo Drive."

Location alone is not the answer for all stores. It takes the right mix of merchandise and a tasteful, memorable presentation to enjoy success in an exclusive shopping district. In fact, the 1,350 square feet currently occupied by Catherine's was most recently leased by a bath accessory store, and Berrang says the site had occupant turnover every year for the last five. High turnover didn't scare Berrang. She jumped at the opportunity to lease the space.

"The location is phenomenal," Berrang says. "Perhaps the previous occupants did not utilize the space as effectively." In any retail venture, a little luck also helps.

"We were fortunate that The Gap moved in next door," she says. Catherine's line of hair accessories, leathergoods, belts and stockings ("everything except clothing," Berrang says) works in harmony with the clothing specialist in the adjacent space. "The Gap is the consummate destination store no matter what town you're in," she says.

Berrang knew that her line of women's accessories would work in the shopping district in Greenwich. Experience with Estee Lauder provided her with that instinct. Berrang spent nine years with the women's beauty product corporation in London and six years in New York City. And it was while she worked in The Big Apple that Berrang discovered her desire to open her own store. "I'm a single mother raising a little boy," she says. "The daily commute into New

York left me too little time with him."

While prior experience had prepared Berrang for the merchandising and marketing aspects of the business, practical application to a specific space was another matter. "I interviewed a lot of architects," she explains. "I had absolutely no background in building a retail space so I had to have someone I could relate to. I needed someone who would fit my budget and who could work very quickly." Time was indeed of the essence. Berrang leased the space in April of 1994 and intended to be online by June "in order to be open for the summer," she says.

One of the qualities Berrang envisioned for Catherine's was a "homey" feel. That made her ultimate selection of upscale residential specialist Hilton-VanderHorn a logical choice. "In 24 hours after our first meeting, they came back with some ideas," Berrang says.

Because of Berrang's limited budget, Charles Hilton of Greenwich-based Hilton-VanderHorn says most of the



allotted funds were spent on the storefront — a key for the Greenwich Avenue district. On the interior, the design team (Charles Hilton, Douglas VanderHorn and Daniel Pardy) had to creatively utilize all of the existing fixtures, which Berrang purchased from the previous tenant as a condition of the lease.

While the architects worked with the existing interior fixtures and structure, the storefront underwent radical alterations. The design involves large, plate glass windows accented with decorative leaded glass panels. The windows are framed by pilasters with a granite base, which act as a support system for the broad sign. The sign is painted wood with custom-carved scroll brackets and letters coated in gold leaf.

"We channeled most of our resources into the storefront," Hilton says. "On the inside, we broke the space into three main rooms to achieve the 'home' feel. In the main entryroom, most of the pre-existing fixtures were reused. We had everything repainted and added new knobs to the cabinets." To add elbowroom to the entryway, existing cabinetry was relocated deeper into the space. Then, stock moldings were used to create the illusion of freestanding shelf units actually being built out of the

Stock moldings create the illusion of freestanding shelf units that appear to be built out of the wall. The more centralized space focuses on design amenities — giftwrap counter, belt storage unit, custom jewelry case — and accommodates typically residential furnishings. The objective was to remind customers of their own living rooms.

wall. As the space opens into the central sales area, design amenities include a giftwrap counter, belt storage unit, a custom jewelry case and (Berrang's favorite) a children's play area.

"Mothers can come in, have some coffee and spend an hour shopping because the children are occupied in the fully outfitted play area," explains Berrang.

To make the atmosphere even more comfortable and inviting for shoppers, Berrang supplied various furnishings that one might typically find in a home. To add warmth, 2-1/2-inch stained strip oak flooring was installed over the existing tile. The original track lighting was incorporated into the new design, but Hilton-VanderHorn installed additional lighting in the entryway to provide general illumination and spotlighting to highlight merchandise.

"The main objective was to make the store feel comfortable and to remind people of their own living rooms," Hilton says. Residential-like comfort has been shown to be a plus in the Green-

wich shopping district, since so many of the regular customers are from within the community.

"It's a dream come true to have a store like Catherine's in a community such as this one," Berrang says, "where there's no place to go to get a pair of stockings without packing up the kids and going to the mall."

Go to the mall in Greenwich? Surely you jest. ▲

Matt Musgrove is an Atlanta-based freelance writer.

THE PLAYERS

CLIENT

Laurie Berrang, Owner

Consultants

Architecture and Design: Hilton-VanderHorn Architects

Charles F. Hilton III

Douglas A. VanderHorn

Daniel J. Pardy

Contractor: Bruce Wernert Associates Inc.

Suppliers

Carved Scrolls (exterior): Dimitrios Klitsas;

Fine Wood Sculptor

Leaded Windows: Rolff Studios

Lighting: Cuyler Associates

