

On the move

Luxe retailers play musical chairs amid Newbury Street flux

By JILL RADSKEN

Is Newbury Street down and out?

That's where the retail tenants are going.

In the past six months, "For Lease" signs have replaced mannequins in many storefronts on Boston's toniest street as longtime luxury brands relocate or leave altogether.

The European clothier Oilily closed its doors at No. 32, the prized (read: high-rent) first block of Newbury, with reported plans to reopen farther down the block in the fall. Bliss (121 Newbury) and Kitchen Arts (161) both moved to spaces equal or smaller in size at 225 and 215 Newbury, respectively.

"The rent is cheaper," said a salesperson at Kitchen Arts, explaining the move.

Some have given up on Newbury altogether. Sassoon Salon, a 20-year resident at 14 Newbury, rounded the corner last month to open a bright, first-floor space at 399 Boylston St.

"We always wanted to be on the ground floor," said Martyn Duff, regional creative director for Sassoon.

This game of retail musical chairs has extended into other neighborhoods and

even malls. Sean, a menswear shop that left about nine months ago due to doubled rents, now resides at 76 Dartmouth St. in the South End. Stil, a womenswear boutique that left Newbury Street for the Prudential Center last winter, suddenly closed those doors, and is relocating its store on the second floor at the Mall at Chestnut Hill to a less-centrally located space there.

Dizzy yet?

Some stores — many of them chains — have simply gotten the corporate heave-ho.

New York-based apothecary C.O. Bigelow left Copley Place, as did bankrupt Crabtree & Evelyn. But the failure of Richart chocolatier at Copley hasn't deterred Hotel Chocolat from planning its first U.S. store to open next month at 141A Newbury (formerly Tess & Carlos).

"We want to make a big splash in Boston," said CEO Nikki Doggart of the luxury chocolate brand that started 20 years ago as a catalog company. "Boston hasn't seen anything like us before."

Doggart said Hotel

Chocolat, which will feature a by-appointment tasting room, already has planned events with Boston Fashion Week (the last week of September) to help build its fashion-forward brand.

"In spite of the economic downturn, our business is growing and growing strong. We've seen — touch wood — growth," she said.

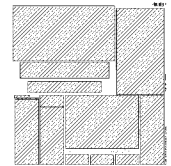
Other corporate brands are taking the risk as well. Ben Sherman plans to open at the former Sean space at 284 Newbury, and London clothier Ted Baker is setting up shop at 201 Newbury. Home guru Jonathan Adler has staked out No. 127 (formerly home of Comptoir de Famille).

Still, the block will need more new blood to get its high-end energy back.

Meanwhile, in the South End, the retail scene is thriving.

Longtime Mario Russo stylist Kent Newton opened his own salon at 1315 Washington St. and Flock, a womenswear boutique, is aiming for a September debut at 274 Shawmut Ave. And Jane Miller will open JEM, a home accessories boutique, at 470 Harrison Ave. this fall.

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STAFF PHOTOS BY ANGELA ROWLINGS

SPACE ADVENTURES: Newbury's Oilily is relocating, Sassoon Salon moved around the corner and Ben Sherman is moving in. Parlor in the South End closed this summer.



