



Mitchells Family to Renovate Wilkes Bashford



A rendering of the new staircase for Wilkes Bashford.

Wilkes Bashford is about to get a facelift.

The venerable San Francisco-based specialty store will begin renovations next month on its Sutter Street store that will increase selling space by 35 percent by the time it is completed next year.

“We have an opportunity to make it the flagship of the West Coast in terms of a multibrand store,” said Bob Mitchell, co-president of the Mitchells Family of Stores, which purchased Wilkes in December of 2009.

The company has hired Gensler, a San Francisco-based design firm, to renovate the store, which will remain open during the multiphase project, which is slated to be finished by November of 2012.

“Our plan is to polish San Francisco’s retail jewel in order to enhance the shopping experience for our customers,” said Jack Mitchell, chief executive officer of the Mitchells Family of

Stores. “As a locally based design firm, Gensler understands our history and recognizes that we have a world-class store that is distinctly San Franciscan. We are confident that during and following the refit, Wilkes Bashford will stand out even more as the city’s clothier that offers a special experience to each and every customer, something very few mono-brand stores are able to provide.”

Bob Mitchell said the plan is to “expand the footprint” of the existing store, converting the offices on the top floor to selling space and removing the central elevator. The lower level of the building will be the only nonselling area.

“We want to create a townhouse feel,” Bob Mitchell said. “We believe a lot of customers will enjoy a more residential shopping feeling.”

Mitchell believes there is “a big opportunity to grow the business,” and is projecting sales will double within three to five years. “We’re expecting exponential growth,” he said.

Mitchell noted that currently “the floors don’t sync and they’re harder to shop.”

During the renovation, adjacencies will be improved, with the main floor housing “the best of Wilkes Bashford for men,” an assortment of merchandise that will include highlights from every vendor in a variety of categories. That will be joined by women’s jewelry and accessories — “things you don’t have to try on,” Mitchell said — and men’s shoes.

The existing elevator, which is located in the center of the store, is “an impediment to business,” Mitchell said, and will be removed. “We will make the store bigger and more open.” Additional windows will also be exposed to provide more light and an airy feeling to the store.

A staircase will be installed that will lead to the second floor, where women’s shoes and accessories will be housed. The third floor will feature women’s luxury lifestyle merchandise such as Brunello Cucinelli and others, and the fourth floor will house women’s couture designer merchandise.

Men’s wear will span the fifth through seventh floors with luxury sportswear on five; furnishings on six, along with custom clothing; and super-high-end brands including Brioni and Kiton in the penthouse, Mitchell said. The store will be serviced by a new high-speed elevator in a less visible location.

Overall, the renovation will add 35 percent more square footage to the store.

“We’ll be creating a real shopping environment that is bigger and better,” Mitchell said.

“Our design firm has been a part of the fabric of San Francisco since we started in 1965, so, like Wilkes Bashford, we have a strong link to San Francisco,” said Jeff Henry, design director for Gensler. “The new design will honor Wilkes Bashford’s past by incorporating elements of the store’s heritage into an updated, fresher look and feel. Our goal is to create a vibrant and accessible refit that fully showcases not only the clothing, but the exceptional personalized

service that has been and continues to be a hallmark of shopping at Wilkes Bashford.”

Mitchell admitted that the renovation plan is “aggressive,” and there is “tremendous competition” in the California market. “We’re respectful of that, but there are enough people out there who want to shop in a specialty store, not a department store.”

Wilkes, which also operates a store in Palo Alto, Calif., was on the brink of liquidation when the Mitchell family swooped in as white knights to rescue the business by buying its assets for \$4.1 million. Its annual volume is estimated at around \$20 million, and men’s accounts for around 60 percent of sales.

Bob Mitchell said the company’s performance in the last fiscal year has improved. “Starting last spring, we saw solid improvement, and that has continued into fall,” he said. “We’re very encouraged. It’s such a huge market and if we get a small percentage of the business there, we will be successful.”

Wilkes Bashford, the store’s founder and namesake, who has remained with the business as an ambassador, is a San Francisco icon who was one of the first retailers to offer European designer clothing to U.S. customers when he opened his store on Union Square in 1966. The Palo Alto store opened in 1999.