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Haight Street obtains SHOE NIRVANA

BY LOUISE CHAO

Leather boots that cover not only your calves but your thighs; wooden sandals like little boats; platform sneakers with soles as thick as birthday cakes. They are what's hot in Haight Street's trendy shoe stores.

And what do they have in common? The answer is they all add more than a few inches to your height.

Followed by the clothing-store boom on Haight Street, fashion accessories such as shoes have become a promising business. In a six-block stretch of upper Haight Street between Central and Stanyan streets there are now 21 stores that sell shoes, six of which sell shoes exclusively.

While the vestiges of the non-commercial '60s are still present, the neighborhood is a fashion catwalk for unique (and expensive) shoes that you can't find anywhere else in California.

Haight Street is such a hot market for footwear, stores like John Fluevog Shoes and Luichiny would rather open a store here than anywhere else in the state.

But why platforms and high heels? It seems it's all about rising above the crowd.

"They sell really well, they are really flattering," Marissa Freeman, a sales person at John Fluevog Shoes said about the hottest style on shoe design right now.

Marianne Rowe, a coworker of Freeman's, said she goes dancing in her 10-inch platforms like a lot of other people do. Although she admitted her feet do get a little sore but it doesn't bother her much. "It's



Marianne Rowe, sales person at John Fluevog Shoes on Haight Street, models a \$640 pair of thigh-high boots. Fluevog named a boot after her for his 2000 spring line.

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HAIGHT ASHBURY VF

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just fashion," she said.

"Some people don't care about comfort. They just want the look," said Lotta Velger, assistant manager of luichiny. "You feel more powerful," she said while standing on 10-inch sandals.

A customer, Olivia Huang, a graphic designer, did not totally agree.

"I just feel better," Huang said. She did not think "powerful" was the right word to describe it.

"I like something with heels because I am short," said the high-heel-wearing Huang, as she picked out two more pairs of heels for purchase. Huang said she shops for shoes in the Haight because "I like something funky and interesting."

And that was exactly the reason John Fluevog Shoes chose to open its store in the neighborhood. Freeman said the customer trail in the Haight was "funky."

Shoe Biz's owner Mehran Esmaili, who has opened his first shoe store in the Haight in 1979, said the platform shoes were merely a throwback to the '70s.

And platform sneakers have been around for a long time, too. Shoe Biz started carrying those eight years ago.

According to a GeoCities Web site, "Platform Diva: A History of the Platform Shoe," platform sneakers first appeared

among the New York's club set in 1992.

Although people today might remember them in the discos in the '70s, the origins of these shoes is traced back to the late 1400s.

"The platform shoe of the 1400s to 1600s was called the chopine, 'an overshoe' that slipped over a more dainty shoe, protecting it from mud or dirt," said the Web site.

In Venice during the 15th century, platform soles became a symbol of status for women. If you think 10-inch heels are too high for you, imagine Venetian women stomping along those narrow canals in 30-inch heels.

"Venetian prostitutes also often wore chopines. The platform shoes elevated the prostitutes, who often lingered in the dark doorways waiting for potential customers, to a height which would make them noticeable," said the Web site.

Esmaili, owner of three shoe stores on Haight Street, said the business had become very competitive.

Freeman, at John Fluevog, said she felt very little competitiveness among the neighboring shoe businesses. "I feel they all have different selection."

In luichiny, while busy serving customers, Velger said, "There is no competition. We are happy with business. We sell really well."