UNRAVELING THE HIGH HEEL

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ABSTRACT

Health foe. Confidence-booster. Female oppressor. No other shoe style has taken on as many roles as the high heel, or had those roles as passionately debated. Throughout their long history in Western fashion, high heels have changed shape and had new ideas about femininity, performance and compliance heaped on them. Warnings about the health dangers of chronic high heel use also have a long history, with medical professionals counselling against them for almost 300 years. Still high heels have remained a staple of womenswear, always returning after brief sojourns out of style.

This thesis unpacks the high heel, first looking at the effects of high heel use on the body before turning to the history of the high heel and discussing the reasons why countless women have endured a shoe that is by design uncomfortable. Then, we look at attempts to reengineer high heels so that they are more comfortable for wearers and discuss the future of high heels in the footwear landscape. The thesis concludes with a discussion of how attempting to fathom the long narrative of high heels can change your relationship with the object.

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Unpacking the High Heel

In 1909, a woman fell out of her second-floor window. The culprit, the Chicago Daily Tribune blared, were high heels.

Mrs. Valina B. Teele, of Manhattan's Upper West Side, was sitting by her open window when a breeze blew the lace curtains towards her. She stood up to kick them away and as she did, the high heel of her slipper caught in the curtain. She lost her balance, toppled out of her apartment, and, according to news reports: “sustained severe bruises of the face and body”ii and “internal injuries which may cause death”iii.”

Teele was ultimately not killed by her high heeled slipperiv. She would go on to have many more years of wearing heels, probably experiencing far more pedestrian kinds of high heel related injuries: bunions, hammer toes and plantar fasciitis—all far more common than Teele’s fluke accident.

So common that doctors have been harping off-and-on about the dangers of high heels for almost 300 years.v. In 1872, London surgeon P. Hewlett turned to Scientific American to tell the story of a young lady whose heeled boots had injured her feet:vi. “I said: ‘It is simply heels versus brains. If you have brains, you will cut off the heels; if you have no brains, you will continue to wear them.’” The young lady (like all young ladies) had brains, and her feet issue disappeared once she did away with the heel. Forty-six years later, the French Académie de Médecine was forced to discuss the issue of high heels due to the prevalence of pairing them with “the very short skirts that women have taken to wearing.” The Académie passed a resolution declaring that “the fashion of very high heels was injurious and absurd”vii.”

Despite the sexism-drenched warnings and condescension from the medical establishment, high heels have remained a staple in Western fashion since the 17th centuryviii. Even when heels fall out of fashion, they manage to return, taller and more spindly. And with heels, comes pain.

Trying to remember when I became aware of the inevitability of pain when wearing heels is impossible. One is never without the other. Every time there’s pain—in the pulsing bunions after a day in Mary Janes at a conference, in the balls of the feet after a wedding—there are questions about why we live this way and whether there is a way to live pain-free. And, if there is, whether we’d take it.

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I. High Heels as Foe

The human foot didn’t evolve to wear shoes. It definitely didn’t evolve to wear high heels. There are 26 bonesix, 32 muscles and tendons, and 109 ligaments in a footseven, all working together to fulfill its two functions: propulsion and bearing weightseight. In the unshod foot, the weight of the body and the leverage for movement are comfortably distributed. The same cannot be said when any kind of footwear is worn. “Natural gait is biomechanically impossible for any shoe-wearing person,” wrote the late podiatrist William Rossix, who saw shoes as one of the major causes of foot injuriesxii.
When the foot is thrown off balance (by a shoe, a heel, or a medical condition), a strain is placed on the foot. If that strain continues, the foot becomes injured and its very anatomy can change. The earliest evidence of shoe-wearing, from 40,000 years ago, comes not from a preserved leather sandal or boot, but rather from a shortening of the bones in the big toe.

All shoes, from the ballet flat to the sneaker, change the way a person walks, but high heels are notorious for affecting gait. This is old news. “The damage done by the ill-shaped sole is increased by the artificial heel,” wrote Ethel Williams in the British Medical Journal in 1901. Williams, the first female doctor in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne and a longtime suffragist, went on to describe how high heels change the way women walk. “In natural walking the heel alone is first planted on the ground, the body swings forward, and the front part of the foot comes in contact with the ground, while the heel is lifted by the contraction of the calf muscles followed by the front part of the foot.”

Walking across the length of my studio apartment, I pay attention to the movement of muscles and limbs I forget are there. Barefoot and focused, I feel rather than hear the impact of my right heel as it reaches the ground. My right foot rolls forward, and as each part touches the mottled gray floor of my apartment, the same part on my left foot leaves the ground. My body doesn’t so much swing forward, as Williams described, but rather moves in a forward momentum that seems inevitable.

I put on my go-to wedding shoes—2.5-inch black stiletto heels from Aldo—and stand with my back against the wall. Dressed in loose, 89% modal loungewear from The Gap, I look like a child playing dress up in her mother’s shoes. And yet, I can feel my shoulders settling further back, my posture righting itself, my face turned forward rather than slightly down. Even in glorified pajamas, heels have a way of making you feel and look more assured.

As I walk across my studio, the first sign of change in my gait is the sound. The staccato click of the heel. The smack of the outsole as it hits the ground a moment later. I try to focus on the same muscles and body parts as before, but in the heels all I can sense is the strain. The strain of my calves, fully tensed. The strain of the arch and ball of my feet, forced to carry most of my weight. The strain of my ankles, trying to keep from wobbling.

In stilettos, you’re fully aware of every part of your body, because you’re focused on not toppling over. “Thus the whole action of walking is altered, and instead of the firm heel-and-toe gait we get a much less firm and much more fatiguing toe gait or trip,” Williams wrote.

Those trips have landed countless women in the emergency room. Between 2002 and 2012, an estimated 120,000 high heel-related injuries were treated in emergency departments in the United States according to one study by researchers at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Seventy-two percent of these injuries happen to either the ankle or the foot, including sprains which are the most common diagnosis.

That study also found a growing trend in the number of injuries over the years: there were twice as many injuries in 2012 compared to 2002. While the authors didn’t specify an exact reason for the increase, a look at British Vogue’s October 2012 list of the best 100 shoes—a virtual tour through 74 vertiginously high heels, such as Sophia Webster’s bubblegum pop sandals and Nicholas Kirkwood’s rococo booties—gives some anecdotal clues. By comparison, the It shoes of 2002 were Crocs.
Sprains and fractures are only a sliver of the injuries caused by high heels. Longterm high heel use results in a motley crew of toe nail disorders, joint and foot deformities, tissue thickenings and nerve damage. Because the body’s entire weight is born by our feet, these injuries extend beyond the foot itself, creating a painful chain reaction that hikes up the body.

Picture a foot in a 3-inch stiletto. The elevated heel position increases plantar flexion, where the foot points down like a ballerina dancing en pointe. This position forces the knee to compensate by adopting a slight bend that flexes the knee, leading the spine to curve inward. Gait issues as well as back, shoulder and neck pain result.

“The way your foot is shaped inside your shoe, you’re forcing it into a position where it’s not happy,” explained Dr. Grace Torres-Hodges, a podiatrist in Pensacola, Florida who regular sees patients with conditions associated with high heels. The more elevated the heel, the more one’s foot is forced forward, pressing it against toe boxes too small to contain all five toes. This pressure is a disaster for those with a predisposition for hammer toes, bunions and ingrown toenail.

These aren’t invisible issues. Ingrown toenails bend and start growing into the flesh, giving toes an inflamed-pink coloring. Hammer toes, a deformity of the middle joint, gives toes a claw-like appearance, like a bird of prey ready to snatch its next meal. Bunions, a bony bump that pulses at the big toe joint, jut out red and angry. In extreme cases, all three can require surgery.

It’s the fear of bunion removal surgery and the long recovery period—four and six months for full recovery—that keeps my mother interspersing her high heels with flats. “But I like heels and there’s no question that they make you more elegant,” she said. Despite spending her teens traipsing about in four- and five-inch tall sandals, my mother’s bunions only became a problem later. “It showed up when my father died and I wore this one stiletto for 48-hours straight,” she said. It was made of caramel suede and 3-inches tall. “It was Italian, beautiful and comfortable, but it destroyed my feet.”

Toes aren’t the only parts of the foot injured by chronic high heel use. Feet bear our weight, distributing it across length of the foot, with a bulk of the weight falling on the curved heel. High heels shift this weight forward to the ball of the foot, which must now support the entire weight of the body, adding pressure that can lead to stress fractures and neuromas, pinched nerves that make the foot tingle or burn.

According to Torres-Hodges, patients often correctly ascribe injuries in their toes and pain in the balls of their feet to high heels. Other types of pain are less obvious. “There are those that don’t realize some of their tendon pain and inability to wear other shoes is because of the heels,” she said.

Chronic high heel use, Torres-Hodges explained, can tighten the Achilles tendon, the bundle of muscle fibers that connects the heel bone to the calf muscles, and prevent the full stretch of the plantar fascia, which connects the heel bone to the toes. If the foot were a standard right triangle, the Achilles tendon and the plantar fascia would be the two legs that meet at the 90° angle formed by the heel. When the Achilles tendon and the plantar fascia are simultaneously strained for a prolonged period, both remold themselves to their new, elevated heel existence, resulting in shorter, thicker fibers. These become painfully stretched when a chronic high heel user attempts to wear flats. “In a pair of flat shoes, the biomechanics will allow for a maximum pull on the plantar fascia and the Achilles tendon,” said Torres-Hodges. “Think the Pythagorean theorem.”
When a patient arrives at Torres-Hodges’ podiatry clinic complaining of foot pain she starts by locating the problem and trying to relieve the symptoms. “But one thing that I always mention, with any kind of condition, is it’s all good and well to take care of the symptom,” she said, “but if you don’t get rid of what is causing it, it’s not going to help you.”

This doesn’t mean that Torres-Hodges preaches completely eschewing heels—she wears them herself when she gives lectures. Instead, she preaches moderation. “It’s just like when we’re talking to diabetics and tell them they can’t have ice cream,” she said. "You can, just don’t eat [ice cream] when you have everything else.”

II. High Heels as Object

When Elizabeth Semmelhack, the senior curator of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, was working on an exhibition about foot binding, she showed attendees Chinese “doll” shoes made for women with bound feet. The reaction was always visceral. “They had to ask the questions: Why? How? What was the meaning,” remembered Semmelhack. “And then I realized that so many people in the audience were wearing heels.”

High heels may not dramatically shorten the length of the foot in the same way as foot binding—a red silk Han Chinese pair in the Bata’s collection is only 4.5-inches in length—, but long-term, high heels can alter how a foot looks and, like foot binding, how a person walks. Yet, the reaction to wearing heels is hardly ever shock. At most, it is one of delight – “those are some sexy heels” – a question – “where did you get your shoes?” – or commiseration at shared pain –“beauty hurts, am I right?” “Nobody was asking the question why? Why the heel?,” said Semmelhack.

Semmelhack is interested in what mass-produced objects say about culture. Her doctoral work was on Japanese print culture, woodblock artworks produced en masse between the 17th and 20th centuries. “What I liked about looking at mass-produced objects is that they are made to be consumed at the moment of their creation,” said Semmelhack. “So, those that are successful, those that are consumed en masse, clearly are speaking to some larger cultural desire.”

Like Japanese print culture, modern shoes are also mass-produced. 24.2 billion pairs of shoes were manufactured globally in 2018 according to the Portuguese Footwear, Components and Leather Goods Manufacturers’ Association, which puts together an annual World Footwear Yearbook on trends in the industry.

If mass produced material culture allows us to take the pulse of society, recent trends in footwear suggest that, after dominating fashion in the early 2010s, high heels are going down, economically and structurally. In the United States, sales of fashion shoes fell five percent between August 2018 and August 2019. And, when high heels are purchased, they tend to be shorter. “Three or four years ago, it was normal across our brands to sell heels at 120 mm [4.7-inches],” Rebecca Farrar-Hockley, the chief creative officer for the upmarket footwear retailer Kurt Geiger, told British Vogue in 2019. “Now, a high heel is no higher than a 90mm [3.5-inches].”

High heels have gotten shorter and fallen out of favor in Western fashion before. In the late 18th century, as the excesses of the aristocracy began to rankle, the trappings of nobility fell out of fashion: heels shrunk or were eliminated entirely. Jane Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet did ger
schlepping across the Georgian countryside in flat-soled, leather half-boots. In the 1940s, as millions of women joined the workforce and key components of shoes were diverted to the war effort, spindly heels fell out of trend again. In both cases, however, heels came roaring back.

Fashion does not exist in a vacuum, immune to the travails of society. Rather, it responds to world events, remolding itself to fit into the social mores, anxieties and beliefs of the time. The stiletto, for instance, was one of the ways fashion responded to the post-war emphasis on female domesticity in the late 1940s, when men returned to work and women were sent back into the home. In Western fashion, heels have moved up and down, in and out, throughout history since their debut in Europe, yet after every dip they return to relevancy. So, what keeps women in heels?

When Semmelhack asked herself that question, the first thing she did was look for their source. “The thread just kept going back further and further into Western Asia,” she said. “I began to see these images of high heels in connection with stirrups,” such as the horseback rider featured on a 10th century bowl that came from present-day Iran that currently sits in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.xxxii. Heels allowed riders to more securely hold onto stirrups, and the joint invention of the stirrup and the heeled riding boot expanded the military abilities of horse riders. “I realized, oh, it’s a tool,” Semmelhack remembered. “It’s a tool for equestrianism.”

When the high heel arrived in Europe in the 17th century, men were the chief wearers, slipping them on both for riding and in formal settings.xxxiii. At the time, women’s fashion was borrowing heavily from menswear, with the heel being just another element of men’s dress that was co-opted.xxxiv.

Throughout the 17th century, men and women’s heels both increased in height, but while male high heeled shoes grew tall and sturdy, women’s heels grew tall and thin in an effort to accentuate the smallness of women’s feet.xxxv. The story of Cinderella’s glass slipper and her teeny-tiny feet was published by Charles Perrault at the tail end of the 17th century.xxxvi.

In the 18th century the meaning of high heels began to diverge along gender lines. In menswear, heeled shoes were no longer universally accepted throughout Europe. In France heels continued to be an important marker of male privilege.xxxvii—only those granted access to King Louis XIV’s courts were allowed to wear red heelsxxxviii, while in England they fell out of favor. On women, heels became increasingly associated with desirability, frivolity and irrationality.xxxix.

These associations continue to this day. Shoes can codify the type of woman you are, categorizing women as “sexy” (tall, 2.5-inch and up, thin heel) or “sensible” (short, 1.5-inch, block heels). For Semmelhack, the latter term is "a means of describing a woman whose desirability is depleted.” In her book *High Heels*, journalist Summer Brennan expanded on this concept: “It is hard not to despair when one follows this rhetoric to its logical conclusion, which is that ‘sensible’ shoes are unfeminine, and ‘feminine’ shoes are not sensible, therefore to be feminine is to be without sense.” xl

Femininity isn’t the only concept associated with high heels. Where heels continue to appear in men’s shoes, such as in cowboy boots, they’re a measure of practicality. Women’s shoes, journalist Rachelle Bergstein argues in her book *Women from the Ankle Down: The Story of Shoes and How They Define Us*, are different: their value is mostly measured in terms of fashion. “High heels, for instance, aren’t exactly practical, so the way women understand their efficiency is more abstract: they’re sexy, so they’ll capture men’s attention; they’re tall, so they’ll give the wearer more authority.” xli
“Everyone says ‘nobody notices if you’re wearing heels,’ and as nice as that is, it’s not true,” said my sister Carolina, who wore stilettos daily when she worked in corporate. For her, the value of heels is not in the male attention they might garner, but in female approval. “When I see a woman who’s really well-dressed, I want her to look at me and see someone who is her equal.”

This diverse value system makes it difficult to explain why women wear heels. There’s no universal explanation, and the reasoning is often contextual. One wears heels to weddings because it’s expected, even though abandoning them under the table as you head towards the dance floor is equally expected.

“Compliance to social norms is a key driver of human behavior and fashion, including use of high heels, is a clear manifestation of this,” wrote Maxwell Barnish and Jean Barnish in a 2016 review of high heels and injuries published in the British Medical Journal. “The high heel is now womankind’s most public footwear. It is a shoe for events, display, performance, authority, and urbanity,” wrote Brennan in High Heels.

Radwa Sharaf, a research scientist at a cancer genomics company in Cambridge, Massachusetts, wears high heels because of the way they look, the way they make her look, but also for their ability to make her feel like an adult. Sharaf grew up watching her mother in heels and, as a kid, was told she was too young for them. “I always associated it with being a grown up,” said Sharaf. For her, heels have a second role thanks to their classic click-clack sound: heralding one’s arrival. “They announce that you’re about to enter into a room,” she said. “It’s like you have your own butler.”

High heel’s leverage comes in part from the belief in their transformative power. “It’s almost like when an actor puts on a costume,” shoe designer Manolo Blahnik told The Guardian’s Tamsin Blanchard in 2003. “The woman who buys my shoes, she’s exhausted all day, working, and then she puts on the shoes,” he added.

When I defended my Ph.D., the question was not whether I would wear high heels, but rather which pair was the right option for the 10 AM event. Like much of academia, there is no designated dress code for a Ph.D. defense, only unspoken assumptions of what is appropriate. Assumptions that make it seem absurd to show up without slacks, a blazer and a pair of heels.

High heels also change the way you hold yourself. As a five-foot-two woman, I wanted the extra height even though I’d be sitting for two-thirds of the event. As an anxious person, I wanted a confidence boost when I faced my all-male defense committee. I opted for black-and-white slingbacks with 1.5-inch block heels from Sam Edelman that manage the tight-rope walk of sensible and feminine.

I’m not the only one who wore heels to their Ph.D. defense. When science journalist Bethany Brookshire defended her Ph.D. in physiology and pharmacology at Wake Forest University in 2010 she wore 4-inch high ankle booties with silver buttons up the side. “They looked fantastic and they were really hard to walk in and I did not care,” she said. Brookshire is 5’10; in the ankle booties she was 6’2 and towered over 4/5ths of her defense committee. Brookshire explains that the shoes were chosen on purpose. “It was so glorious to tower over in my giant heels and look down at the white men judging my dissertation to be like, so did I pass?”

Femininity. Performance. Power. Confidence. Maturity. Compliance. Acceptance. It’s a lot of notions to heap on a single object. “I think the bigger point is that heels are simply a thing that are given meaning,” said Semmelhack. Women are not predisposed to obsess over heels, Semmelhack
argues, the same way that men are not biologically built to desire women in heels. “It’s difficult to see [heels] without that cultural history of baggage, but they really are just things and they can be given whatever meaning we decide to societally.”

If any meaning can be ascribed to high heels, then it’s equally possible to transfer some of those ideas to other, more comfortable types of shoes. The 2010s saw the sales of high heels fall and, at the same time, a rise in athleisure sales, representing shows with a sports DNA that are designed for style rather than performancexlv.

The reasons for these trends are multiple. Casual office wear has spread from the West Coast tech industry into the sartorially strict upper echelons of East Coast financerxlvxlvi. World Footwear notes growing health awareness as another possible explanation. And as wellness becomes a trend, so does the uniform of wellness: athleisure. According to the market research firm NPD Group, it's athleisure rather than fashion or performance sportswear that will lead US shoe sales growth in 2021xlvii.

Another explanation revolves around changing perceptions of female empowerment. When commenting on 2017 shoe trends, Refinery 29’s senior features writer Connie Wang drew attention to this: “I think that empowerment looks differently to many different women. For some women, they feel more like themselves in a pair of flats and I think we've reached a tipping point in society where that's finally more than okay to do at the office.”xlviii

If sneakers and flats manage to become associated with the ideas that are frequently ascribed to high heels, then heels could lose their hold on women. “Sneakers offer women a form of footwear that often does a lot of the same work that high heels do,” said Semmelhack. Designer sneakers, such as the $795 Balenciaga trainers that look like black & white ergonomic socks, can cost as much as high-end designer high heelsxliv. And they are just as coveted.

Tentative and not-so-tentative postmortems for high heels have already been written. “Are the days of high heels coming to an end,” mused NPR’s All Things Considered in 2019. “Why smart, chic women are abandoning high heels (forever),” claims a Wall Street Journal headline from 2018. “Are you over high heels,” asked Harling Ross in 2017 on Man Repellerili. “Ding dong the high heel is dead,” celebrated Chemmie Squier in Grazia in 2016iiii.

These seem premature. According to Semmelhack, the success of flats and sneakers over heels will depend on whether women in comfortable footwear will still be deemed feminine and desirable. “But if you can do it in comfortable shoes, will we be willing to go back to high heels,” she asks?

Looking at the history of high heels and women’s fashion, Semmelhack’s answer is yes and she isn’t the only one. British shoe consultant Susannah Davda, also believes high heels will return, but with a twist. “We’ll have higher expectations of how we should feel in them,” she told writer Lauren Bravo in a 2019 piece for Refinery 29ili. The future of high heels, Davda predicts, is comfortable.

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III. High Heels as Design Project

On one of the coldest days in New York City this past winter, I took the R train to Long Island City to try on shoes at the showroom of Antonia Saint NY, a startup shoe company that launched
with a Kickstarter campaign in July 2017. The campaign’s title—“High-tech heels and flats that feel like sneakers inside,”—had all the taglines of a crowdfunding campaign: a universal problem, a tech-y solution and an outrageous promise.iv.

Antonia Saint NY isn’t the first or last company to arrive on the market in the last few years promising to deliver comfortable heels. Thesis Couture, founded by former Oculus VR and SpaceX recruitervii Dolly Singh in 2013viii, offers Eve, a $395 painless pump that transforms stilettos into a wedge and distributes body weight more evenly across the shoe–it’s “coming soon,” though no date is mentioned.ix. Joan Oloff and Marion Parke, both former podiatrists who started eponymous shoe brandsx–xii, sell classic pumps for $285xiii and $495xiv, respectively, with arch support, extra cushioning, and design elements that should decrease pain in the ball of the foot.

Many shoes companies promise comfortable heels, but these startups and brands go further. They don’t just promise comfort; they list their bonafides in their marketing, sprinkling the word “tech” throughout their website and drawing attention to their patented technologies. Knowledge of the anatomy of the foot and intimate awareness of the pain caused by heels are also there, as are origin stories involving uncomfortable heels.

The idea for Antonia Saint NY came to Antonia Dunbar in 2013 as she was walking to the headquarters of THINX, the period-absorbing underwear of which Dunbar is a co-founder. “I was down to one pair of shoes that I could wear that was cute enough and comfortable enough to get me through day and night,” Dunbar said over the phone. At home were one-hundred pairs of shoes, none of which fit her needs. “I wanted to be focused on the things I was saying and what I was trying to accomplish, and not on the pain in my feet,” she added.

In 2014, Dunbar started to sketch out the idea for a comfortable shoe, using many of the same questions that had driven the development of THINX: how could the product be improved and what changes would she want to see. “I really focused my shoe design on the pain points that I had,” said Dunbar. Pain points such as blisters on her big toes and support for her tall arches.

The Antonia Saint NY showroom is a long rectangle, one side dominated by shelves stacked with boxes of shoes, the other by windows that look out onto the endless train tracks weaving into Manhattan. On one end of the room is an enlarged picture of pale, gold sparkles emblazoned with the question “how I’m breaking the glass ceiling in 2020?” No one had added their answer, but it was only the second week of January.

For all the technology that goes into an Antonia Saint NY stiletto—the patented Tri-Arch Support System, extra cushioning—, the process of being fitted for a shoe is old-school, intimate. Each foot is measured beyond just the length. The size of the heel, the width of the largest part of the foot—bunions included—and the plumpness of the foot are all taken down with a wooden shoe sizer and a measuring tape.

I purchased the 3.5-inch Victoria heel, size 7 in black. I went with a wide toe box to accommodate the bony bunion bump. The measuring, the trying on of differently sized pairs, the walking up and down the hallway of the multi-office space, took 26 minutes and cost me $225.

The promise of comfort is costly, because it involves more material. This doesn’t mean comfort isn’t a priority for companies designing affordable footwear. Camtrade, a Boxborough-based women’s footwear company, sees comfort as part of their niche and manufacture their shoes with it in mindxiii. Vanessa Boliero, a product development manager at Camtrade, designs shoes for her lifestyle: a busy mom who wants shoes that are fashionable, but still practical and comfortable
enough to get her through the day. “I absolutely approach footwear design from that perspective and trying to get that balance of fashion and comfort.”

Comfort also determines the construction of shoes at Camtrade, such as the height of the heel to the inclusion of memory foam and padding for arch and heel support. But how much comfort-inducing elements can be added to a shoe will depend on the style of the shoe, particularly on how much space there is to add cushioning. “So I might only be able to put four millimeters of memory foam, which is pretty thin, but you might be able to do up to eight,” depending on the shoe shape said Boliero.

This is a problem Dunbar is aware of. “It’s hard to disguise all that comfort tech in a beautiful shoe.” To hide it, she went back to the drawing board and designed an exoskeleton that could conceal all the extra material. “I had to deal with the fact that my shoe would look a little puffier than I would like in order to have that meld of sneaker-like technology and classic design,” said Dunbar.

When shoes aren’t designed for comfort, aren’t trying to pack in comfort technology, there’s little they cannot look like. Barely there high heel sandals, secured to feet by thin straps of leather and balancing on thin heels. 4.7-inch patent leather pumps that create an almost 90-degree angle between the toes and the bridge of the foot. These shoes will put you back over $1,500 for the pre-Hedi Slimane Céline Nude Cage Sandals and $695 for the So Kate 2.7-inch pumps from Christian Louboutin. It’s a lot of money for any shoe, but particularly for one you can barely walk in.

Many high-end shoe designer are focused on fashion, with little consideration for comfort. Louboutin even came out against the entire concept in a 2011 interview for Lauren Collins of The New Yorker. “It’s like when people say, ‘Well, we’re not really in love, but we’re in a comfortable relationship.’ You’re abandoning a lot of ideas when you’re too into comfort,” Louboutin told Collins.

High end fashion designers may have the profit margin to re-invest in comfort, but the niche they fill doesn’t require it. Women who buy Louboutin’s shoes, aren’t buying them for comfort. They’re paying for the artisanship, the design, the red-soles and the status.

The expectation of comfort also depends on the purpose of the shoes. “They’re buying them because they bought an amazing dress and these are the shoes that are going to match that dress perfectly,” said Boliero. “You know it’s only going to be a couple hours, and they want to look great in these high fashion colors and materials.” Comfort becomes more of an issue when buyers are looking for a versatile shoe that works with multiple outfits, especially when on a limited budget.

Dunbar believes there will always be a place for designers like Christina Louboutin and uncomfortable, high-fashion heels. But daily, walking high heels, will feel different when they swing back into fashion. Consumers have noticed that comfortable shoes aren’t just about being pain-free, they also affect our mood and our ability to be productive. “We’ve been exposed to too much sneaker-like technology and we know how good our feet can feel,” said Dunbar.

Boliero agrees, noting that while fashion-focused shoes aren’t going away, they will no longer be as prominent. She points out the way society has changed recently, with everyone on the go and juggling a million things, and these changes require a different type of high heel. “You have people
working two jobs and managing a family,” said Boliero. “I think comfort is definitely here to stay for quite a while.”

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IV. High Heels as Quagmires

As Rachelle Bergstein wrote her book Women from the Ankle Down, which chronicles the story of shoes in the 20th century and women’s relationship to them, her own relationship with high heels changed. “When I was writing the book, it became very clear that women in some ways have been really programmed to want to wear them,” she said.

Bergstein likes high heels. She likes how they polish a look, how they boost her height and her confidence. “I like the way I look in high heels, but I don’t necessarily like the way they feel,” Bergstein explained. Writing her book, which was published in 2012, led her to realize that many of the reasons she gave for wearing high heels were part of a long historical narrative. “So how do you liberate the item from that narrative,” she asked? “Can you enjoy something that maybe you’ve been trained to like, even if it’s bad for you?”

My relationship to high heels also changed during the reporting for this piece. Now, when I look at the high heels I own–five pairs, down from eight when I began reporting–I catch myself asking if I truly like them or have I been trained to like them? And is there even a difference? Only one pair made its way into the closet: the pumps from Antonia Saint NY.

The Victoria heels sat in my closet for two months before I left the house with them. Unlike a high heeled sandal, which feels like a piece of hard leather roped to your foot by floss and sheer willpower, these stilettos make their presence known. You can feel the arch support when you step in them, the same way you can feel the extra space in the toe box. You can’t quite wiggle your toes, but at least they’re not begging for release.

But shoes are context dependent. For all their added comfort, they aren’t the right shoes for walking around the MIT campus where I study. The click of the stiletto tip feels too incongruous on a campus where it’s not uncommon to see undergraduates walking around barefoot. I changed into a pair of loafers by Briggs Field, where students were enjoying the sun and playing frisbee and soccer. The Victoria heels wait in a box for a more appropriate excursion.

When Ethel Williams wrote about common feet deformities and shoes in 1901, some thought the era of high heels would soon be over: “It will be said that the tyranny of heels is being relegated to the past, with many other minor tyrannies, by the bicycle-riding and hockey-playing young women of the day.”

That didn’t quite happen. High heels have had a long and varied history since Williams imagined their demise, including a long history of individuals crowing their death. The question shouldn’t be whether high heels are dead or dying. Rather, when high heels do inevitably resurrect, will they be engineered for comfort or not? In the meantime, we’ll keep carrying back-up flats when we don heels.
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