



What she describes as a dearth of high quality, stylish shoes for children has inspired UK-based designer Louise Shill to launch her own luxury children's footwear brand, Young Soles London.

Quality demands drive designer to do her own thing

Louise Shill is not the only parent to have become concerned about improving the quality of shoes available to her own children, but she is one of a select band in recent times to have done something concrete about it, setting up her own footwear brand, Young Soles London.

Northampton-based Teresa O'Driscoll did something similar in 2011 when she launched Premier Shoes For Girls; she had a health issue to address because her teenage daughter was suffering back problems and did not like any of the podiatrist-recommended support shoes enough to be willing to wear them. Louise Shill has followed suit, but for quality rather than health reasons: her view is that the shoes available for her to buy in UK shops until now for her own two-year-old child lacked the quality she demanded and represented poor value for money.

A background in the industry

She was in a position to do something about this because she had spent the previous 15 years in design and development roles in the footwear industry. After completing undergraduate and post-graduate degrees at the hotbed of footwear design that is DeMontfort University in Leicester, Ms Shill worked inhouse and on a freelance basis for a number of retailers and brands, including Kickers, Ellesse, Merrell and Lee Cooper.

She believes Young Soles London has a chance to succeed because of her conviction that luxury, well made, attractive shoes for children represent a "desperately under-served" market in the UK. "The UK market is saturated with supermarket and own-brand children's shoes," she continues, "in a mish-mash of vibrant colours, with patterns and glitter,

often all on one shoe at the same time." Young Soles is aiming for a much more classic look, which the founder believes will be popular with purchasing adults and with stylish young wearers alike. "I'm looking to create a nostalgic, lasting quality product that won't harm a child's foot growth," she explains, "a product that the child will grow out of, instead of the footwear falling apart first, a shoe the child will cherish as much as the purchaser."

Exceptions to the rule

Although she paints a poor picture of the UK marketplace, there are certainly exceptions, with Start-rite the name Ms Shill comes up with first, pointing particularly to its Classics range. "But brands such as this are few and far between," she insists, "unlike our European neighbours in countries such as France, Spain and Denmark which offer a variety of children's brands offering simple classic designs." She says Young Soles will offer a fresh approach to classic designs for children, taking inspiration from established brands such as Goodyear-welted men's shoe specialist Grenson, handmade shoe and boot maker for men and women Trickers and the newer (and less high-end) brand Hudson in the adult footwear market.

Partners in Portugal

So, Young Soles London is launching with "re-invented" versions of well loved styles such as T-bar and Mary Jane shoes for girls, and brogues, creepers and monkey boots for boys. Made from supple, full-grain leathers, suede and patents, using traditional methods and tooling, the first Young Soles London range have recently become available wholesale. The classic styles Ms Shill has chosen owe much to the traditions of English

shoe-making, but, for reasons of capacity and availability, she has had to look further afield to find manufacturing partners for her inaugural range, in this case choosing outsource footwear producers in Portugal whom she knew from earlier in her career and whom she knew she could trust for quality and reliability.

She also worked with producers in neighbouring Spain, as well as further afield in Asia, principally in India and China. "I felt Europe would be most fitting for the brand," she says. "Short lead times, the European heritage in shoe-making and an ability to interpret the Young Soles vision were all considerations in this decision. I also felt it was important to support the European footwear industry which has had a particularly hard time in recent years with many brands and retailers opting to place production in Asia instead."

She even sourced the leathers herself from a variety of European tanneries, basing her selection on softness, colour and texture to achieve "the perfect balance of comfort and style". Lasts follow the shape of the foot, with a wide toe and narrow heel, and the shoes have a lightweight, flexible outsole that the designer believes will suit growing feet and first steps.

The inaugural Young Soles London range is for autumn-winter 2014-2015, with styles and sizes for toddlers up to children aged ten. Initial reaction from a number of boutiques across the UK has been very positive. 📍

From toddlers to ten-year-olds, Young Soles London believes it can inject a little luxury and quality into the "desperately under-served" children's footwear market in the UK.

CREDITS: YOUNG SOLES LONDON / FLANNERY O'KAFKA.

