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The fine art of retail

Aimee Farrell

Designed by an architect and often ‘curated’, the modern boutique has become a gallery of desire



Victoria Beckham's London store, designed by Farshid Moussavi

An aesthetic war is being waged in stores, with fashion's leading luxury brands battling to lure and seduce consumers with ever more artistic retail spaces. The secret weapon in this naturally-lit world? An army of architects and creatives who are transforming the stores we shop in and, by extension, the way we shop.

One of the most visible partnerships has been between Rem Koolhaas and Miuccia Prada: a decade ago, the Dutch architect and designer unveiled a palatial Prada store in SoHo, New York, on the site of the shortlived downtown Guggenheim museum. With its sweeping statement staircase, ranks of stylish mannequins and glass cabinets of handbags (presented as one might display historical relics), it transformed perceptions of what a store could be and set a new benchmark for brands.

Since then, the Italian luxury house has built on its shop-as-gallery aesthetic: the brand's recent Iconoclast project, for which Miuccia Prada invited film

costume designers to “dress” key flagship stores in London, Paris and Milan, may have led patrons to feel they had stumbled into a museum show. And as plans are unveiled for Koolhaas’s next wave of sculptural monoliths for the Fondazione Prada in Milan, the line between art and retail space is growing ever blurrier.

In many ways, it makes perfect sense: galleries and fashion houses now stand cheek-by-jowl on many of the world’s most exclusive shopping streets. When Comme des Garçons opened its multibrand boutique Dover Street Market in London a decade ago, Dover Street was known for a clutch of independent galleries and leisurely lunch venues. Today they sit alongside stores including Victoria Beckham, Acne, John Rocha and Vanessa Bruno, and Dover Street has become one of the most dynamic retail destinations in London (how typically avant-garde, then, that Dover Street Market now plans to move into Burberry’s old London headquarters in Haymarket).

Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons has called her approach to store curation “beautiful chaos” and regularly fills her store with on-site installations and rotating in-shop residencies. In her New York outpost, customers are encouraged to discover the 20,000 sq ft former school building via a vast transparent lift that zips between the seven split-level floors.

The prevailing trend in store design, however, is less about creative chaos than about cool, and the look is minimal not maximal. At the new Saint Laurent stores being rolled out globally to replace the dark Tom Ford-designed mahogany-shelved shops of old, the artistic director Hedi Slimane uses words such as “serenity” and “calm” to evoke the spaces in which he sells his clothes. The design is completely bare-bones chic: a simple rail runs the



Céline, Mount Street, London

length of the cement floor and shoes are mounted on the walls. Likewise, when Victoria Beckham opened her first flagship store in London last year, she chose art-world architect Farshid Moussavi to deliver a polished concrete paean to minimalism that echoed the mood of the brand without detracting from her clothes. Thanks to Moussavi’s focus on display, the shop floor is a blank canvas, and the customer’s eye is drawn towards a carefully curated selection of goods.

The gallery sentiment is echoed at Céline, which has opened several new stores and refurbished others in the past year, including a flagship store on Mount Street, London, and another in SoHo, New York. The 600 sq m Mount Street store is broken up with simple grey walls, on which shoes and handbags are displayed like artefacts, while the

visual drama is quietly provided by the marble, parquet-effect flooring inset with semi-precious stones.

Phoebe Philo, the house's artistic director, commissioned Danish artist Thomas Poulsen to design furniture for the Mount Street store. His daybed and floor lamps help bring what he calls "the hidden language of art" into the space. "The first thing you touch as you enter [the exterior door handle] is very sculptural, and the last thing you touch [the interior door handle] is very minimal," he says. "The hope is that there's a transition between the two that happens while the customers are in the shop." In other words: enter a gallery, leave with a carrier bag. For Poulsen, it also gets his work into a more dynamic setting, a merging of art with architecture and design that he considers in the same spirit as that of a movement such as Bauhaus.



Prada, Paris, 'dressed' by Milena Canonero as part of the brand's Iconoclast project



Christopher Kane by John Pawson

provides a sort of permanent atmosphere, but the emotional resonance will depend on how the spaces have been curated that day."

But why is the store space so important when today's buyers are increasingly likely to shop online anyway? "Stores have become a place to enhance the brand experience. Consumers don't just want to shop, they want to feel that the brand understands them," says Alison Cardy, managing director of global design consultancy HMKM, whose clients include Burberry and Harvey Nichols. When a designer's range is "made available anywhere in the world at any time", she continues, the store is where a brand can exert its identity and offer a physical experience.

In future, the boundary between gallery and store might vanish completely. At the newly refurbished Hermès on Bond Street, a sweeping staircase draws shoppers towards an outdoor courtyard complete with Henry Moore sculpture. It's proof perhaps that the ultimate communicator of luxury today is space. And Moore is always merrier.

Photographs: Gilbert McCarragher; Stéphane Muratet