

Soothing and serene

A new design for H2O Plus introduces a signature theme of blue illumination on white and neutral surfaces

By Gareth Fenley, Senior Editor

When H2O Plus opened its first store in 1989 featuring a selection of spa and skin care products and fragrances, it was unique in the category, predating the Body Shop. A decade later in 1999, the small but growing chain had significant competition, and its original design had become dated. "That once-forward design was no longer forward," explains Brad Lenhart, director of communications for the Chicago-based company, who is involved with branding and store design. "As we started opening new stores, we saw it was time to step forward again."

Enter Architectura of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, the firm retained to develop a new look. "We were commissioned to help them rebrand their stores to be more in line with their product and philosophy," says Susan Smallenberg, principal and director. "Water is the obvious brand image that they wanted to put forward, but they had not been very successful in presenting it in some of their locations. We helped develop a minimalist, serene environment that was water-themed. Lighting became a big part of the design."

Aside from the lighting, the resulting environment is predominantly white with accents of blue and gray throughout the millwork, which uses a 75 percent gloss white lacquer finish. The counters and flooring have a proprietary custom concrete finish. Glass textures and finishes, including custom-cut frosted glass, promote a cool, refreshing atmosphere.

Lighting consultant Galina Zbrizher, then principal of the lighting group of Reid Crowther and Partners and currently principal of Total Lighting Solutions, both of Vancouver, headed up the lighting design. "The objectives were to create visual interest that would invite entry, and once the customers were in the store, to keep their interest on the products," she says. "And it was very important for the clients to look good." The blue lighting that is so integral to creating the evocation of water was a challenge for that last objective. "If all of the light was blue, we would make people look very sickly. We limited the blue light to coves in the ceiling and walls, and the other light in the space is very high in color rendering. At the counters you are bathed in directional



Photo: Elaine Kilburn, Vancouver, B.C., Canada

H2O Plus creates a restful and serene impression with the use of blue lighting on white surfaces, evoking the brand-centered theme of water. High color rendering halogen sources illuminate the areas in the store where customers stand.

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
Originally, the blue light source for the wall illumination was to be provided by cold cathode. However, when a 1,450-sq.-ft. space on Vancouver's upscale Robson Street opened up that was perfect for H2O Plus to debut its new design, a very short project schedule required the use of fluorescent lamps with color sleeves.

All of the sources in the store are long-life lamps, including T5HO fluorescents for displays and triple-tube compact fluorescents for wall-washers. The halogen lamps are dimmed to 95 percent, which more than doubles their 5,000-hour rated life.

Behind the cashwrap, the designers splurged on a special feature: a vertical glass panel with color-changing LEDs from Color Kinetics, Boston, mounted behind it. "The whole surface changes color from turquoise to blue so it looks like waves slapping on the shore," says Zbrizher.

The overall impression, according to Lenhart, inculcates a sense of relaxation. "It's a wonderful feeling of luxury—like you're walking from the chaos of

the outside into the oasis of H2O Plus," he says. "The design really sets us apart from the rest of the industry. When you go into Aveda or Origins you don't see a lot of space given to simply free space for the eyes. They shove as much stuff as they can in there with products or visuals that are straining to the mind. We're really happy with the lighting because it's soothing to the mind. We could have put a sign up and made you read some copy, but we feel the subconscious approach is more impactful."

The team has continued to evolve and fine-tune the design over the course of building out eight new stores modeled on the prototype, bringing the total number of H2O Plus locations to 35 in North America. New stores in Las Vegas and Beverly Hills will be using a faux-stone product instead of concrete for the flooring, to eliminate cracking and scuffing. The lighting design remains basically unchanged. "We've had a lot of fun," says Smallenberg. "We all like the philosophy behind the product. Perfection is a thing we all strive for, and as we look at each new project, we try to come to it with a fresh approach." 

<p>PROJECT FILE</p>	<p>H2O PLUS 929 Robson Street Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada</p>	<p>Canada <i>Galina Zbrizher, LC, IALD (now principal of Total Lighting Solutions)</i></p>	<p>LIGHTING Color Kinetics Inc. Boston Elliptipar West Haven, Conn. Iguzzini Recanati, Italy Kurt Versen Westwood, N.J.</p>
	<p>CLIENT TEAM H2o Plus, Chicago <i>Cindy Melk, president</i> <i>Brad Lenhart, director of com- munications</i></p>	<p>GENERAL CONTRACTOR Heron Construction & Millwork Ltd. Richmond, British Columbia, Canada</p>	<p>PROPS AND DECORATIVES Joel Berman Glass Studios Accuglass Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada</p>
	<p>CONTRACT DESIGN FIRM Architectura Planning Architecture Interiors Inc. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada <i>Susan Smallenberg, principal and director</i> <i>D. Brent North, principal</i> <i>Alan Endall and Philip Gowland, design team</i></p>	<p>ELECTRICAL ENGINEERS Earth Tech Canada, formerly Reid Crowther and Partners Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada</p>	<p>SIGNING / GRAPHICS Architectura Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada</p>
	<p>LIGHTING DESIGN Lighting Group in Reid Crowther and Partners Vancouver, British Columbia,</p>	<p>FIXTURES Heron Construction & Millwork Richmond, British Columbia, Canada</p>	<p>FLOORING AKA Beton Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada</p>
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