

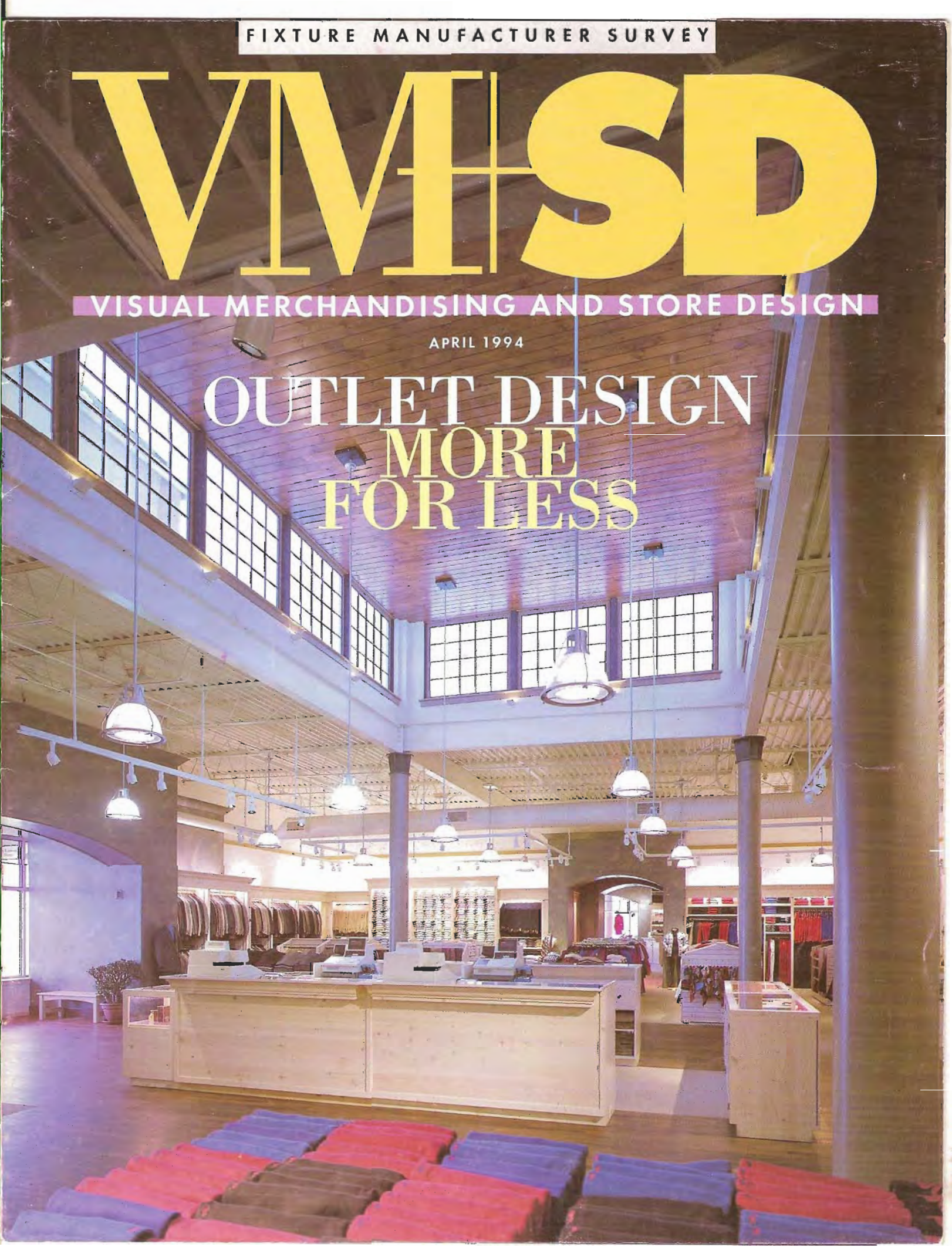
FIXTURE MANUFACTURER SURVEY

VMSD

VISUAL MERCHANDISING AND STORE DESIGN

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OUTLET DESIGN MORE FOR LESS



RETAIL

WHILE SHOPPERS
LOOK FOR GOOD
BUYS, DESIGNERS
OF OUTLET STORES
SEEK THEIR OWN
SORTS OF
BARGAINS

BY STACEY WITT
TOEVS

Americans love outlet retailing. In the early days, busloads of bargain-hunting shoppers descended upon the pipe-rack, bare-bulb outlet, actually located next door to the factory. Today, by design, it's much more difficult to distinguish the factory outlet store in the strip mall from its full-price counterpart in the regional center.

In the past 20 years, outlet stores have boomed. In 1993, reports *Value Retail News*, there were some 300 outlet centers in operation nationwide — representing over 9,000 store units. And still manufacturer's outlet stores continue to proliferate making outlets one of the retail industry's fastest growing segments. While shoppers have obviously made these outposts a habit, any store designer hoping for outlet commissions must be prepared to work even harder within tight outlet-

store budgets to reflect a manufacturer's well-honed image.

In fact, more and more retailers like Polo/Ralph Lauren insist their outlet images remain consistent with their mainline operations. Says Craig Hardman, senior associate at Seattle-based NBBJ Retail Concepts and project manager for Polo/Ralph Lauren Factory Stores, "When the outlet concept was unique in offering bargains, manufacturers didn't need to differentiate. But when customers get a special experience in addition to bargains, the design reinforces the value of what they're buying."

We asked four retailers and their contract designers how they hold down costs and where and when they cut or substitute materials in order to deliver value engineering to value merchants.

Although all Polo/Ralph Lauren outlets reflect some corporate consistency, each has its own local character. In this Lancaster, Pa., store, the surrounding Amish and Mennonite communities influenced the fixturing design.



PAUL WARCHOL, NEW YORK CITY

WALDEN

POLO / RALPH LAUREN FACTORY STORES

One of the most desirable tenants in outlet centers around the country, Polo/Ralph Lauren Factory Stores occupies prime real estate at some 48 centers. Steven Grasso, senior director of real estate and store development for the Lyndhurst, N.J.-based Polo outlet division, says about six to eight more will open this year. And though the outlets carry off much of the feel of the mainline stores, they are a bit more casual.

NBBJ's Craig Hardman has spent almost three years working with Polo on more than 20 stores. He says each outlet is designed to reflect the materials or characteristics of local style. While conveying the look and feel of a Polo store, every outlet is unique. "The challenge," says Hardman, "is to take the common thread — the standard fixturing and atti-

tude of Polo — and adapt it to characteristics of the region and also the mall itself.

"In every locale," says Hardman, "We try to have a strong enough concept that it can work with a variety of material options." That may take form in plaster walls finished to resemble concrete — much cheaper than having concrete poured — or other materials solutions. The designers establish priorities in each design like the stone fireplace keynote in a mountain lodge setting at Polo's Medford, Ore., location near Crater Lake.

"We went through a value engineering phase to save money," says Hardman. "It was a conscious decision to keep the fireplace and add some acoustical ceiling, for instance, instead of a Sheetrock ceiling or wood. We also eliminated some of the wood floor as a way to balance the costs. Often, we're thinking about the costs, but

we're forced to decide which of the elements helps reinforce the concept best. Asking, 'Is there another way of accomplishing the same thing?'"

Says Grasso, "The dollars spent in the outlet stores are very different from the full retail stores." Stained, painted or color-washed knotty or clear pine replaces the more pricey veneers and solid woods of the retail stores. Sisal-like carpeting of durable wool-nylon stands in for the retailer's signature floor covering but is more cost effective and wears better than the real thing.

Versatility and wear-and-tear are watchwords. Says Grasso, "In some stores the traffic is so high, you have to anticipate what the repair and maintenance schedule is going to be. We design from a flexibility standpoint. Shelves and hang bars are easy things to replace." Each store re-

The Pigeon Forge, Tenn., location has a more traditional, residential, Ralph Lauren feeling. Display in Polo outlets usually consists of lifestyle vignettes in each area such as this knotty-pine bed or a niche or window presentation.



ceives a standard range of knotty pine rolling fixtures — lower-cost versions of a classic design fixture with crown molding.

From Polo's perspective, says Hardman, "The lower grade of wood reflects the factory outlet character. There's no antique furniture. We take the basic fixture and play with the color and finish so it fits a variety of situations. Making it flexible, but building on a standard, prototypical kit of parts including cashwrap and fixtures."

Hardman admits the temptation when selecting materials might be to say, "It's just an outlet store. But the other side of it," he says, is remembering "it's not just an outlet store, it's Polo." Where marble may otherwise serve, the outlets will get brick instead. "We equate it to the country estate versus the sophisticated urban mansion. One's more casual, but there's still a basic elegance or simplicity."