



Beauty and comfort lined up.

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK/ANREPHOTO

Beautiful comfort

Manolo Blahnik International Limited, the eponymous London-based company set up by the famous Spanish footwear designer, is preparing to celebrate half a century in business next year. Kristina Blahnik, the designer's niece, has been the company's chief executive for the last ten years and takes at least some of the credit for growing its revenues and employee numbers in that time. Growth takes time and, even when there are strong family connections, trust has to build up between a designer and his chief executive.

The company's turnover is now around £35 million per year and it employs about 60 people. There were only six people at head office when Kristina Blahnik, a Cambridge-educated architect, started working there. "It's been organic growth," she says. "We have evolved. When a brand is almost 50 years old it can't reinvent itself. You don't want to rebrand; if you do it means there's something wrong with the foundations you've built. But it must evolve."

Recent adaptations that mark the company's progress include the opening in 2018 of its first dedicated men's store, located in the prestigious Burlington Arcade in London. The

The chief executive of Manolo Blahnik's company explains the designer's aversion to athletic shoes. The brand has always had comfort as well as beauty at the heart of its designs and believes it simply does not need sneakers.

chief executive speaks enthusiastically about the early success of this idea, even if she is quick to point out that Manolo Blahnik started out making men's shoes and has always included men's designs in his work. "Our male customer base is increasing day by day," she says, "and our male customers are very passionate and very colourful." But she notices differences, concluding that women tend to buy because they have fallen in love with a beautiful object, whereas men are interested in the processes and techniques involved in making that object.



Kristina Blahnik at the 2019 Financial Times Business of Luxury Summit in Madrid.

CREDIT: FT BUSINESS OF LUXURY SUMMIT

Beauty remains one of the key components of the Manolo Blahnik International strategy. The other is comfort. "We're not really fashion," the chief executive says. "Our one and only objective is to create beautiful, comfortable objects. Those objects are not driven by a trend, but by culture and creativity." Her view of the footwear market in general is that most brands seem not to want to limit themselves these days to one type of product, one price bracket, one particular segment of customers. "Everything is blended into one," she says, "and it's as though there were only one market and one consumer base. Social media has had a lot to do with that. We sit on a little Robinson Crusoe island."

Film enthusiast

Evolution is ongoing, but the trend in recent years saw practically every brand under the sun start to make and sell sneakers. Not Manolo. "Well we do have one," says Ms Blahnik, emphasising the singularity of the brand's concession to athleisure pressure, which she goes on to argue is no concession at all. It's a reference to a shoe with a sporty rubber tread on the sole and an upper that is whole-cut suede, which forms part of the 'Weekend' section of the brand's men's collection. It's made in Italy and is available in four colours at a cost of £625 per pair. The designer, a celebrated film enthusiast, insists this shoe is inspired not by athleisure, but by one of his favourite actors, Gary Cooper; perhaps he was being ironic when he gave the shoe the name 'Entrenador', the Spanish word for trainer (in the sense of a trainer who trains a team or an athlete, not a shoe).

No need for sneakers

"Manolo doesn't feel that the sneaker category is right for him," his niece says, "in the same way as he didn't see platforms in the early twenty-first century as the thing to do. That was because he felt platforms were disproportionate to the shape of a woman. We pride ourselves on comfort and comfort is the reason the sneaker has come in; it's comfortable and you can run around in it. But for 50 years our

obsession has been to create beautiful comfort, so we don't need a sneaker."

She acknowledges that sneakers have been a very important part of footwear, from luxury brands to the entry-level category, for years now. But she says the trend is "starting to go back now to elegance and beauty" and she says this is good to see.👁



The man himself, Manolo Blahnik, with his chief executive in the background. CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK/FREEDOMPIC