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Dress Code

Interior Design for Fashion Shops

Dress Code
The Architecture of Fashion

Text
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Humans live inside clothes. Since time immemorial, clothes have been our second defence – the first being our own skin – against the elements. Buildings have been our third.

Buildings and garments mediate and buffer our experience of the world outside our bodies, something reflected in the fact that fashion designers and architects have been borrowing from each other for eons by sharing the same materials (bark, grasses, hide, steel) and techniques (weaving, pleating, folding, draping) at different scales. Both work with scale and geometry, texture, colour and ornamentation, volume and voids and are increasingly using technology to do so. While designing the high-tech but voluptuous Miele boutique in New York's Meatpacking District, Hani Rashid and Lise Anne Couture of Asymptote used computer studies of fabric cuttings from the floor of Miele's design studio to convey both the sensuality of the body and the tectonics of clothing construction. 'We wanted to find out if we could structure pattern for space the way you structure pattern for the body,' Rashid explained. In Tokyo, designer Steve Lidbury created an architecture for the men's section of the Addition boutique that, with its diaphanous layers of glass, polyurethane, reflections and light, resembles a textile in its own right. Over and over again in recent years, we have been reminded that while clothes are miniature dwellings, buildings are vast garments; we can dress ourselves in architecture and take shelter in our clothes. And if we don't want to hide, architects and fashion designers can also use structure and surface – silk, seams and thread as much as marble, beams and cable – to create interfaces between people, tools that communicate without talking. Architect Shuhei Endo who created the Rodenstock Galerie de Brille shop in Tokyo, compared eyeglasses to architecture. Located 'in between', between people and their environments, both connect our inner and outer worlds and hold up a lens to our surroundings and our selves.

In alliance with the fashion industry, whose most exclusive houses were swallowed up by behemoth international conglomerates during the 1990s, retail architecture has become a tool in the manufacture of individual and group identity (particularly in urban areas) as well as an expression of corporate identity. Now, garments have become characters that perform on an architectural stage and the theatrical quality of both creates a dialogue between the two that is all about the brand. In fact, retail designers are finding fertile creative ground by refusing to draw distinctions between art, architecture, fashion and commerce. The increasingly vigorous and synergistic exchange taking place amongst these disciplines has become more conspicuous in the retail environment today. 'To me, a clothing store is a more accessible kind of gallery,' says contemporary design curator Ellen Lupton, 'a place where I can walk away with some art in my shopping bag.' One no longer merely browses, tries on and buys clothes. In a boutique, above all, a shopper has an experience that is contrived through architecture: you enter a different world or are thrust into a very real world you might not otherwise have had the opportunity (or wanted the opportunity?) to enter. You find a fly-postered city in London shop, Firetrap. **You enter a white forest in Seoul's T.odo boutique, wander through the tarpaulin-clad lean-tos of a homeless community in Tokyo's Bernhard Wilhelm store.** Indeed, Manhattan's entire Meatpacking District has become a theme park of fashion boutiques, hermetic fictions linked by a single goal: to sell expensive clothes.

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How can architecture help to sell clothes today? Ten years ago, it was expected to recede in favour of the fashions. Not so any longer. With the proliferation of choice today, offering a product, even a chic product, isn't enough. Retailers and fashion houses feel pressure to offer something bigger. Dutch firm 3D Projecten redesigned a Mayke shop in the Netherlands, not structurally or even functionally, but to evoke the brand through the atmosphere of the space. Today, according to 3D architect Peter Robben, architecture and fashion are expected to reinforce one another in exactly this abstract, ambient, wholly explicit manner. The accessories of retail architecture remain the same: a till, fitting rooms, display systems (racks, tables, shelves, cupboards), a storefront – but they must resonate with shoppers' fantasies in a way that lasts long after they leave the shop. A pair of trousers, a frock, become the souvenirs of an experience and tokens of a larger, ongoing narrative that is the brand. 'Architecture and fashion design are not about function but about communication,' says designer Fabio Novembre. 'Attaching some clothes to some rails is not really a difficult function to solve. Seducing people with a beautiful spatial story is what it is all about.'

Stories

The word design means 'to conceive or fashion', 'fashion' means 'to give shape or form to', architect, 'to form or devise'. These words denote a family of makers. What is being made today by designers of both disciplines are stories. Most (stories and interiors) are built to last even if the fashions aren't. **Fashion is ephemeral but endurance has always been architecture's virtue. When it comes to ephemerality, however, Rei Kawakubo's guerrilla Comme des Garçons outposts and, more recently, Bernhard Wilhelm's in-mall Tokyo boutique designed by artists item idem and Muti Randolph's Galeria Melissa in São Paulo, challenge the notion of static retail space. Although architecture has yet to match the speed and totality with which fashion shifts, Kawakubo's guerrilla shops differ radically from place to place and have preset expiration dates in case we become too attached to them. Wilhelm's shop is an art installation where clothes are sold; the entire interior will change twice a year. Made in its initial incarnation from trash and found objects, its 5800-euro price tag makes this frequent overhaul unprecedentedly feasible.**

Sometimes retail architecture's story is as simple as making the shopper feel at home (in the Platonic ideal of home, perhaps) as Laur Meyrieux has done with her Fukuoka shop, Le Ciel Bleu which resembles a bright Mediterranean living room. Other times, it is a story about technology. Technology hasn't yet transformed the shopping experience as the publicity machines of Prada and Koolhaas once hoped, but it has helped us to change the shape of our clothes and our architecture. Ammar Eloueini's Pleats Please boutique designs for Issey Miyake in Berlin and Perpignan celebrate form and composition as much as the couturier does and the computer has allowed him to do so in a new way.

At other times, it is a story that is meant to pleasantly confuse, instead of clarify, the shopping experience. In Robin Elmslie Osler's design for B8 in New York City, the darkness of the space amplifies its exclusivity – coming in off the bright street in summer, shoppers feel as if they've entered a secret jewel box. By layering mirrors, screens and translucent material, Osler obscured the edges of the space. 'In the fashion industry,

Ellen Lupton

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you're working with vanity because that's all that fashion is,' says Osler, who worked as a model for ten years before training to become an architect. 'It's a powerful tool that you can use to manipulate how others see you. So we were manipulating how visitors perceive the space.'

Many of the boutiques in Manhattan's Meatpacking District use metaphors from nature as a way to provide a recognizable and tranquil place to spend time and money or to offer shoppers a new world that must be explored and discovered. If the Stella McCartney boutique is a topographical map, the adjacent Alexander McQueen shop, a glacier complete with crevasses and caverns, and Balenciaga, to the north, a desert, the neighbourhood seems to be evolving into a cabinet of curiosities. The Catherine Malandrino shop, designed by Christophe Pillet, evokes a lush garden. A hillock of a sofa has sprouted leather sod and garments hang in a profusion of mossy knits and leafy silks from racks that might be hedgerows. The branches of a chandelier are weighted with pendulous Murano glass bulbs, beneath which a path wandering through the shop creates tiny openings and closures. This is how Eden looked after the apple was eaten.

One of the more recent phenomena of retail architecture is the opulent flagship store which, pioneered by Rem Koolhaas and Herzog & de Meuron for Prada, has become a total declaration of brand as well as a provocation: Has culture sold out to commerce? **At the other end of the spectrum, as artists item idem did for the Bernard Wilhelm store, some designers are foregoing luxurious materials in favour of elevating or recycling the very humblest of materials (trash, in the case of item idem) to dress a boutique.** Guy Zucker's design for Delicatessen manages to redeem lowly linoleum. Using only linoleum and cardboard tubes, the designer sheathed the space in a thin 'garment' that forms the store's furniture: display racks, a fitting room, a cashier's desk and a storefront. With a change of season, change of mode or change of the owner's heart, this garment can be replaced, the interior keeping pace with the latest fashions. The entire project cost a mere 2500 euros (830 euros of which went for materials). By cutting, folding, rolling, stacking and wrapping his materials – almost as a fashion designer might – Zucker spun pedestrian, ephemeral, readymade stuff into something fine, reminding us, as our mothers once did, that it is not the clothes that make the man. Zucker's resourcefulness poses a challenge to retail architecture and to fashion, itself. If builders can embrace the ephemerality of the fashion industry, if designers can alter our notions of what is precious and what is poor, we may be able to invest in imagination over material. Mind over matter, my mother always said.