

Sporting Good Looks

Giorgio Borruso harnesses kinetic energy to re-energize Fila sportswear and fuel the fanaticism of fans.

Michael Webb

Sport has become the universal religion, leaping over national and cultural boundaries and inducing a sense of ecstasy in screaming fans and sweating acolytes. Sports apparel stores, no less than stadiums, are temples of this cult – places where true believers can outfit themselves for field, court, or gym. Most are there to participate vicariously, by sporting their team's colours or donning high-performance footwear to browse the mall. No firm has exploited this addiction better than Nike, which has developed brash super-stores, full of flashing screens and loud music, to equip a few athletes and draw in a multitude of wannabes.

Fila wants its share of this consumer frenzy, but it's taking a much more sophisticated approach. The company that was founded in 1911 in the foothills of the Italian Alps introduced its first line of elegant sportswear in 1973, and quickly built a reputation for footwear and apparel that combined performance and beauty. No baggy sateen shorts or Day-Glo stripes for teenage jocks; their target audience was stylish men and women, over thirty, with a passion for tennis, golf, yoga, or jogging. However, as the firm expanded to become a major player in Europe, the Americas, and Asia, its identity became blurred and it lost ground to aggressive competitors. Fila is now owned by Sports Brands International and headquartered in New York.



Page taken from the issue. Photography by Benny Chan

In 2004, new management shuttered the network of Fila stores in the USA and hired award-winning architect Giorgio Borroso to develop a new retail concept. Best-known for the surrealist fantasy of his stores for Fornarina, another venerable Italian brand (Frame 45, 2005), Borroso left his native Sicily to study in Spain and open his design studio in Venice, California. The 500-m² showcase he has created for Fila in mid-Manhattan is a dynamic expression of motion and style. It's a destination and a prototype for new stores that the company is planning to open across America and around the world.

Growing up in Italy, Borroso developed a fondness and sense of affinity with Fila, and he sought to infuse its heritage with a fresh energy. He understood that the company wanted to return to its roots while moving forward, and spent four months discussing its needs. To express the elegance, lightness, and grace of the products, Borroso tried to isolate a single defining characteristic of sports, and came up with movement. That one word is the key to everything that followed. Expansive unframed windows on the busiest stretch of Madison Avenue, just north of Grand Central Terminal, reveal an interior in which everything appears to be in a state of arrested motion.



Page taken from the issue. Photography by Benny Chan

If Salvador Dali was a source of inspiration for the fluid furnishings of Fornarina, Umberto Boccioni and other Italian Futurists provided a model for Fila.

White fabric soffits swirl like clouds on a windy afternoon, concealing theatrical lighting on the ceiling above. Structural columns are encased within two vortexes of mirror-finish aluminium strips that provide kaleidoscopic reflections. A canted rear wall, 5 m high and 16 long, is incised with wavy lines and serves as a backdrop for up to 300 shoes, deployed like birds in flight. A quotation from Leonardo da Vinci adorns the sinuous sales counter: 'The foot is a masterpiece of engineering and a work of art.' Dry wall serves as a projection screen and is cut away to frame top-lit displays. Organic folds of pale blue fabric, stretched on an aluminium frame, lead customers to the curtained changing rooms and capture shadows of moving figures.

The spirit of invention is evident at the point of entry, where an air curtain provides climate control for the interior in a city that is uncomfortably hot and humid or bone-chillingly cold for much of the year. Shoe-like stools are topped with soft acrylic gel, and wood benches dip and swell.



Page taken from the issue. Photography by Benny Chan

Arched display racks of acrylic wrapped around steel armatures lean forward and appear to float. Borruso describes his furnishings as 'muscles in tension, resting in extraordinarily beautiful poses, ready at any moment to spring to life, dancing, running and jumping on the dark wenge wood floor, which resounds like a harmonic chamber.' There's an echo here of Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto: 'The world has been transformed by a new beauty, the beauty of speed . . .'

'Creativity at an affordable price' is Borruso's preferred strategy, and the Fila showcase demonstrates how well it can work. He designed the elements so that they slot together and can be easily reconfigured, here and wherever else they are employed. The details and finishes are impeccably realized, but the store furnishings are made to perform as well as the products they set off. 'This look will infuse all our new stores – we're trying to achieve consistency,' says Sheryl Bloom, Fila's Managing Director for Retail, who worked closely with Borruso and TPG, the executive architects. Together they've channelled the raw energy of New York and the refined craftsmanship of Italy to achieve a distinctive image that should carry the company into its second century of operation.