

AUDACIOUSLY INVENTIVE



The peculiar story of an outdoor performance brand, hailed by some as the best in the world, and how its new line of “*performance menswear*” tests the boundaries of category.

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Our story begins in the Canadian city of Vancouver. Situated at the North American West Coast and shielded from the heartland by mountains, Vancouver is characterized by a temperate rainforest climate, meaning it rains a lot. Residents with a sense of humor refer to the rain as “liquid sunshine.”

Vancouver is also the warmest city in Canada, making it “the home of the homeless.” A vagrant community has put up bivouac permanently in the city center—in fact, the term “skid row” may have originated in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Adjacent neighborhood Gastown is rapidly becoming the trendiest part of the city. Nearby ski resort Whistler Blackcomb will host the winter Olympics next year. Sports and the outdoors are big in Vancouver; no matter how bad the rain gets, you’ll still see people riding all-terrain bikes up and down the hills. Staying fit and eating healthy are simply part of the lifestyle.

Life is good in this part of the world. The city is spacious, liberal, and wealthy. The nature is vast. And the Canadian banks are conservative. Yes, apart from the constant rain, Vancouver could qualify as the promised land, and it is from here that a new menswear product will be launched this fall. Its name: Veilance. The company: Arc’teryx.

Arc’teryx was launched in 1991. It sprung from the minds of two climbers, Dave Lane and Jeremy Guard, who started the company making revolutionary climbing harnesses, and followed that up with a line of backpacks. When, in 1998, they had the audacity to begin making clothing—outdoor performance jackets, to be precise—they did the impossible by becoming successful at it. The brand consistently won awards for its designs, setting new standards of weight, construction, comfort, and waterproofing in every field they took on. They stuck by a philosophy of constantly asking “Can we make it better?”, resulting in the most minimalistic designs on the market.

Arc’teryx will never be a mainstream company. Their products are expensive and they’ve never had any interest in developing a cheaper product line “for the masses.” While arguably elitist, this conviction has enabled them to deliver on their pledge to settle only for the best in performance wear.

So what makes Arc’teryx so successful? Is it superstar endorsements? No, Arc’teryx has no world-famous sports heroes signed to their label. Instead they sponsor people like free skier Greg Hill, whose blog *The Meanderings of Greg Hill* is a radical testimonial to free skiing as the embodiment of freedom (the real thing, not the mass-marketable variety). Is it sponsorship of the most challenging events in the world? No, you won’t see Arc’teryx logos at the Winter Games next year. Arc’teryx is a brand for those in the know. Its products consistently win rave reviews in outdoor and mountaineering magazines. It delivers products to the most secret

divisions of military units worldwide (the LEAF line, short for Law Enforcement and Armed Forces). It’s also constantly being copied. Ever wondered who came up with the waterproof zipper, which can be found in any outdoor jacket made today? It was Arc’teryx—they forgot to patent it (“We made some people rich,” laughs Mike Blenkarn, one of the main designers). Likewise, the technology of sewing with micro-seam (minimum seaming with substantially less seam tape) was perfected in Vancouver.

At the end of the day it’s also a matter of factors like company culture, logistics, and the mixed bag of people—all of whom are into outdoor sports—who make up the workforce. Strangely enough, you won’t read a lot about the history and culture of the brand on its almost hermetic, product-oriented website. “We Canadians are not that good at bragging about ourselves,” says special projects manager Kate Paterson. “I’ve left the company three times, was burned out twice. Right now this is a very democratic company, at times almost too democratic. But it wasn’t like that before.” All designs are constructed right above the marketing and sales head office on the second floor of the building. This is where prototypes are assembled and patterns are drawn. The factory, where 300 workers produce a third of the complete production, is a 20-minute ride from North Vancouver and is located close to the heart of the city.

Until now, Arc’teryx has remained an interesting brand with a great outdoors product but no fashion relevance, except to some style heads who love the ultra-clean and minimalistic aesthetics that are its trademark. That all changes this September with the Veilance project, a capsule collection that is definitely not just another casual outdoor line. Designer Conroy Nachtigall has interpreted menswear classics and combined them with state-of-the-art manufacturing techniques, creating innovative and even radical new products. Consider the blazer, a style item through and through—Nachtigall’s model, made of Windstopper, manages to be functional as well as stylish, as does his fleece-lined Gore-Tex car jacket. To wear these items is to be reminded that good design is logic translated into lucid aesthetics, and that the best designs create a rationality of their own.

For the people at Arc’teryx, the Veilance project is a venture into the world of fashion, a world that seemed alien to many at the company (albeit a cultivated alienation). That may explain the product’s otherworldly name. Marketeer Tom Duguid provides this definition of Veilance: “A construct meant to capture the relative capacity to unite, react, or interact, possessing a degree of attractiveness in an individual, activity, or thing. A thing that mysteriously conceals, disguises, or obscures a greater thing.”

I visited Vancouver and met up with Nachtigall to find out what the hell he was thinking when he combined classic tailoring with high-tech utility, and what a St. Martins graduate is doing working at an outdoor company.



“It’s not a question of compromise but a question of balance.”

— You finished your MA in menswear in 1998 at Central St. Martins. What made a Canadian designer, with a love for snowboarding and the great outdoors, leave for a fashion school in London?

I was interested in fashion because of its strong connection to identity, although personal identity clearly is not only visual. St. Martins actually was the cheapest option at the time, especially compared to schools in the US. They were the only school that didn’t require an application fee. Living in London, on the other hand, was very expensive.

After graduating from art school in Calgary I couldn’t imagine myself locked in a studio and knocking on gallery doors hoping to get an exhibit. It seemed to me too much like working in a vacuum with little relevance to the outside world. I found I didn’t have much to say unless I was presented with a specific situation I had to respond to, but then I would do everything possible to not respond directly to it.

My whole time at art school was like the prototype of Maurizio Cattelan’s art career. Ironically, he never went to art school himself, and I never thought that my art school avoidance tactics could be turned into an art career.

Design, at least, has problems that need to be addressed directly, so I started exploring design. I had already experimented with clothing as sculpture, or, to be more precise, sculpture as clothing. It dawned on me that there was an immediacy, the immediacy of the body intimately interacting with an object, that was relevant. I wasn’t so much interested in fashion as in design, the design process, and how our identity is manifested in the objects we surround ourselves with.

When I started at St. Martins, I expected the approach to be focused on the design process, but it really was about the world of fashion rather than the clothing. I learned that fashion operates at a level which, like the art world, is detached from the practicalities of everyday life, and like art, has an overinflated sense of self-importance. At the same time I think it’s all very fascinating. Still, as much as I was intrigued by this world, I learned I could never be really comfortable in it. I appreciate the pragmatic aspects of design, the nuts and bolts, the way clothes are constructed and the fabric that goes into them. I learned to construct clothes simply by doing it myself, making all the patterns from scratch and just figuring it out as I went along.

In the outdoor apparel world, on the other hand, the calculated emphasis on functional and commercial qualities seems to ignore any psychological or social component. I find those components both interesting and relevant. So again, on one hand I’m fascinated by the technical construction, and on the other hand I like to explore the context of how clothing fits into the environment in which it is being worn.

— How did you come to work at Arc’teryx?

I originally wanted to do my own label that was going to be technically focused menswear, but the whole process of setting things up was so daunting that I needed to find some backup work: something part-time, or a contract for a limited amount of hours, enabling me to still concentrate on my own project. I approached Arc’teryx to find out whether there were any possibilities there. To my surprise, they were thinking of doing a line with the same approach I had been contemplating. It required a full-time commitment but the chance to work with the best fabrics and techniques was too good to pass up. The project didn’t come together at that time, so I worked on the summer sportswear (24) and snow sports (Whiteline) lines until the project got revived again by Tyler Jordan, the president of Arc’teryx.

—How would you describe the Veilance project in short?

Technically focused menswear, based on knowledge gained by constructing premier outdoor apparel. The goal is to create a new category, occupying a territory between, for example, the requirements of traditional menswear, needed for those occupations that require this as a symbol—i.e., business attire—and the overly casual attire from our younger days that no longer works in more sophisticated environments. We call it performance menswear.

— What did you want to achieve with Veilance? What was the mission?

We felt that there had been such huge technical achievements and improvements in the tools that we use in our everyday lives: mobile phones, laptops, et cetera. Knowing that we had become part of that same drive by building outdoor apparel, it became obvious that this technical innovation of construction and fabrics was lacking in our daily apparel. The mission was to demand as much from our urban apparel as we expect from the other devices and utilities in our lives. We want to change the expectations of what menswear can be.

— What made it logical for you to execute non-performance-based designs with performance materials? In other words, why reinterpret classical menswear rather than make more stylish sportswear?

It was never our intention to reinterpret classic menswear items. We used these items only as a starting point. We knew we wanted to create something new, to take all the things we had learned while building the best outdoor apparel and bring them to a consumer who is concerned mostly with style and image. To make this technological approach accessible it was necessary to keep the style from screaming “techie.” We already had a small sportswear category in our outdoor line and we wanted to make sure there was a clear distinction between the two categories. To us it is very important to keep building the best outdoor product for its intended use, so the only solution was to build the

best urban product for its intended use. There is no blurring of these two categories other than that the approach in creating them is the same.

— *Did you compromise on performance anywhere in the designs? One could argue that by choosing designs that are rooted in the history of tailoring, you made a compromise from the start.*

It's not a question of compromise but a question of balance. The performance criteria that are necessary for outdoor are different than the performance requirements in an urban environment. Within the Arc'teryx lines, the performance criteria are also different between our outdoor and snowsports products, but obviously much closer to each other than either one is to urban. In this way we respond to the specific requirements of each category. Hand pockets don't exist in our outdoor hardshells because pockets can't be accessed easily while wearing backpacks and harnesses. But in daily life it's important to get at your keys and wallet easily.

It's also a question of experience, the user's experience. By eliminating weight, increasing durability and mobility, and enhancing weather protection, you will have a better experience while doing outdoor activities. Instead of simply transferring what we know about outdoor performance, we recognized that the urban environment has different needs, including such things as comfort and adaptability. Adaptability can mean moving from indoor to outdoor spaces, incorporating mobility without obvious visual clues to it. Adaptability can also mean blending into any environment while at the same time remaining distinct from it.

We liked the benefits of the performance we had achieved in our outdoor garments and started questioning why we couldn't get them in our daily clothes. Simply wearing outdoor gear all the time wasn't quite the answer, although for a long time we tried to think it was. The requirements were different, so some things that were outdoor-specific weren't needed, and other criteria that we never would have built into our outdoor garments were. Fits changed, but are still built on articulation, 3D structures, and human movement. Weight is still important because rigorous attention to weight builds lighter, more supple garments that are more comfortable to wear all day long, are easier to travel with, dry quicker if they get wet, and can alleviate fatigue. Reducing the restraints of conventional clothing opens up new possibilities.

— *You took classic menswear items as a starting point for Veilance. Does this categorize Veilance as fashion?*

Ah, the dreaded F-word. Working at a pure function-driven outdoor company, "the dreaded F-word" is an expression that is used often when an aesthetic decision starts to override a functional one. Even though the former does not reflect my personal

relationship with fashion, in my view classic menswear items exist outside of fashion. The iconic pieces have been around for a long time and are not subject to the whims of the continual change. Yet the adherence to tradition means that a lot of classical menswear does not get updated to reflect our changing environment and the availability of new materials and construction techniques.

That said, to me it doesn't matter if Veilance is fashion or not; it doesn't change the product, only the perception. A lot of effort has been made to include all the techniques we have in our garments without relying solely on these technical features or textiles for their appeal.

From the outset the collection has been designed to be both unique and distinctive, while maintaining the ability to blend in and not stand out. This contradiction is reconciled by making the details part of the whole. The technical constructions and fabrics are combined into a subdued style. There are no visual signifiers to what the garment really is or is meant for. For this reason it is important that the starting point is familiar. The familiarity makes it more accessible and approachable. Even the colors were chosen to be solidifying and cohesive without drawing attention to themselves. Even though the original intention was to build it all in black only, this idea was eventually dropped because black in itself is a statement, an explanation point, an absolute.

— *If Veilance were a city, which city would it be? Or which area of a city?*

The interesting parts of a city are always off the beaten path: the periphery, industrial areas on the outskirts, or the interstitial areas that every city has. The clash of the old and new and the clash of pristine clean and grimy dirtiness—it is in this in-between space that Veilance exists.

— *Is there a connection between splitboarding and Veilance?*

Backcountry touring is a great place to check fits and functionalities; it's a great testing ground. Splitboarding in particular is also an activity that exists between categories. It completely misses the "cool" factor of snowboarding, and it can't claim the acceptability and established discipline of ski touring. It's a fringe activity that isn't trying to be a fringe activity. The appeal only exists if there is a strong desire to travel, self-propelled, into the backcountry during winter. There are other ways of doing this, using snowshoes or just resorting to ski touring. Yet despite these more established modes, for me splitboarding is not a compromise, it's an "in-between" activity that dynamically combines the flow of snowboarding with the backcountry experience of touring. So its connection to urban performance wear and Veilance is in existing, and finding a reason to exist, in these interstitial spaces.

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VEILANCE ANALYZED

CAR COAT

- Material: Gore-Tex.
- Based on the car coat style, which tends toward a three-quarter length and warmer textiles than most trench coats.
- Uses a Gore-Tex fabric with a warm fleece bonded to the inside.
- Removable hood with its own pocket inside the jacket (doubles as a wallet pocket).
- Gasket cuffs seal the wrists off without being binding or restrictive.
- Back opening based on the military fishtail parka, since the complex construction needed keep the coat waterproof with the fleece interior precludes a normal back vent.



BLAZER

- Material: Windstopper
- Clean, stealthy look is again meant to both blend in and be distinctive at the same time.
- Windstopper fabric and finishing tape add to the element of protection.
- Pockets have a vertical opening, to be functionally used as hand pockets.
- Larger inside document pocket.
- Invisible sliding snap front closure.



FIELD JACKET

- Material: Pro Shell (the most robust Gore-Tex fabric).
- Passes Gore's most extreme weather test; armor-like quality creates confidence for the wearer.
- Lots of pockets that stay waterproof without zippers; two additional zippered pockets hidden beneath the pocket flap to secure items.
- Stow hood is smooth and clean on the outside and provides a cozy seal against the neck when stowed.
- Slider tab at cuffs instead of velcro.
- Large stretch document pocket with extra hidden pocket laminated to the inside.



CARGO PANTS

- Material: Windstopper
- The practicality of cargo pockets without the decidedly casual saddlebag effect. The pocket is based on the seam architecture of the Stealth pant, which puts it on a diagonal across the thigh, providing easy access when sitting. The bottom of the pocket is shaped so the objects inside don't fall to the back where you can sit on them.
- Windstopper fabric offers great weather protection, while the soft, brushed interior makes the pants comfortable all day long and wicks away moisture in warmer conditions.
- Hem adjuster to close off any extra fullness at the bottom.

