



SUSTAINABLE FLOORING

A REPORT TO ADVOCATE FOR SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

# POLISHED CONCRETE FLOOR REVEALS NATURAL BEAUTY AT AMERICAN EAGLE OUTFITTERS

## ENEREF INSTITUTE EXAMINES POLISHED CONCRETE FLOORING IN RETAIL SPACES AS A SUSTAINABLE AND APPEALING OPTION

As an aesthetic for American Eagle Outfitters, “We really like polished concrete flooring,” declares Michael Smith, Director of Store Design.

And polished concrete flooring, side-by-side, in combination with inlaid wood

pads, Smith added, “is really beautiful.”

American Eagle Outfitters developed the store design in 1998 with BAR Architects, of San Francisco, who helped move the retailer to polished concrete flooring. The look is

# WE LIKE POLISHED CONCRETE AND IT'S A BIT LESS EXPENSIVE. TO BE HONEST, IT'S BOTH AN AESTHETIC AND FINANCIAL CHOICE.

## Michael Smith is the Director of Store Design for American Eagle Outfitters

achieved through a multi-step, progressively finer grinding system using specialized equipment with industrial fine diamond tooling to hone and polish a concrete surface.

As part of our Sustainable Flooring initiative, Eneref Institute interviewed a number of stakeholders involved with the floor design of the American Eagle Outfitters stores, including: **Michael Smith, Director of Store Design and Gary Staso, Director of Construction for American Eagle Outfitters and David Schwing, an Architect with BAR Architects.**

According to Schwing, polished concrete is a practical material that develops a nice patina over time while its integral, through-body soft color conceals gouges and scrapes that occur in such high-traffic environments. Its neutral coloration provides a good backdrop to a retail space and the merchandise that needs to be the focus of attention.

As a result of the success in three

New York City flagship stores, most American Eagle Outfitters mall stores will now combine polished concrete flooring slab with real wood inlay pads, explains Smith. Using a unique technique developed with the BAR architectural firm and their national flooring contractor, QuestMark Flooring, they were able to achieve “some really wonderful textures... like a poor man’s terrazzo,” said Smith.

American Eagle Outfitters (NYSE: AEO), a nearly forty-year-old clothing retailer, has grown to more than a thousand stores by managing to remain hip despite aggressive and fashion-savvy competition from retailers like Forever 21 and H&M.

“We used to say that we had a beach house aesthetic,” said Smith, “a natural earthiness, with some industrial overtones.” He compared the look to white shiplap, the wooden board for barns and seasonal homes.

As an architect by training, Smith abides by the modernist design

principle ‘form follows function,’ contending that the combination of inlaid wood pads and polished concrete floor visually organizes the space and defines patterns for walking and fixture placement. But, just as important, he said, the flooring is a “great background for our clothing.”

A typical American Eagle Outfitters mall store is about 7,000 ft.<sup>2</sup> of which 4,000 ft.<sup>2</sup> is polished concrete with 3,000 ft.<sup>2</sup> of real wood inlay in the center of the store.

### DESIGN HISTORY

Between the years 2000 and 2012, beginning with their 2000 all-white store design, American Eagle Outfitters experimented with various combinations of wood and polished concrete flooring, which included a 2004 and 2008 design. It was with the introduction of their 2012 store—which actually began in 2009—that polished concrete flooring became more central to design. The 2012 store had a greater focus on polished concrete with the retrofits of their major New York City flagship locations.

“Once we made the decision, we were off and running with it,” explained Gary Staso, the retailer’s Director of



## NEW YORK CITY FLAGSHIP STORE

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Construction. “It polished up really well.”

Furthermore, Staso said, since some malls don’t have air-conditioning when closed at night, there is no control over ambient temperature and humidity. Wood flooring can expand and contract, affecting durability and surface quality. Compared to primarily all-wooden flooring, Staso said, “I put concrete in. I don’t have to worry about it.”

## DESIGN PROCESS

Smith described a collaboration design process of small groups

within the company, but, “it’s definitely not just a one or two person-driven design process. I manage the process, but then we get a lot of input from our partners.” Those partners include the Marketing, Visual and Store Operations Groups.

BAR Architects presented various flooring options, such as rough wood, reclaimed lumber, and concrete. The retailer’s group bought into the polished concrete flooring after prototyping it in their warehouse, said Staso.

While initially the aesthetic, and eventually the lower cost, were

the driving forces, the American Eagle Outfitters corporation also wants to be a “positive partner for the environment. That is part of our brand DNA,” explains Smith. Indeed, both the installation and maintenance of polished concrete flooring have positive environmental benefits and can contribute to potential LEED points.

## NEW YORK CITY FLAGSHIP STORES

Ultimately, the New York City flagship stores were the proving grounds for the polished concrete flooring as these locations “tend to be the

# PITTSBURGH-BASED AMERICAN EAGLE OUTFITTERS HAS GROWN TO OVER 1,000 STORES WORLDWIDE SINCE 1977.

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laboratories for developing new ideas,” explained Smith.

The flagship store on 34th Street in Manhattan received a major remodeling in 2009, a complete gutting of the space. The façade was removed and the second floor was raised. “Aesthetically that one came out really, really nicely,” says Smith, adding that the special elements in the store “elevate the experience quite a bit.”

Tens of thousands of shoppers visit the store each week. BAR’s Schwing explains the polished concrete floors work well because they are a hard-wearing, neutral-toned walking surface for such high traffic locations. The natural oak plank inset “carpets” delineate departments and visually organize the space. Walk-off mats manage rain or snow brought in on foot from the street.

Flagship locations require more time and more effort because of the custom detailing, but eventually design elements in the flagship stores find their way into the mall stores. An “A plus” or “A double plus” mall is likely to get the special elements. But even American Eagle Outfitter locations in the “B” malls received polished concrete flooring, because the costs tend to be

lower than other flooring options, especially once maintenance is included in the equation.

Expertly polished concrete flooring requires substantially reduced maintenance compared to, for example, clear-coat epoxy floors. And unlike tile or carpet there is no material replacement cost. It doesn’t wear out, so there is no need for anything to be replaced.

The outlet store locations, now the fastest growing segment for American Eagle Outfitters, feature polished concrete flooring without the inlaid wood pads. And nearly half of the nine hundred mall stores have been remodeled with polished concrete flooring in the last five years.

“If you do a really beautiful job of polishing, I think it’s a stunning floor,” says Smith.

## THE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

While the final product looks extraordinary, the starting point can offer numerous challenges and requires a systemic approach, explains John Scanlon, Executive Vice President for QuestMark Flooring, the nation’s leading commercial flooring company and prime vendor for

American Eagle Outfitters.

When American Eagle Outfitters takes over an existing mall space from a previous tenant the flooring could consist of any number of materials: ceramic tile, wood, sometimes even polished concrete. When that floor is ripped up, according to Director of Construction Staso, what is revealed often looks like “machine gun blowouts.”

After the demolition of an existing store, the concrete placement is laid out, with slurry strips to partition the inlaid wood pads. A topping of anywhere from  $\frac{3}{8}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  of an inch is poured and needs to set before floor polishing can begin. Once the concrete is polished, framing out the store can begin.

Part of the magic that makes the American Eagle Outfitters’ polished concrete floor especially appealing is that aggregate particles are scattered into the topper when poured. Smith compares the process to “scattering chicken feed,” and says it gives the floor a “really beautiful texture and tone.”

At this level, the polishing is almost an art. According to architect Smith, the retailer’s construction



#### A SUSTAINABLE FLOOR

*Polished concrete flooring can contribute to potential LEED points in at least two categories.*

department “had to go through and be very careful about who they are choosing to get the quality and finish they want.”

And Gary Staso agreed, explaining this was part of the decision for choosing QuestMark as their prime vendor.

Of course, Staso’s concerns go beyond the aesthetic. “In retail it’s all about getting the best look at the best price,” explained Staso. Polished concrete is “relatively inexpensive with no maintenance. That’s kind of nice.”

#### ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

In addition to its aesthetics and ease of care, polished concrete flooring can contribute to potential LEED points in at least two categories. In the Energy and Atmosphere category, polished concrete could contribute to LEED points because they don’t employ VOC materials and because the sheen actually increases the room’s ambient light. In the Materials and Resources category, the technology increases the life span of the already existing concrete floors.

Beyond its numerous environmental benefits, the primary purpose of polished concrete floors at American Eagle Outfitters is to create a store aesthetic that can increase sales.

“It’s got a lot of character,” Smith says of the flooring technology. And according to Schwing, the unpretentious, utilitarian qualities of concrete “convey honesty and integrity, which reflect the core values of the American Eagle Outfitters brand.”

*Research and reporting compiled and provided by Eneref Institute. Information generously provided by American Eagle Outfitters, BAR Architects and QuestMark Flooring.*



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and corporations with common sense solutions that can achieve effective results.

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