



VILLAGE PEOPLE

■ The winners of the First Into Fashion competition receive an exclusive outlet at London's Connaught Village. **Hardeep Sandher** reports. Photographs by **James Royall**

Shoe designs to rival Jimmy Choo, a dress made out of hair and sustainable designs that highlight "fashion with a conscience" were just some of the entries for the First Into Fashion competition to find a new retailer for London's prestigious Connaught Village.

Launched by *Property Week* in conjunction with the Church Commissioners and the London College of Fashion earlier this year, masters students from the college in the past two years were invited to submit a 2009/10 autumn/winter collection and a business plan that detailed their financial projections for the next six months.

This tested not only their fashion vision, but also assessed whether they had the entrepreneurial skills to become successful retailers in a city already inundated with fashion stores from around the world.

It was a demanding process, but with a prize

of which most emerging designers can only dream: a 772 sq ft store at Connaught Village with rent and service charges paid for a year, as well as mentoring from Jimmy Choo himself.

Connaught Village is something of a hidden gem in the Church Commissioners' £1.3bn property portfolio. A stone's throw from Mayfair, it is home to some of London's most exclusive boutique operators. By leasing the store to the industry's newest recruits, the commissioners are putting the estate's reputation on the line.

"Not everyone can come into the village," admits Rob Lines, commercial asset manager at the Church Commissioners. "We try to be selective about who we bring in to make sure it is in line with our other tenants and, more importantly, who our customers want to see here."

Dai Rees, course director at the London College of Fashion, adds: "This isn't a competition about

selling your own designs. Whoever wins needs to have the business acumen and the confidence to be able to run their own store. I see student after student who has a creative and ambitious drive with their designs, but their business strategy is closed."

The stakes were high and so was the standard of the designs from the four finalists (see box, opposite). Ultimately, the judges were so captivated by the designs and plans of two candidates – Joanna Stoker and Julia Smith – that they decided to award the prize to both.

Choo fits

Over the next six months the two winners will be coached by Jimmy Choo and advised on marketing by *Grazia* magazine's fashion editor at large, Melanie Rickey. The Church Commissioners will also contribute towards fit-out costs.

Rickey, who chaired the judging, cautions



Rich seams (left to right): Joanna Stoker and Julia Smith will set up shop together in the Connaught Village fashion enclave, but Megumi Fukuda will have to try another strategy for her "craft kit" range



THE WINNERS

Julia Smith, under the brand name Julia Smith Fashion, and Joanna Stoker, under the name Joanna Stoker London, were named as joint winners of the competition.

Smith's sustainability angle of "caring where clothes come from" captured the judges' imagination. Her clothes are made using only organic or sustainable fabrics, which are all sourced in the UK.

Her previous ventures include setting up a co-operative in Ghana in 2008. Its hand-printed dresses made in Ghana by local communities are sold at Topshop's Oxford Street branch.

"It is good to see that she has already made money from her designs and the fact she has worked with Topshop shows good evidence of her understanding the commercial aspect of business," says Rob Lines, commercial asset management at the Church Commissioners.

Her business plan was also easy to understand and the judges reported that she seemed to have a good financial "know-how".

But Dai Rees, course director at the London College of Fashion, was equally impressed with

Stoker's business plan, which was, in his view, more in tune with market and stood out from the rest. Stoker had already alerted the judges to her interest in taking over the unit at the end of the six-month rent and service charge-free period. Her business plan also stated that selling around eight pairs of shoes a month would allow her to cover the rent and rates charges in the first year.

Stoker already has a private investor helping her to get the business off the ground, and this month she worked on three collaborations with designers for London Fashion Week. These initiatives could not be ignored, said the judges.

However, Stoker intended to use the shop predominantly as a showroom for buyers, which was not what the Church Commissioners wanted. And, as she planned to work on a "made to order" basis, she would not need an entire store to sell her collection either.

A shoe shop on its own might have given an old-fashioned impression, but two different designers in one store gives it a certain edge, agreed the judges. "The two together could gather more footfall from the street," says Rickey.

With Stoker sourcing shoes only made in the UK and Smith's theme of sustainability, the judges agreed they would bring a certain vibrancy to the shop in Connaught Village.

THE RUNNERS-UP

All the judges saw flaws with Megumi Fukuda's business plan from the start, although Rickey thought her somewhat abstract clothes concept was the problem, describing it as "a little uncommercial".

Nevertheless, Fukuda's idea to sell a "craft kits" range where customers can buy the materials and equipment to design and make their own accessories such as corsages was inspiring and something that interested the panel of judges.

"If a store like Urban Outfitters could get their hands on her concept, they would love it," says Rickey.

Meanwhile, the judges agreed unanimously that Julia Reindell's designs were simply too "left field" to work in Connaught Village – her previous designs had included a dress made out of human hair.

"She is talented but her work is so avant garde. She wants to challenge people with her designs, but it just isn't working," says Rickey.

Lines agrees with Rickey's opinion that, because the designs were an acquired taste, Connaught Village's customers were unlikely to buy her products. Therefore it would be unwise to give her a shop, they agreed.

Hair today: Julia Reindell's designs, which included a dress made of human hair, were deemed too avant garde for the shop (right)



THE JUDGES (clockwise from below)

- Jimmy Choo, shoe designer
- Rob Lines, asset manager at the Church Commissioners
- Dai Rees, course director at London College of Fashion
- Melanie Rickey, fashion editor at large of Grazia magazine

« that the hard part has only just started: "If it works this could be great. It might not, so we have to help them give it a great shot."

Choo, who owns his own store in Connaught Village, knows the difficulties of setting up a new shop. His first was a far cry from the fashion denizens of Mayfair, in Hackney, east London.

"It will not just be about the next six months for these designers, but about the next two years," he says.

For any new retailer to succeed in today's market is a challenge. The First into Fashion competition will help the winners meet their overheads for leasing the space. The annual rent on the unit is £25,000, business rates total £5,698 and there are service charges and insurance on top. All these costs will be covered for the first six months. But Stoker and Smith will still face a stiff test as shoppers' purses continue to get tighter.

"We are in challenging times and retailers are having to be more inventive and creative," says Lines. "The winners will have to take the current economic climate into account, and the challenges associated with setting up a new business.

"But they are not setting out to be millionaires in the first year. The winners needed to show they can be inspirational, but also realistic in their approach to fashion and opening a retail business in the village, and the two entries we selected certainly are."

Rickey agrees: "To be a successful independent retailer today, they need to have a product that people want, in a place that people want.

"You have to put aside the economy for a minute – this is about the winner getting their product out there."

Arguably, Stoker and Smith have something working in their favour by offering their collections in Connaught Village. There is still a place for smaller stores and boutique operators on the street, providing it is in the right place, say the judges.

"Small is sometimes more beautiful and it is harder to do mass market at the moment in terms of retail stores," says Rees.

Already home to 71 boutique operators, galleries and restaurants, Lines says Connaught Village's future is to become one of London's premier villages. Vacancy rates this year have been around 7%. Two of the five vacant units are under offer and the First into Fashion competition will fill another.

Last year the commissioners opened eight new stores in the village and this year two more, independents Viola and WearDowney, followed.

The new addition of Stoker and Smith's boutique, a name for which they are deciding, officially launches next month. ■

■ For more information and to watch a video of the competition, please go to propertyweek.com/fashioncompetition

