

Women are visiting the men's room to find suits that lend power to the day and statement to the evening, says Mark C O'Flaherty. Photograph by Dan Smith.

Some of the world's sleekest, chicest and smartest women are discovering a whole new world of fashion: men's wear. And this isn't a here-today, gone-tomorrow trend like the poncho, the gypsy skirt or the cape. It's the 2006 catwalk's response to the demands of real women who need to function in demanding professional environments and who want to look like they mean business. Its appeal? It's modern, it makes for a faster, leaner wardrobe and it looks wonderful.

The interesting thing about the current phenomenon of men's suiting on women is that it is being driven by women shopping for their own men's wear. If you're looking for a way to get that sharpness that is so consistent in a man's wardrobe, then why not just go next door to the men's department? As the male silhouette in fashion has narrowed, so the fit has become more woman-friendly.

Paula Carrahar, director of Major Players recruitment consultancy, was seduced by her first Dior Homme suit two years ago, but long before that she had bought several Paul Smith men's suits in small sizes. "I find that if you buy carefully from the right men's wear designers you can get something just as sharp and well-fitting for a woman." Carrahar's Dior Homme revelation came when shopping with a male friend. "We both tried on the same jacket and it flattered my shape far more than his. The cut of Dior Homme is perfect for me. It's high fashion but it doesn't turn you into a fashion victim; it's feminine but quite commanding. I love the subtlety of it."

If there is one designer who can be credited with kick-starting the new wave of men's wear for women, it's Hedi Slimane of Dior Homme. The Dior Homme silhouette is thin and androgynous but there is nothing of the cross-dresser about it. Seized upon in its first few seasons by the likes of Nicole Kidman, Linda Evangelista and Yoko Ono, it also, somewhat surprisingly, works for women in the office.

When worn by women, the edgier elements of Dior Homme seem to be smoothed away, leaving something more 1960s, discreet and YSL in style. The most popular item for women is the Le Smoking-style suit (£800-£1,600) and Slimane estimates that about 10 per cent of all Dior Homme customers are women. Dior Homme is, undeniably, for the svelte. Slimane's male models resemble sensitive pale teenagers, and the range is too narrow for men with muscles,

business lunch through to meeting clients for cocktails in the evening. In particular the tuxedo for women is huge this season," says Young. "It gives you the impression of power, but also looks a little bit edgy." And herein lies the magic of men's wear in general for women: it is something that lends power to the day and statement to the evening.

One of Young's clients is Shona Hampel, a London-based solicitor with the international law firm Linklaters. She describes much of her working wardrobe as "masculine" and Young has incorporated several literal men's wear looks alongside women's wear staples such as Diane Von Furstenberg and MaxMara. The men's ranges at Day Birger et Mikkelsen and Hugo Boss Orange are particular favourites as the shapes, dimensions and subtle flourishes work fantastically on both sexes. "I think traditionally masculine clothes with more structure look smarter and more polished," says Hampel, who gives the suitings a twist: "Always wear heels and lipstick - if it's too harsh and overtly masculine, it really isn't a good look."

The current men's wear collection at Day Birger et Mikkelsen features some quirky but classic-looking jackets (£250) and trousers (£108) in rich amber stripes plus shirts (£97) with matching striped cuffs. It has the same slightly ethnic, bohemian style as the women's collection but with a smarter, more pared-down take, and is as appropriate for the evening as it is for nine-to-five.

The crossover between day and night is a key draw for Hampel and the tuxedo is one of the best ways to cover all style bases. "If I have a client lunch and dinner I would feel very happy in the same outfit. For a more relaxed drinks event, I'd change the shirt for a more strappy evening top, although always something structured so that it would work with the trousers. I might change my bag to something girly by Matthew Williamson or Chanel but I'd keep the jewellery discreet; just diamond studs or simple drop earrings. I'm always pushed for time, so I just want to be able to add some quick touches and jump in a cab."

While Hampel's tuxedo is from Philip Lim's women's line at Harvey Nichols, many women have discovered that the cut of a Brooks Brothers boy's tux (about £178, available online or in the US) is a quirkier and more literal way to get the look. Simon Kneen, vice-president of design at Brooks Brothers, which opened a London flagship in September,

YOU'VE GOT MALE

let alone women of a curvier disposition, so much of the range can be prohibitive for any woman over a size 12.

The cut on designer men's wear can, however, also work on women of more obviously womanly proportions. As fashion has dictated a narrower silhouette for men, so this has shrunk the shoulders on jackets to the point where they can fit a "womanly" woman perfectly in smaller men's sizes. Dolce & Gabbana's men's wear has been popular with women for years and Jil Sander's men's suits - both under her own directive and now under the auspices of Raf Simons (often compared to Hedi Slimane) - can make for the perfect women's fit; slim enough to prevent being engulfed yet large enough to work with curves.

Camilla Young of Y Shop is a personal shopper whose clients are typically female executives in their mid-30s or above and very few are androgynous waifs: "Larger-sized women benefit from the men's wear rather than women's wear ranges because of the wider leg and longer jacket." Fundamentally for Young, her clients are time-challenged women who want a capsule wardrobe, and a pared-down masculine style is often the answer: "They need to be able to pick out what they can wear immediately and to walk that outfit through different scenarios in one day, from a

has taken notice of the suit's popularity and will be launching a slightly curvier version exclusively for women by the end of the year. "The new women's tux will tempt many more women into this timeless classic," says Simon. Until then, the boys' version will work perfectly well.

Adapting a trademark gentleman's look is one thing, but there is also some successful cross-dressing at the more adventurous end of the contemporary collections. At the autumn/winter 2006 men's wear shows, Jean Paul Gaultier's collection was worn by models of both sexes, including a wonderful slim black single-breasted suit with a rounded collar and some striking tie-belted coats with asymmetric black and white collars. Veronique Branquinho's pinstripe single-breasted velvet suits were styled identically on both men and women, the only difference being in the height of heel. Both were marvellous.

Newer designers such as Deryck Walker, who showed at London Fashion Week as part of the Man men's wear collective, have immediately struck a chord with women. "When I launched my first collection in 2005 at Dover Street Market, the first sale was to a woman," says Walker, whose work is undeniably directional with as much exaggerated draping evident in his coats (£600) as there is simplicity in his dress