

SHOE DESIGN

NIKE'S NEW SENSIBLE SHOES

Nike is launching two, very different, shoe lines this month. One, 'Free', takes the concept of 'training shoe' to new heights. Inspired by the insight that it is more effective to train barefoot on grass than in a running shoe, the featherweight 'Free' allows incredible freedom of movement and strengthens muscles other trainers cannot reach. This kind of performance-driven innovation is Nike at its best, and is what helped cement its superbrand dominance of the Nineties, along with stylish design, communications, and canny sponsorship. But this was before it became one of the pariahs-in-chief of the anti-globalisation movement.

The second new line, 'Considered' (pictured right), addresses that issue, and as such represents a new departure for Nike. While it references other parts of its range, particularly the ACG (all condition gear) walking shoe format and the seminal Air Woven detailing, there's something very un-Nike about this range. Instead of asking athlete-centric questions about increasing comfort, decreasing weight, and maximising performance, the designers' starting point was no longer what is best for people, but what is best for the environment, and how to 'design more with less'.

All shoes in this and future collections will share a philosophical, rather than visual, thread – quality craftsmanship, simple design and basic materials. The new shoes reduce the number of stages in the production process by using a maximum of five major materials, instead of the more usual 20 to 30. The sole is constructed from snap-together components that can be separated and recycled as part of Nike's Reuse-A-Shoe programme. Furthermore, all Considered shoes are made in Thailand with locally sourced materials.

The Considered Boot features an 'innovative' lacing system, with one very long lace hand-woven between the leather parts on the upper. But how much of an advance does this represent? It stops the boots being waterproof, and untying the shoes too much would cause them to fall apart. Each size requires a different sized and shaped woven area, which doubles the time it takes workers to make one.

In their post-No Logo search for integrity, are Nike designers stepping back from their spirit of innovation? Now that Nike is happy to compromise performance to solve ethical problems, what makes it different from the rest? If people want a non-performance eco-shoe why not buy it from Clarks, Camper or Tsubo instead?
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