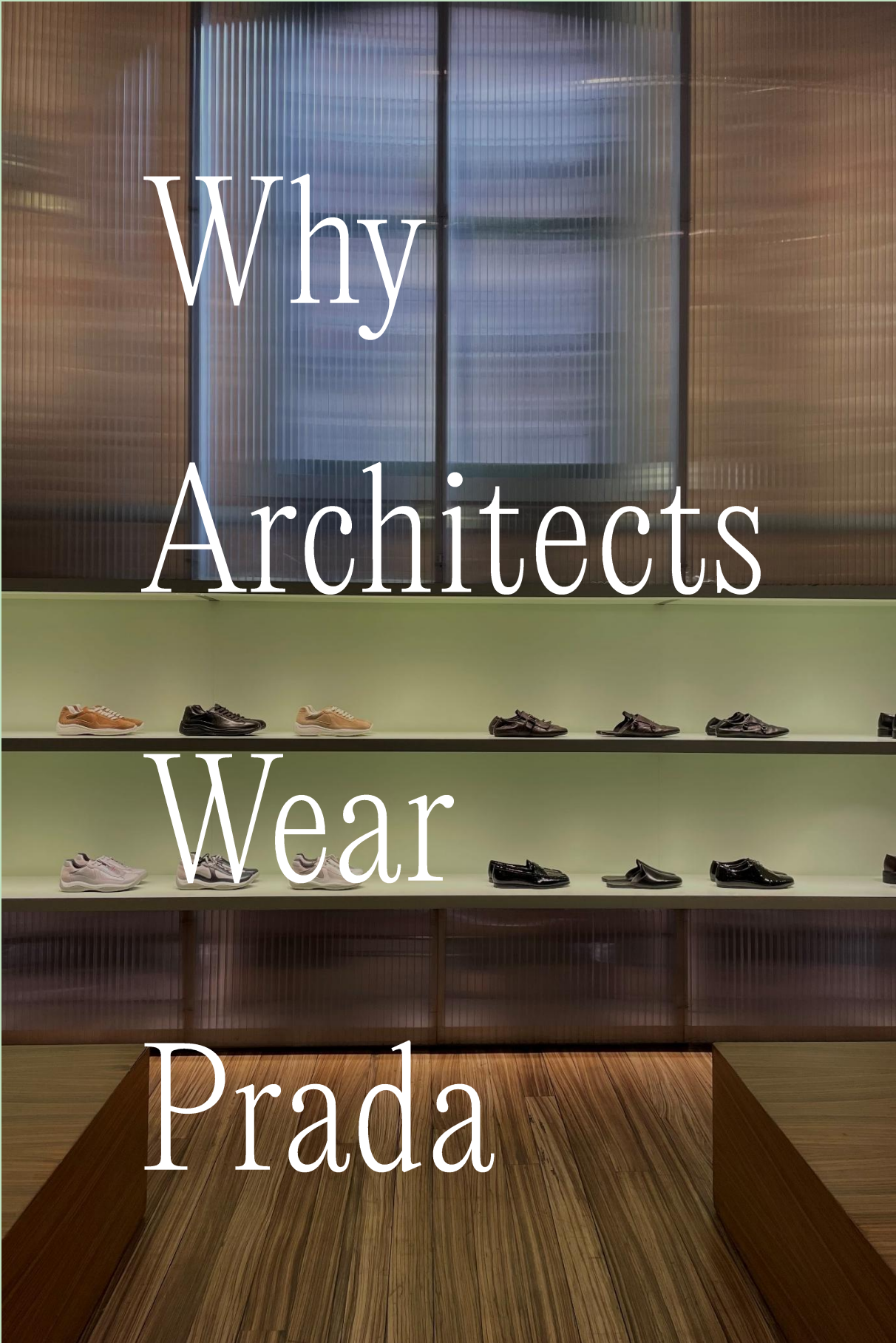


A photograph of a Prada shoe store interior. The background features a large window with vertical blinds, through which a cityscape is visible. The floor is made of dark wood. Two long, low wooden shelves are positioned in the foreground, each displaying a row of various shoes. The text 'Why Architects Wear Prada' is overlaid in a white serif font.

Why
Architects

Wear

Prada

Figure 1. Photograph of the interior of the Prada flagship store on Broadway in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

Experiencing Fashion through Architecture:
Tracing the Evolution of Fashion Spaces from OMA's 2001 Prada Epicenter to
Today's Immersive Stores and Shows, and the Role of Architecture in
Shaping Brand Identity and Transforming the Fashion Experience

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You realize when you are in the realm of architecture that you are touching the basic feelings of man and that architecture would never have been part of humanity if it weren't the truth to begin with. –Louis Kahn

Preface

This thesis is the result of two converging interests – architecture as a way of shaping space, and fashion as a way of shaping self. From a young age, I was drawn to the spatial world of architecture, intrigued by how environments affect human behavior and perception. My connection to fashion, however, grew more personal and emotional, shaped largely by my father’s discerning eye for design and style. After his passing in 2019, I felt a renewed responsibility to honor his sensibility through my own choices – particularly in how I dress and present myself. Fashion became, for me, a vehicle for self-expression and remembrance, not as a pursuit of trends but as a search for distinctiveness, meaning, and emotional resonance.

In 2023, during a six-month academic exchange in Milan – a city that occupies a central position in both the fashion and architectural world – these two passions converged more sharply. There, the initial concept for this thesis was born. I became increasingly interested in how architectural space influences the way fashion is perceived, experienced, and consumed. Under the invaluable guidance of Prof. dr. Maude Bass-Krueger, and later with support from Dra. Karen Van Godtsenhoven, I began a research journey that sought to bridge the sensory and symbolic dimensions of architecture and fashion.

The deeper I delved into architectural practice, the more aware I became of the profound psychological and emotional effects that spatial design can elicit. I also came to recognize a gap in architectural academic programs: a tendency to privilege conceptual narratives over the visceral, lived experience of space. This concern became central to my thesis, especially as I explored fashion boutiques – spaces that must communicate brand identity not just through aesthetics, but through immersive spatial storytelling. By visiting these boutiques firsthand, I came to understand how powerful architecture can be in conveying narratives, emotions, and values, often in ways that transcend verbal or visual communication.

My understanding of architecture is inseparable from emotional memory. Spaces linger in my mind not simply as visual impressions, but as felt experiences – at times nostalgic, unsettling, or inexplicably familiar. Architecture, unlike other forms of artistic expression that reflect past emotions, invites present engagement. It is a stage upon which human gestures unfold, and it becomes meaningful only through the presence and performance of people within it. This thesis proposes a “gestural architecture,” one that invites intuitive interaction rather than prescriptive meaning, and explores how fashion spaces can embody this concept in ways that resonate universally.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to several people who have accompanied me on this journey. First, to my father, who instilled in me a belief in the value of hard work and whose memory continues to inspire everything I do. To my mother, my sisters, and my brother, whose support and presence are beyond words. To Prof. dr. Maude Bass-Krueger and Dra. Karen Van Godtsenhoven, for their expert guidance, generosity, and encouragement. And to Prof. dr. Wouter Davidts, for believing in the relevance and potential of this subject.

This thesis is a tribute not only to personal memory, but to the broader dialogue between space, self, and society – between architecture and fashion, and the profound experiences they co-create.

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Explanation regarding the Master's Thesis and the Oral Presentation

This master's dissertation is part of an exam. Any comments formulated by the assessment committee during the oral presentation of the master's dissertation are not included in this text.

Abstract & Keywords

Flagship fashion stores have evolved from simple commercial spaces into immersive environments where architecture shapes how fashion is experienced, remembered, and understood. This thesis explores how spatial design contributes to brand identity by transforming retail into a sensory and cultural encounter. Through material choices, lighting, circulation, and atmosphere, architecture functions as a narrative medium, guiding behavior and reinforcing meaning. Despite their prominence, fashion retail spaces are often overlooked in architectural academic programs. This research addresses that gap by analyzing architect-designed flagship stores as scenographic platforms that merge storytelling with spatial experience. It traces the development of immersive flagship architecture from OMA's 2001 Prada Epicenter in New York to recent case studies in London, Tokyo, Paris, and Miami. The methodology combines theoretical inquiry, historical timeline construction, and firsthand fieldwork. Personal site visits and sensory observation inform the analysis of how space produces affect, expresses brand values, and constructs user experience. The findings show that these fashion spaces blur boundaries between public and private, spectacle and intimacy, commerce and culture. They assert that architecture is not secondary to fashion, but integral to its expression. By staging identity and provoking emotional engagement, these flagship stores redefine what it means to design for consumption. The thesis argues for their inclusion in architectural theory as critical sites where cultural, symbolic, and experiential forces converge.

Keywords: fashion architecture, flagship store, spatial branding, affective experience, retail design.

Extended Abstract

Contemporary flagship stores are no longer just places of commerce. They have become immersive, symbolic environments that communicate brand identity, guide consumer experience, and influence the fabric of urban life. This study focuses on the intersection of architecture and fashion, asking how spatial design contributes to the cultural and emotional impact of luxury retail spaces. Using a combination of theory, historical context, case study analysis, and firsthand fieldwork, the research explores how architecture functions as a medium of storytelling and sensory engagement within the fashion industry.

The investigation begins by challenging the notion of architecture as a neutral container for fashion. Instead, it argues that architecture actively shapes how fashion is perceived, felt, and understood. The research traces the emergence of this spatial turn in fashion from the early 2000s onward, taking as a conceptual starting point the 2001 opening of OMA's Prada Epicenter Store in New York. This project marked a significant departure from conventional retail design, initiating a new era in which architecture became central to fashion's narrative and experiential strategies. The study's central question – how architecture influences the development and experience of fashion spaces, and how this reshapes the fashion industry – is addressed through both theoretical frameworks and material engagement with built environments.

The literature review provides a foundation for the research by engaging with key theoretical perspectives on space, branding, and affect. Anna Klingmann's notion of "brandscares" frames architecture as a communicative and emotional tool that contributes directly to consumer identity and memory. Louise Crewe's theory of "mediatecture" explores how architecture and media coalesce in contemporary flagship design, while Mark Wigley's work on minimalism and the symbolic use of color provides a lens for understanding architectural aesthetics as branding strategies. The review also draws on urban theory, particularly in relation to the transformation of cities into branded landscapes, and examines how fashion

shows serve as ephemeral but powerful sites of spatial storytelling. These theoretical insights are complemented by historical analysis, tracing the evolution of retail architecture from 19th-century department stores to 21st-century “brand cathedrals,” showing how architectural spectacle, cultural capital, and symbolic power have become essential components of fashion marketing.

Methodologically, the thesis adopts a multidisciplinary approach. The research is grounded in a comparative case study model, supported by a unique timeline of noteworthy fashion-architecture collaborations from 2001 to 2025. Firsthand site visits to flagship stores in New York, Milan, Paris, and London form the empirical core of the study. These visits follow a structured observational protocol and are supplemented by affective analysis, a method that foregrounds bodily perception, emotional resonance, and sensory experience. This methodology allows for an embodied understanding of how spatial design produces atmosphere and influences consumer behavior, moving beyond textual or visual analysis to capture architecture’s performative dimensions.

The case study chapter presents in-depth analyses of seven flagship stores. These include OMA’s Prada Epicenter in New York, Rei Kawakubo’s Dover Street Market in London, Peter Marino’s CHANEL boutique in Tokyo, OFFICE KGDVS’s Paco Rabanne store in Paris, Virgil Abloh’s Off-White project in Miami, Smiljan Radić’s Alexander McQueen store in London, and Studio Anne Holtrop’s Maison Margiela boutique in London. Each case is examined through the lens of brand philosophy, spatial design, materiality, and user experience. Particular attention is paid to how architecture constructs narrative and atmosphere, how it invites or excludes, and how it performs identity through spatial form. The consistency of the analytical framework across these diverse examples enables meaningful comparison and synthesis.

Findings from the case studies demonstrate that architecture functions not merely as a backdrop for fashion but as a co-author of its meaning. These flagship stores operate as spatial scripts, staging luxury through scenography, symbolism, and emotional intensity. They blur the boundaries between commerce and culture, public and private, permanence and ephemerality.

At the same time, the study acknowledges the ideological tensions within these spaces. While they produce powerful aesthetic and affective experiences, they are also embedded in systems of exclusivity, surveillance, and symbolic hierarchy. Architecture in the service of fashion can both democratize experience and reinforce cultural gatekeeping.

The final chapter of the thesis offers a visual and textual timeline of key developments in fashion-architecture collaborations over the past two decades. This timeline reveals broader trends: the rise of sensory branding, the shift from transactional to experiential retail, the increasing involvement of (star) architects, and the recent closure or transformation of physical stores in response to digital and economic pressures. It contextualizes the case studies within a larger cultural and commercial trajectory, reinforcing the argument that architecture has become a critical medium in fashion's spatial and narrative strategies.

In conclusion, the thesis proposes that fashion architecture exemplifies a form of “gestural space” – one that operates through material, sensory, and emotional cues to construct experience and identity. These spaces are not static containers but dynamic agents that stage fashion as a lived, embodied phenomenon. The research calls for an expanded architectural imagination that embraces affect, intuition, and narrative, and positions fashion retail spaces as vital sites for understanding how contemporary life is designed, consumed, and performed. By situating flagship stores within the continuum of urban transformation, aesthetic expression, and cultural production, the thesis contributes to broader conversations about the future of architecture, the role of fashion, and the politics of spatial experience.

Nederlandse vertaling:

Hedendaagse flagshipstores zijn niet langer louter commerciële ruimtes. Ze zijn uitgegroeid tot immersieve, symbolische omgevingen die merkidentiteit communiceren, de consumentenervaring sturen en het stedelijk leven mee vormgeven. Deze studie richt zich op het snijvlak van architectuur en mode en stelt de vraag hoe ruimtelijk ontwerp bijdraagt aan de culturele en emotionele impact van luxueuze retailomgevingen. Aan de hand van theorie, historische context, casestudyanalyse en eigen veldonderzoek onderzoekt dit werk hoe architectuur functioneert als een medium voor storytelling en zintuiglijke beleving binnen de mode-industrie.

Het onderzoek vertrekt vanuit de kritische stelling dat architectuur geen neutraal decor vormt voor mode, maar deze actief vormgeeft en betekenis verleent. Als conceptueel startpunt geldt de opening van OMA's Prada Epicenter Store in New York in 2001, een project dat een breuk betekende met conventionele retailarchitectuur en het begin inluidde van een tijdperk waarin architectuur integraal deel uitmaakt van de merkidentiteit en zintuiglijke beleving van mode. De centrale onderzoeksvraag – hoe architectuur de ontwikkeling en ervaring van modespecifieke ruimten beïnvloedt, en zo de mode-industrie hervormt – wordt benaderd via zowel theoretische kaders als materiële confrontatie met gebouwde omgevingen.

De literatuurstudie vormt het fundament van de scriptie en verbindt ruimtelijke theorie, brandingstrategieën en affectonderzoek. Anna Klingmanns concept van 'brandscares' positioneert architectuur als een zintuiglijk-communicatief instrument in de opbouw van merkidentiteit. Louise Crewe's idee van 'mediatecture' biedt inzicht in de versmelting van architectuur en media in hedendaagse flagshipstores, terwijl Mark Wigley's analyse van minimalisme en kleur symbolische betekenissen aan architecturale esthetiek toekent. Verder wordt gebruikgemaakt van urban theory, onder andere om de transformatie van steden in merklandschappen te begrijpen, en wordt aandacht besteed aan de manier waarop modeshows functioneren als tijdelijke, ruimtelijke performances van merkverhalen. De literatuurstudie wordt aangevuld met een historische

analyse van retailarchitectuur, van het 19e-eeuwse warenhuis tot de 21e-eeuwse 'brand cathedrals', waarin spektakel, culturele waarde en ruimtelijk prestige samensmelten.

Methodologisch volgt dit onderzoek een multidisciplinaire benadering. Aan de hand van vergelijkende casestudies, aangevuld met een unieke tijdlijn van mode-architectuursamenwerkingen tussen 2001 en 2025, worden trends en verschuivingen in kaart gebracht. Cruciaal hierin is het terreinwerk, waarbij flagshipstores in New York, Milaan, Parijs en Londen bezocht en geanalyseerd zijn volgens een vaste observatiemethode. Daarbij wordt gebruikgemaakt van affectieve analyse – een methode die lichamelijke gewaarwording, emotionele resonantie en zintuiglijke beleving centraal stelt – om zo het performatieve karakter van architectuur tastbaar te maken.

De kern van de scriptie wordt gevormd door zeven casestudies van flagshipstores: OMA's Prada Epicenter in New York, Rei Kawakubo's Dover Street Market in Londen, Peter Marino's CHANEL boetiek in Tokyo, OFFICE KGDVS's Paco Rabanne winkel in Parijs, Virgil Abloh's Off-White project in Miami, Smiljan Radić's Alexander McQueen winkel in Londen en Studio Anne Holtrop's Maison Margiela boetiek in Londen. Elke case wordt onderzocht op basis van ontwerpfilosofie, ruimtelijke vormgeving, materialiteit en gebruikerservaring. De focus ligt op hoe architectuur narratief en atmosfeer construeert, hoe zij uitnodigt of uitsluit, en hoe zij merkidentiteit belichaamt door middel van ruimte.

Uit de analyse blijkt dat architectuur niet enkel decor is, maar een coauteur van mode. De flagshipstores functioneren als ruimtelijke scripts, waarin luxe wordt opgevoerd via scenografie, symboliek en affectieve intensiteit. Ze vervagen de grenzen tussen handel en cultuur, tussen privaat en publiek, en tussen blijvend en tijdelijk. Tegelijkertijd erkent het onderzoek de ideologische spanningen in deze ruimten: hoewel ze krachtige ervaringen genereren, maken ze ook deel uit van systemen van uitsluiting, surveillance en symbolische hiërarchie.

In de afsluitende hoofdstukken wordt een visuele en tekstuele tijdlijn gepresenteerd, waarin belangrijke ontwikkelingen in samenwerkingen tussen

mode en architectuur van de afgelopen twee decennia in kaart worden gebracht. Deze tijdlijn onthult bredere tendensen: de opkomst van zintuiglijke branding, de verschuiving van transactionele naar ervaringsgerichte retail, de toenemende betrokkenheid van (ster)architecten, en de recente sluiting of transformatie van fysieke winkels als reactie op digitale en economische druk. Zo worden de casestudies gesitueerd binnen een bredere culturele en commerciële dynamiek.

De scriptie concludeert dat modearchitectuur een vorm van ‘gestuele ruimte’ belichaamt: een ruimte die via materialiteit, zintuiglijke stimuli en emotionele resonantie identiteit construeert. Deze flagshipstores zijn geen statische omhulsels, maar dynamische omgevingen waarin mode wordt beleefd, herinnerd en begrepen. Ze vormen niet enkel verkooppunten, maar scenografieën van verlangen, identiteit en ervaring. Mode en architectuur delen een performatieve logica; ze worden ‘gedragen’, doorleefd, en verankeren zich in het geheugen. Door flagshipstores te positioneren als ruimtelijke manifestaties van hedendaagse cultuur, draagt dit onderzoek bij aan een bredere reflectie over de rol van architectuur in een wereld waar beleving centraal staat.

Table of Contents

Preface	v
Explanation regarding the Master's Thesis and the Oral Presentation.....	vii
Abstract & Keywords	viii
Extended Abstract.....	ix
Table of Contents	xv
I Introduction	1
II Literature Review & Historical Context	4
A Experiencing Spaces	5
B I Shop Therefore I Am.....	7
C The Value of Flagship Stores.....	10
D The Value of Fashion Shows.....	13
E Spaces Fashioning the City.....	15
F Architects Fashioning the Brand.....	17
III Methodology.....	21
Theoretical Framework.....	22
Case Study Analysis	23
Timeline Development.....	24
Field Research and Affective Analysis	24
IV Case Studies	28
A THE EPICENTER: Prada by OMA (Flagship Store, New York City, 2001) ..	34
<i>The Visit: "Wandering Through Prada's Quiet Drama"</i>	34
The Brand	38
The Concept.....	44
The Store	48

Let's be honest: fashion and architecture make a surprisingly compelling duo. At first glance, they might seem like distant cousins – one draped in fabric, the other built in concrete. But spend a little time with both, and you'll notice something deeper going on. Beyond the obvious aesthetic flirtation between silhouettes and structures, the real magic happens in the realm of experience. Fashion isn't just about what we wear, and architecture isn't just about what surrounds us – they both come alive in the moment we inhabit them.

Yet conversations about fashion and architecture tend to hover on the surface – fabric meets form, structure echoes silhouette, and so on. All very poetic, but also a bit... flat. Because fashion doesn't strut around in a vacuum; it needs space. And architecture isn't some neutral backdrop – it's an accomplice. The layout of a boutique, the material of a staircase, the sound of your own footsteps in a gallery – these things don't just frame fashion, they shape how we feel it, perceive it, and remember it (Potvin, 2009: 2–6).

This thesis dives into that dynamic relationship. It looks at how architecture has increasingly become an active player in fashion – not just holding the clothes, but heightening their drama. The story begins in 2001, when OMA unveiled its Prada Epicenter in New York City. That store wasn't just a store; it was a declaration: architecture and fashion had entered a new phase of collaboration. From there, I trace how this relationship has evolved – from slick flagship boutiques to elaborate runway sets – asking: how has architecture influenced the development and experience of fashion spaces, and in doing so, reshaped the fashion industry itself?

These spaces aren't just about selling things. They are about staging emotions. They create moods, project identities, and choreograph how we move, pause, and respond. A flagship store doesn't just display clothes – it curates your whole encounter, using light, texture, and spatial rhythm to draw you in. A fashion show might last ten minutes, but its architecture lingers, setting the tone for the entire collection. In both cases, architecture is a co-author in fashion's unfolding narrative – one that often spills out into the urban fabric, turning cities into fashion's theatrical stage.

My own curiosity about all this came from noticing a curious silence in architectural academic programs. We talk endlessly about museums, libraries, and concert halls – but retail? Fashion shows? These are often dismissed as too commercial, too fleeting. Yet they are some of the most emotionally charged and carefully designed spaces we move through. That gap in educational discussions intrigued me. Much of the discourse on fashion spaces tends to spotlight iconic projects or aesthetic trends, without really asking why these spaces feel the way they do – or how they’ve adapted to shifting cultural, technological, and economic landscapes.

So, this research steps into that gap. Through a series of case studies grounded in historical context, it explores how architecture doesn’t just serve fashion, but elevates it – creating conditions for fashion to be seen, felt, and remembered in new ways.

In the end, this thesis isn’t just about architecture and fashion as separate disciplines – it’s about their encounter. And how, together, they construct the worlds we temporarily live in – worlds made not only of walls and fabrics, but of gestures and atmospheres (Ugelvig et al., 2023: 199).

A Experiencing Spaces

In exploring the evolution of contemporary fashion retail environments, I draw on the work of Anna Klingmann, whose concept of “brandscares” – architectural spaces designed to create immersive, emotionally resonant brand experiences – provides a central framework for my research. Klingmann argues that architecture today plays an active role in shaping consumer identity and memory by engaging multiple senses and evoking emotional responses (Klingmann, 2007: 51). I use her work to analyze how physical retail spaces can exceed the transience of media-generated impressions – such as those found in online campaigns or social media – and instead cultivate lasting affective and spatial experiences.

Rather than viewing architecture merely as a backdrop for consumerism, Klingmann situates it as an experiential medium in its own right, capable of communicating brand values through material, atmosphere, and spatial narrative. This distinction is vital for my research, which investigates how high-fashion boutiques, particularly those by architect-designed flagship stores, are increasingly constructed to facilitate sensory discovery and emotional engagement. My work builds on Klingmann’s assertion that architecture now plays a crucial role in mediating between commerce, media, and culture – not simply supporting fashion but becoming part of its expressive language (Klingmann, 2007: 54–55).

The intersection between media, experience, and architecture is further illuminated by Klingmann’s exploration of the tension between spectacle and sanctuary in retail design. She notes that while some architects amplify the theatricality of fashion through media-saturated environments, others craft intimate, even contemplative spaces that push back against the overstimulation of contemporary consumer culture (Klingmann, 2007: 51). This binary informs my reading of recent fashion spaces that shift between the immersive and the introspective. For example, I investigate how stores by architects like Smiljan Radić or Studio Anne Holtrop resist the flashy visual rhetoric of media-driven

fashion branding, offering instead spaces that privilege materiality, slowness, and sensory richness.

Additionally, my analysis considers how globalization and the fragmentation of identity have influenced fashion's spatial expressions. The work of Klingmann again proves valuable here, as she discusses how the traditional alignment between physical place and cultural identity has become destabilized in the global retail landscape (Klingmann, 2007: 54). Drawing from this, I argue that contemporary fashion spaces must now address a diverse and mobile clientele, acting as cross-cultural platforms that support both commercial transactions and brand storytelling. In doing so, these environments become stages for both local engagement and global connectivity.

Fashion boutiques, concept stores, and flagship locations increasingly operate not just as retail outlets, but as social and cultural hubs. I examine how they function as spaces of experience – blending commerce, culture, and architecture to form environments that encourage not only consumption but also affective participation. Klingmann's notion of "experiential branding" supports my claim that the goal of such spaces is no longer simply transactional, but transformational: to allow consumers to momentarily step into the brand's world and form a more intimate, lasting relationship with it (Klingmann, 2007: 54–55).

Finally, this chapter also situates my research within a historical trajectory. From the rise of the 19th-century department store to the branded interiors of the 20th century, architecture has consistently played a critical role in shaping fashion's relationship with its audiences. What distinguishes recent developments, and what my research aims to explore further, is the degree to which spatial design has become central to a brand's conceptual identity. Building on Klingmann's framework, I analyze how architectural design is now leveraged as an expressive and strategic tool, producing immersive experiences that are as significant to brand-building as the garments themselves.

B I Shop Therefore I Am¹

The transformation of retail environments must be understood within a broader historical and theoretical context that includes economic shifts, technological innovation, and the spatial strategies of fashion branding. A key starting point is the department store, which emerged in the late 19th century as a new typology that fused commerce, spectacle, and architecture. Le Bon Marché in Paris, opened in 1852 and redesigned in the 1870s by architect Louis-Charles Boileau and engineer Gustave Eiffel, exemplifies how architecture was instrumental in transforming shopping into an experiential activity. The use of grand atriums, balconies, and early escalators created a theatrical setting in which consumers could not only shop but also see and be seen. This redefined the relationship between space and consumer, casting the store itself as a form of entertainment and self-display (Fischli et al., 2021: 25).

Fashion brands quickly recognized the potential of architecture to communicate identity. By the early 20th century, retail spaces were adopting styles such as Art Nouveau – exemplified by Louis Vuitton’s early boutiques – and, later, Bauhaus and modernist principles that aligned with the clean, functional aesthetics of post-war luxury (Fischli et al., 2021: 25). These early collaborations laid the foundation for what would later become the flagship store, a spatial format that this chapter begins to trace and which will be explored in more detail in the following section of the review.

Today’s flagship stores, while rooted in these early experiments, have evolved into highly curated branding environments that transcend their original commercial function. My research draws on this historical lineage to explore how flagship architecture functions not only as a space of sale but as a spatial narrative of brand identity. Jeppe Ugelvig, Camila Palomino, and Cheuk Ng describe these spaces as experimental platforms that mediate between physical and digital economies, emphasizing experience over transaction. These immersive spaces

¹ Subtitle based on the artwork *I Shop Therefore I Am* by Barbara Kruger (1990)

mark a departure from the typology of the enclosed mall and the department store, signaling an architectural response to the rise of e-commerce and changing consumer expectations (Ugelvig et al., 2023: 2).

This changing dynamic is sharply illustrated by the contrast between the “dead mall” phenomenon and the continued vitality of flagship stores. The term “dead mall” refers to the widespread decline of suburban shopping malls in the U.S. and Europe – an outcome of digital disruption, shifting demographics, and changing consumer habits. These abandoned structures now provide architects with opportunities for adaptive reuse and experimental design, often untethered from the constraints of commercial viability. In contrast, the flagship store has become more vital than ever for luxury brands seeking to create exclusive, immersive experiences that reinforce their cultural capital. These spaces are less about selling inventory and more about producing affective environments that sustain brand loyalty and cultural resonance (Fischli et al., 2021: 25).

This repositioning is most visible in the collaborations between fashion houses and internationally renowned architects. Since the early 2000s, Herzog & de Meuron and Rem Koolhaas have worked with Prada, while Claudio Silvestrin has developed minimalist boutiques for Giorgio Armani. More recently, Smiljan Radić has created experiential, materially driven spaces for Alexander McQueen. These partnerships reflect a growing recognition that architecture is not merely supportive but strategic – a way to narrate brand values through spatial form, atmosphere, and sensory engagement (Fischli et al., 2021: 29).

Rem Koolhaas’ influential book *The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (2002) provides a theoretical lens through which to understand this development. In it, Koolhaas argues that shopping has become the dominant form of public activity, replacing many of the civic and cultural functions that architecture once served. He contends that retail space is now the primary site where architecture operates at scale, meaning that design is increasingly complicit in the production of capital, experience, and identity. My project builds on Koolhaas’ assertion by examining how flagship architecture blurs the boundaries between commerce

and culture, functioning within the very consumer systems it might once have critiqued (Fischli et al., 2021: 30–31).

Fredi Fischli, Niels Olsen, and Adam Jasper expand this critique by exploring how architecture facilitates the transformation of consumers into both subjects and data. In the department store era, shoppers performed identity publicly; escalators and balconies staged consumption as a social event. In contrast, digital commerce renders the shopper invisible to others but hyper-visible to corporations – tracked, categorized, and targeted by algorithms. This inversion challenges the earlier spatial logic of fashion retail, where the store was not only a place of purchase but of performance (Fischli et al., 2021: 20–24). My research takes up this shift by comparing how different types of flagship architecture either resist or reinforce these dynamics – some offering contemplative, tactile experiences in contrast to the frictionless interface of e-commerce.

The implications of this shift extend to the urban realm. As Fischli et al. argue, the decline of retail as a civic practice contributes to the weakening of public life itself. Where once the act of shopping involved chance encounters, shared spaces, and embodied engagement, the dominance of online platforms risks isolating consumers in individualized, screen-based experiences (Fischli et al., 2021: 24). My study responds to this concern by examining architectural interventions that reclaim retail as a spatial and social experience – spaces where the flâneur might still wander, where fashion is not just consumed but encountered.

Even within increasingly curated or branded environments, the spirit of flânerie has not entirely disappeared. As Bijan Stephen (2013) notes, digital platforms still allow for unexpected discovery and serendipitous browsing, albeit within algorithmic limits. This tension between spontaneity and control, visibility and invisibility, is at the heart of my analysis of fashion architecture. I argue that despite digital convenience, physical spaces remain vital for fashion's performative, social, and material dimensions.

By mapping the historical development of retail architecture and engaging critically with key theoretical perspectives, this chapter establishes the foundation for my research into contemporary flagship stores. The following chapter will further explore how the flagship emerged as a distinct spatial and branding typology in the mid-to-late 20th century and how it has been redefined in the 21st through its alliances with architecture, media, and global culture.

C The Value of Flagship Stores

The flagship store is a central spatial and symbolic device in the luxury fashion industry, serving not only as a point of sale but as a site where brands project identity, authority, and cultural value. This chapter traces the historical evolution of the flagship and its conceptual redefinition in contemporary fashion branding, drawing on key frameworks from Rex Butler, Karinna Nobbs et al., Louise Crewe, and others to articulate how these spaces shape – and are shaped by – the logics of consumer culture, architectural design, and global capitalism. My research builds on these works to investigate how flagship architecture functions as both a branding strategy and a cultural signifier, with particular attention to how spatial experience mediates consumer engagement.

Historically, flagship retailing can be linked to early 20th-century Parisian couture houses, where designers such as Coco Chanel and Paul Poiret integrated retail, design studios, and client salons into a single space. This model, as Butler (2022: 29) observes, established a spatial format that enabled direct interaction between consumer and designer, foregrounding luxury as both personal and performative. I take this historical model as a point of departure for analyzing how immersion, authenticity, and craft continue to inform the design of contemporary flagship stores.

By the mid-20th century, this integrated approach had begun to evolve in response to broader shifts in consumer behavior and urban development. Butler (2022: 29) identifies the emergence of the “concept store” in the 1960s and 1970s as a key moment in this transformation. These were spaces where brands experimented with curated environments that extended beyond product display,

reflecting a shift from transactional retail to experiential consumption. In the 1980s, the “lifestyle store” further expanded this logic, blending fashion with interior design, books, and art to create holistic brand worlds. This lineage directly informs my study of the flagship as an environment that stages not only products but lifestyles and values – performing identity as much as selling it.

Butler (2022: 30) further outlines the emergence of the modern “flagship store” in the 1990s and 2000s, characterized by large-scale, high-profile locations that prioritize architectural spectacle. These spaces operate less as stores in the traditional sense and more as immersive branding environments – what Crewe (2018: 90) later describes as “brand cathedrals.” This typology is central to my own research question: How does architecture function as a medium of branding in contemporary flagship spaces? The evolution of these spaces into cultural and technological hubs – seen in Louis Vuitton’s “Global Maisons” and Prada’s “Epicenter stores” – signals a shift in luxury retail toward spatial storytelling and symbolic visibility (Nobbs et al., 2012: 923).

Karinna Nobbs, Christopher M. Moore, and Mandy Sheridan (2012: 923) emphasize how the design of flagship stores has become an essential part of luxury branding, enabling companies to differentiate themselves not just through product but through space. These immersive environments are carefully choreographed: minimalist interiors evoke art galleries, materials are sensorially rich, and product displays are sparse and elevated. My research draws on this concept of “curated exclusivity” to analyze how spatial cues signal hierarchy, aspiration, and cultural value.

Crewe (2018: 88–94) provides several detailed case studies that further articulate this shift. In particular, she discusses how flagship stores like CHANEL’s Tokyo location or Dolce & Gabbana’s Milan space embed local cultural signifiers – such as bespoke French dining experiences or a Sicilian barbershop, respectively – into their design. These examples support my argument that flagship architecture is not merely a backdrop for products but an active participant in brand storytelling. The store becomes a scenography where identity is performed and consumed.

The integration of digital technology in flagship spaces further complicates the relationship between physical and virtual retail. Crewe (2018: 89) highlights the case of Burberry's Regent Street flagship in London, opened in 2012, as emblematic of this hybridization. The store employs RFID mirrors,² live-streamed fashion shows, and theatrical lighting to fuse retail with entertainment, offering a sensory experience that digital commerce cannot replicate. I use this example as a benchmark for evaluating how technology contributes to the creation of immersive, embodied brand experiences – and how it transforms architecture into an interface between consumer, brand, and data.

As Crewe (2018: 90–92) argues, these flagship spaces are less about immediate profitability and more about symbolic and spatial domination. Placing a flagship in a globally recognized urban district functions as a territorial claim, reinforcing a brand's alignment with specific cultural or aesthetic values. This concept – retail as a form of spatial capital – is essential to my analysis of how flagship stores act as architectural declarations of cultural authority. They mark the city with a brand's presence, asserting dominance in both the marketplace and the urban landscape.

In pushing this argument further, I engage with Crewe's notion of "mediatecture" – a term she uses to describe the increasing use of screens, lighting, and dynamic displays in flagship architecture (2018: 93–94). Architects such as Rem Koolhaas, particularly through his collaboration with Prada, have framed the flagship as a mutable, experimental space where fashion, media, and architecture converge. I build on this reading to explore how movement, interactivity, and visual saturation in flagship spaces encourage a form of consumer participation that is as much aesthetic as economic.

Finally, Crewe (2018: 102–103) contends that flagship stores remain a vital tool in luxury branding, especially in emerging markets where physical presence still carries symbolic weight. While e-commerce reshapes many aspects of retail,

² RFID (Radio-Frequency Identification), developed in the 1960s, enables the remote identification of objects using radio signals.

these stores endure because they offer something that cannot be fully digitized: a spatial encounter with the brand itself. My research takes this assertion as a central hypothesis – that flagship architecture operates as a medium of affect, narrative, and symbolic power, shaping the way luxury is experienced and understood in a globalized market.

In sum, this chapter has drawn on the work of Butler, Nobbs et al., and Crewe to trace the flagship's evolution from atelier to architectural spectacle. Their frameworks support my investigation into how flagship spaces function not just economically but semiotically, encoding brand identity into spatial form. The next part of the thesis will extend this analysis into case studies that illustrate how these dynamics play out in specific flagship projects.

D The Value of Fashion Shows

Fashion shows serve not only as industry events but as complex spatial performances that intertwine fashion, architecture, and narrative. In this chapter, I draw on key concepts from Jacob Rosengren (2015) and Bradley Quinn (2003) to explore how the spatial dimension of fashion shows contributes to brand identity construction and cultural messaging. These authors help frame my research inquiry into how luxury fashion brands use space – both physical and symbolic – as an active medium of storytelling, a question central to my analysis of flagship architecture and experiential branding.

Rosengren (2015) emphasizes the increasing theatricality and spatial sophistication of contemporary fashion shows. In his account, the catwalk has evolved from a utilitarian white runway into an orchestrated environment that mirrors the brand's aesthetic and ideological codes. He highlights how luxury houses like Loewe, Dior, and Prada integrate location and architecture into the very fabric of the presentation. I build on this framework by proposing that such spatial choreography is not merely aesthetic but also strategic, serving to extend the brand narrative into architectural and cultural space. In this sense, fashion shows can be understood as short-term flagship environments – temporary yet

powerful brand manifestations that anticipate or parallel the design strategies found in permanent stores.

The use of specific architectural typologies in shows – for example, the Fondazione Prada as a hybrid cultural-fashion venue, or Dior’s custom pavilions – is not incidental. These spatial decisions communicate intentionality, positioning the brand within a broader field of cultural production. Rosengren’s argument allows me to consider how fashion events function as “curated environments” where material culture, location, and temporality coalesce to perform luxury. In my work, I extend this idea to examine how fashion shows act as ephemeral forms of spatial branding that blur the line between spectacle and space.

Quinn (2003: 36) contributes a complementary lens, focusing on the performative and hyperreal qualities of the runway. He characterizes fashion shows as a “blend of fiction and reality,” where models enact stylized, choreographed movements through highly controlled environments. While the garments on display are real and wearable, the context of the show removes them from the mundane, casting them in a heightened, even dreamlike world. Quinn’s framing is especially useful for my analysis of how space operates symbolically in fashion contexts – transforming garments into ideas, and spectators into participants in a brand’s mythology.

Quinn (2003: 36) also notes that this hyperreality is paradoxically reproducible. Once the show concludes, the clothes re-enter the everyday world, where consumers reinterpret them in diverse and unscripted ways. This notion aligns with my research interest in the afterlife of spatial branding – how the meaning constructed during a fashion show (or in a flagship store) continues to shape consumer perception long after the experience has ended. In this way, I treat fashion shows not only as performances but as sites of cultural encoding, where brand messages are spatially and symbolically inscribed.

Together, Rosengren and Quinn provide the theoretical scaffolding for my understanding of the fashion show as a spatial medium. While Rosengren foregrounds architecture, location, and scenography as key elements of brand

communication, Quinn offers insights into the theatrical and narrative dimensions of the catwalk. My own work brings these perspectives into conversation to argue that fashion shows, like flagship stores, should be seen as spatial apparatuses that materialize brand identity, cultural positioning, and consumer aspiration.

This approach directly informs my broader research question: How do luxury brands deploy spatial strategies – both permanent and ephemeral – to shape the cultural meanings of fashion? By examining fashion shows through the dual lenses of performance and architecture, I position them not as peripheral marketing tools but as central to the brand's spatial discourse. This understanding helps to situate flagship stores within a continuum of spatial branding, one that includes not only fixed retail locations but also transient performances that contribute to the brand's narrative world.

E Spaces Fashioning the City

This chapter engages with the interdisciplinary relationship between fashion and architecture in the context of urban transformation, drawing heavily on Crewe (2018), Vésma Kontere McQuillan (2020), and Quinn (2003). These researchers offer conceptual frameworks that are instrumental in framing my own investigation into how luxury fashion operates not only within buildings but across broader urban spatial practices. Their insights guide my exploration of how branded architectural spaces contribute to the reimagining of cities, and how these environments complicate the binaries of permanence and ephemerality, aesthetics and politics, or commerce and culture.

Quinn (2003: 40) opens a critical avenue by framing urban architecture as a complex assemblage of material, social, and affective components shaped by capitalism. He suggests that urban spaces are not static, but dynamically shaped through human interactions, events, and commercial flows. This view provides a foundational lens for my own inquiry, as I examine how fashion-led spatial interventions – such as flagship stores, temporary pavilions, or fashion show installations – actively reshape how people engage with urban environments. Rather than viewing these interventions as isolated phenomena, I position them

as agents within broader capitalist and symbolic economies that influence urban experience.

McQuillan (2020: 14) identifies a significant gap in scholarship: while fashion shows and retail architecture have been widely examined in isolation, there is limited research on their integration into the urban fabric. My research seeks to bridge this gap by theorizing flagship fashion architecture as both a commercial and urban phenomenon. This work aligns with McQuillan's call to consider how the convergence of architectural and fashion vocabularies produces new spatial logics within cities – logics that complicate traditional urban planning models and introduce new consumer geographies centered around branding and spectacle.

Crewe (2018: 13–14) provides the most comprehensive theoretical grounding for this chapter. She frames fashion and architecture as disciplines with distinct materialities, temporalities, and scales – fashion being fast, intimate, and bodily; architecture being slow, monumental, and public. At first glance, these differences appear to reinforce disciplinary boundaries. Yet Crewe argues for their convergence, especially in urban settings where buildings are increasingly designed as expressive, branded environments. Her concept of the “relational geographies” produced by fashion spaces is particularly useful in my study of flagship stores, which I treat as urban interventions that blur the line between cultural icon and commercial infrastructure.

Crewe's analysis of the shared concerns of fashion and architecture – such as form, color, materiality, and the manipulation of space – helps me articulate how these disciplines collectively shape urban experience. She also introduces the idea that fashion spaces challenge traditional spatial hierarchies by offering new ways to think about materiality, embodiment, and consumption. This concept is central to my own analysis of how luxury brands leverage architectural design not only to sell products, but to assert cultural capital and reshape perceptions of the city. I extend her argument by treating flagship stores as “urban scripts” – sites where spatial narratives of luxury, heritage, and aspiration are constructed and staged for public consumption.

In addition, Crewe (2018: 14–15) highlights the political stakes of this convergence. While some critics view the merger of fashion and architecture as part of a neoliberal spectacle dominated by branding and celebrity culture, she also points to their potential for creative resistance. Fashion architecture can, in her view, open up new spatial imaginaries – spaces where emotional and sensory engagements challenge the logic of pure commodification. This ambivalence resonates with my research, which acknowledges both the corporate ambitions of flagship spaces and their capacity to evoke aesthetic and emotional experiences that transcend the transactional.

Ultimately, Crewe’s idea that fashion and architecture “hover on the margins of a mutual existence” (2018: 18) is foundational to my research. It allows me to conceptualize the flagship store not as a fixed typology, but as a fluid site where multiple disciplines, practices, and meanings intersect. Through this lens, I position flagship fashion architecture as part of a wider spatial discourse – one that contributes not only to retail design but to the reshaping of urban life, perception, and movement.

By building on these theoretical contributions, my project moves beyond a descriptive account of fashion spaces to explore how they function as urban agents. I am particularly interested in how these spaces materialize branding strategies in physical form, how they participate in the visual and symbolic economies of global cities, and how they offer new insights into the politics of spatial consumption. In this way, the frameworks offered by Quinn, McQuillan, and Crewe serve not only as references, but as conceptual tools through which I define and conduct my own investigation into the spatialization of luxury fashion.

F Architects Fashioning the Brand

This chapter investigates how architectural design has been instrumental in shaping brand identity in the fashion industry, particularly within the context of global urban spaces. The discussion builds on the work of McQuillan (2020), Crewe (2018), and Mark Wigley (1995), whose theories I mobilize to better understand how architectural minimalism, media-driven façades, and material

aesthetics function as branding strategies for fashion houses. These frameworks inform my research into how flagship retail spaces not only reflect but actively construct fashion brands' identities, producing what I term "urban fashionscapes."

The concept of "brandscape" provides a critical entry point into this discourse.

McQuillan defines these as spatial and media strategies that unify a brand's messaging across platforms to create a coherent identity (2020: 19–20).

However, McQuillan also notes the paradox inherent in this strategy: while consistency may fortify brand identity, it also risks stagnation and obsolescence if not periodically refreshed. I use this concept to examine the spatial lifecycle of flagship stores – how once-iconic minimalist designs, such as those by John Pawson for Calvin Klein (1995) and Claudio Silvestrin for Armani (2003), initially contributed to these brands' prestige, but eventually lost cultural traction as tastes and trends evolved. My research extends McQuillan's observation by interrogating how shifts in architectural style reflect shifts in brand strategy and cultural relevance.

Crewe (2018: 18–20) offers another key framework for my research: the theorization of fashion retail as urban performance. She emphasizes the ways in which architectural innovation and fashion's transient aesthetics collide in the making of spectacular, sensory urban experiences. According to Crewe, this convergence is particularly evident in cities where high-end fashion brands commission prominent architects to design visually compelling flagship stores. These collaborations not only produce consumer-facing spectacles but also transform urban space into branded territory. I adopt Crewe's concept of "mediatecture" – the use of architecture as a communicative device through digital displays and façades – as a lens to analyze how retail buildings function as multimedia branding surfaces. My research explores how these structures extend the brand's identity beyond the confines of fashion objects, embedding it into the urban landscape and thereby reshaping how cities are seen and experienced.

Crewe also provides a critical perspective on the socio-political implications of these branded spaces. Her argument that fashion-architecture collaborations create "complex metaphorical and material geographies" is central to my own

analysis of flagship retail. I build on her insights to investigate how these geographies are not just aesthetic but ideological, shaping notions of exclusivity, modernity, and cosmopolitanism. The interplay of color, materiality, and spatial form becomes a medium through which brands project their values and aspirations, contributing to what I conceptualize as a form of spatial storytelling within luxury fashion retail.

Wigley's (1995: xiv–xxvi) theory of the cultural politics of color further enriches this discussion. His exploration of the color white as an active architectural and cultural agent – rather than a neutral backdrop – provides a historical and symbolic frame for analyzing minimalist fashion environments. He demonstrates that white, particularly in the 1980s, served as a shared aesthetic code between architects and fashion designers, connoting purity, precision, and control. This minimalist aesthetic, exemplified in the work of designers like Coco Chanel and architects working with fashion brands, was not merely a stylistic choice but a branding strategy in itself. I draw on Wigley to unpack how spatial aesthetics – particularly the manipulation of light, surface, and shadow – help craft the affective tone of a brand's identity.

In applying these frameworks to my own research, I argue that the collaboration between architects and fashion brands is not just about aesthetics or spatial function. It is a strategic partnership that materializes the brand's values, aspirations, and cultural capital in built form. These architectural gestures become critical to understanding how luxury fashion asserts itself in an increasingly image-driven economy. Through site analysis and visual case studies, I examine how flagship spaces operate as nodes within broader global strategies of brand diffusion and cultural positioning.

Finally, fashion spaces also serve as arenas for critical commentary. As Crewe (2018: 25) notes, some designers use both clothing and architecture to reflect on themes such as temporality, regeneration, and sustainable consumption. My research picks up on this thread by examining how architectural expression within flagship fashion stores can signal ethical or progressive brand narratives – through material choices, adaptive reuse of buildings, or ephemeral pop-up

formats. These gestures suggest that fashion architecture is not only a vehicle for commerce but also a space for ideological expression.

In sum, this chapter engages with and extends the theoretical contributions of McQuillan, Crewe, and Wigley to examine the role of architectural authorship in fashion branding. Their insights provide the scaffolding for my analysis of flagship retail architecture as a medium of symbolic communication and urban transformation. By situating architecture at the heart of fashion's spatial strategies, my research contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary luxury brands build not just stores – but cities of meaning.

III Methodology

This research adopts a multidisciplinary methodology that combines theoretical inquiry, case study analysis, timeline construction, and firsthand fieldwork. It is designed to explore the intersection of fashion and architecture by analyzing how spatial design contributes to brand identity formation and retail experience. The study brings together spatial theory, branding studies, and affective analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of how architectural elements function as tools of representation and consumer engagement within the fashion industry.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this research is built on literature that conceptualizes space as a medium of identity construction and a vehicle for representational strategy in the context of fashion branding. In particular, I draw on Anna Klingmann's (2007: 51) concept of "brandscares," which frames spatial environments as integral to the construction and communication of brand identity. Klingmann's work informs how I interpret the function of consistency, coherence, and obsolescence in spatial branding strategies.

Louise Crewe (2018: 18–20, 25) offers a complementary framework by theorizing fashion retail as an urban spectacle shaped by sensory, material, and affective qualities. Her concept of "mediatecture" and spatial branding through retail architecture underpins my analysis of how buildings operate as communicative surfaces. I use her work to assess how design features – façades, materials, lighting, and layout – mediate the retail experience and construct immersive brand worlds.

Mark Wigley (1995: xiv–xxvi), in his analysis of architectural minimalism and the affective power of white, offers insight into how color and materiality function as ideological signifiers. His framework informs my reading of minimalist spaces and their alignment with brand aesthetics and cultural codes.

Finally, this methodology incorporates "affective analysis" as outlined by Maaïke A. van Tienhoven and Anneke Smelik (2021: 163–183), who explore how fashion and architecture intersect to produce embodied and emotional responses. Their work provides a methodological lens for understanding the sensory impact of

spatial environments, which is essential for capturing the full experience of visiting flagship fashion stores.

Case Study Analysis

At the core of this thesis is a set of comparative case studies focused on flagship stores and key architectural collaborations between fashion houses and architects. These case studies are selected based on their cultural significance, architectural innovation, and contribution to evolving spatial branding practices. The analysis of each case follows a consistent framework:

[1] Personal experience: Direct site visits to selected retail environments enable the collection of observational data related to spatial flow, atmosphere, materiality, and user engagement. These first-hand encounters are crucial for assessing affective and sensory elements that are often overlooked in textual or visual documentation.

[2] Brand context: Each store is contextualized within the broader identity and philosophy of the fashion house. This includes its historical engagement with architecture and design, offering insight into how space supports the evolution of brand narratives.

[3] Concept & design intent: Here, I examine the architectural concept underpinning the store's design. This includes the collaboration between the architect and fashion house, the spatial narrative being constructed, and the extent to which architectural choices reflect or amplify brand identity.

[4] Spatial experience & architectural features: I analyze the material and formal elements of the space – layout, lighting, materials, and interactive features – to evaluate how architecture mediates the retail experience. The focus is on how movement, perception, and emotional engagement are choreographed through design.

[5] Sequel & influence: Finally, I assess the broader impact of each project. This includes its influence on subsequent architectural commissions, its role in shaping

the brand's spatial strategies, and its contribution to broader trends in experiential retail design.

The Prada Boutique in SoHo, New York – designed by OMA in 2001 – functions as the central case study due to its pioneering role in integrating architecture into fashion branding. Additional case studies from London, Tokyo, Paris, and Miami offer comparative insight into how different cultural and commercial contexts influence architectural strategies.

Timeline Development

To situate the case studies within a broader historical arc, I constructed a timeline tracing the evolution of major fashion-architecture collaborations from 2001 to the present. This timeline helps identify key moments where the architecture of fashion stores and shows shifted in tone, intention, or technological integration. This phase relies on archival research and “image analysis,” where store and show photography is used to trace stylistic and conceptual developments.

Field Research and Affective Analysis

A central component of this research is fieldwork conducted through first-hand visits to key fashion spaces in New York City, Milan, Paris, and London. These site visits enabled the use of affective analysis, a methodological approach based on the framework developed by van Tienhoven & Smelik (2021: 163–183). Affective analysis unfolds in three phases: [1] Affect – capturing immediate, embodied responses to space and materiality; [2] Percept – recording sensory and formal characteristics without imposing interpretation too early; and [3] Concept – reflecting on these impressions to arrive at a synthesized understanding of the spatial experience. This method facilitates a richer engagement with architecture's atmospheric, sensory, and emotional dimensions and allows the research to move beyond abstract theory toward an embodied account of spatial experience.

New York City serves as the primary site of investigation, with the Prada Epicenter Boutique in SoHo forming the conceptual and methodological

foundation of the case study framework. Additional flagship stores and boutiques in New York, Milan, Paris, and London were also visited to support a comparative analysis of how architectural strategies vary across different cultural and commercial contexts. These visits were guided by a structured observational method:

[1] Pre-visit planning involved mapping a realistic itinerary based on logistical feasibility and geographic proximity;

[2] In-store observation included examining spatial configurations, customer flow, material usage, and lighting conditions, as well as informal conversations with staff where appropriate;

[3] Post-visit reflection entailed immediate documentation of spatial perceptions, affective responses, and atmospheric observations, supported by photographs and field notes.

The following stores were visited during fieldwork:

[1] New York City (February 2025):

Courrèges (104 Grand St);

Alexander McQueen (71 Greene St);

Prada (575 Broadway);

Comme des Garçons (520 W 22nd St);

Dover Street Market (160 Lexington Ave);

CHANEL (15 E 57th St and 730 5th Ave);

Lanvin (855 Madison Ave).

[2] Milan (February 2025):

Dolce & Gabbana (Corso Venezia 15);

BOYY (Via Bagutta 9);

Fondazione Prada (Largo Isarco 2).

[3] Paris (March 2025):

Maison Margiela (33 Avenue Montaigne);

Paco Rabanne (12 Rue Cambon);

Off-White (8 Rue de Castiglione);

Dover Street Market (37 Rue des Francs Bourgeois).

[4] London (March 2025):

Maison Margiela (22 Bruton St);

Alexander McQueen (27 Old Bond St);

Paul Smith (9 Albemarle St);

Dover Street Market (18–22 Haymarket);

Burberry (121 Regent St);

Balenciaga (193–195 Sloane St).

While affective analysis was possible for these personally visited locations, not all case studies discussed in this thesis could be experienced first-hand. Due to practical constraints, some stores were examined through secondary sources, including architectural publications, fashion journalism, and photography. For these cases, affective experience was interpreted through the lens of others' descriptions, allowing for critical comparison while acknowledging the limitations of not physically inhabiting the space. All data – whether gathered through direct observation or sourced from existing documentation – contributes to the empirical foundation for analyzing the sensory, material, and symbolic dimensions of contemporary fashion retail architecture.

At the turn of the millennium, the fashion industry found itself at a moment of technological anticipation and aesthetic transformation. Advances in digital technologies, including the early foundations of smartphones and social media, began to influence not only the production of fashion but also its visual language. The early 2000s runway shows reflected this momentum, often leaning into futuristic themes – metallic silvers, glossy blacks, structured trench coats, and utilitarian styling that evoked cinematic references such as *The Matrix*. The Fall/Winter 2001 collections, for instance, featured predominantly black ensembles from designers such as Balenciaga, Yves Saint Laurent, and Calvin Klein, setting a notably somber tone (Reddy, 2021).

However, following the events of 9/11 and the global economic downturn, the industry pivoted. In the United States, fashion shifted toward a more casual, accessible aesthetic. Denim dominated the market, with low-rise flares giving way to bootcut and, later, skinny silhouettes. Distressed jeans became omnipresent, with brands like True Religion and 7 For All Mankind defining the look of the era. Denim even crossed into formal settings, as evidenced by celebrities appearing in True Religion on red carpets (Reddy, 2021).

Simultaneously, the boho aesthetic – an evolution of 1990s grunge – gained popularity. Unlike grunge's anti-fashion thrifted origins, boho was deliberately styled, often mixing vintage elements with luxury items. In Paris, this aesthetic was labeled “bobo” (“bourgeois-bohème”), highlighting its fusion of countercultural references with upper-middle-class privilege. In parallel, ultra-low-rise jeans and cropped tops became emblematic of early 2000s femininity (Reddy, 2021).

The decade was also defined by iconic “It” items – pieces that defined a moment and became must-haves. Roland Mouret's Galaxy Dress, Juicy Couture velour tracksuits, Von Dutch trucker hats, Ugg boots, and Fendi's Baguette bag were just a few examples. However, the 2008 financial crisis marked another shift. A renewed interest in craftsmanship and vintage aesthetics emerged, with chunky handmade sweaters and artisanal details aligning with the growing appeal of boho-chic fashion. This period also saw a revival of 1940s and 1980s silhouettes,

such as nipped-in waists and exaggerated shoulders. Designers like Alexander McQueen and Marc Jacobs tapped into these retro influences in their Spring 2008 and 2009 collections, respectively (Reddy, 2021).

By the 2010s, social media had fundamentally altered how fashion trends circulated. Initially, vintage-inspired, structured garments dominated, but this gave way to the rise of athleisure. Once confined to gyms, activewear became a legitimate fashion category. Luxury brands responded: CHANEL's Fall/Winter 2014 runway famously paired tweed coats with sneakers and distressed leggings, while collaborations like Yeezy and Fenty x Puma blurred the lines between sportswear and high fashion (Reddy, 2022).

The arrival of Alessandro Michele at Gucci in 2015 catalyzed another stylistic shift. Michele's debut brought maximalism to the forefront, marked by gender-fluid silhouettes, vintage prints, and layered textures. This eclectic, romantic approach replaced the brand's formerly sleek image and helped define the tone of the second half of the decade. Concurrently, Balenciaga and Saint Laurent embraced 1980s nostalgia, with bold shoulders, spandex, and oversized tailoring (Reddy, 2022).

While the industry embraced creative expression, it also faced significant criticism. The 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh forced the fashion world to reckon with the consequences of fast fashion. Although sustainability entered mainstream discourse, systemic change remained slow. Controversies – such as racially insensitive designs by Prada and Gucci or culturally tone-deaf statements from Dolce & Gabbana – highlighted growing demands for cultural accountability (Reddy, 2022).

The 2020s began with the global COVID-19 pandemic, which upended fashion's systems of production, presentation, and consumption. Supply chains faltered, stores closed, and loungewear dominated. Fashion weeks turned virtual, with brands experimenting with formats – from Balmain's cinematic presentations (Spring 2021) to Balenciaga's video game-style runway (Fall 2021). Simultaneously, secondhand platforms like Depop and The RealReal surged in

popularity, reflecting a shift toward circular fashion and increased awareness of sustainability (Criales-Unzueta, 2025).

Post-pandemic, fashion responded with theatricality and optimism. Trends like dopamine dressing emphasized bold color and exaggerated shapes, seen in collections like Valentino's monochrome pink Fall 2022 line or Diesel's oversized, logo-heavy denim. Spectacle remained key to luxury branding, with viral moments such as Coperni's spray-on dress and Balenciaga's dystopian mud runway drawing widespread media attention (Criales-Unzueta, 2025).

Meanwhile, digital innovation introduced new frontiers. Virtual fashion, NFTs,³ and metaverse experimentation led brands like Gucci and Louis Vuitton to explore non-physical clothing. AI-driven personalization reshaped e-commerce. Still, despite the digital shift, physical retail persisted – not as a primary point of transaction, but as an experiential space. Concept boutiques by Jacquemus, modular interiors by Acne Studios, and immersive environments across the industry redefined what fashion spaces could be (Criales-Unzueta, 2025).

From the techno-futurism of the early 2000s to the hyper-digital hybridity of the 2020s, the retail environment has evolved into a key site of brand identity and storytelling. Throughout this period, fashion and architecture maintained a deep, often underexamined relationship. Both disciplines are rooted in spatial design, materiality, and self-expression. Yet while fashion is typically characterized by its ephemerality, and architecture by its permanence, recent developments have seen these boundaries blur. Architectural forms have become more fluid and performative, while fashion increasingly engages with structure and space.

In this context, the architectural design of fashion spaces – especially flagship stores – has become a central medium for communicating brand values. No longer just retail outlets, these environments function as immersive scenographies. The Prada Epicenter in New York City, designed by OMA in 2001, marked a pivotal moment in this shift. Transforming the store into an interactive

³ NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) are unique digital assets verified via blockchain technology, increasingly used in fashion to sell virtual garments, create collectible items, and offer exclusive brand experiences in digital environments.

spatial experience, it redefined the possibilities of fashion architecture and influenced a generation of architect-designed boutiques.

By analyzing these spaces as case studies, this thesis situates them within the broader cultural and technological developments of the past two decades. In doing so, it highlights how fashion brands have leveraged architecture to engage consumers, navigate digital disruption, and maintain physical presence in a post-retail age. In a landscape where the digital threatens to render brick-and-mortar obsolete, architecture remains one of the last tools through which fashion can create meaningful, embodied connections with its audience.



Figure 2. Photograph of the façade of the Prada flagship store on Broadway in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

A THE EPICENTER

Prada by OMA

(Flagship Store, New York City, 2001)

The Visit: “Wandering Through Prada’s Quiet Drama”

It was just past noon on a crisp February Monday when I found myself on the corner of Broadway and Prince Street in New York’s SoHo, staring up at the Prada Epicenter store at 575 Broadway. Sandwiched between cast-iron façades and loft apartments, the building barely hints at the drama unfolding inside. There is a kind of stealth to the store’s presence—urban, elegant, and slightly aloof. Only the subtle signage gives away its identity.

As I stepped through the glass doors, the bustle of SoHo gave way to something quieter, more theatrical. What struck me first was the scale—not simply the size of the space, but a sense of openness that felt carefully orchestrated. The ground floor stretches out like a stage set, with its iconic wooden wave undulating through the interior. There is no clear path to follow, no prescribed circulation route. The layout invites you to wander freely. And on this particular day, I nearly had the entire environment to myself. A couple of customers hovered in the distance, but the space was, for the most part, eerily calm.

The atmosphere inside is meticulously curated, though not in the traditional manner of a luxury boutique. It feels more like stepping into a design manifesto. The materials are minimal, and the fixtures appear temporary—more reminiscent of an exhibition than a store. Rather than aggressively promoting its merchandise, the space offers room—both physical and conceptual—for you to engage with the products on your own terms. The staff greet you warmly, but without pressure or intrusion. The experience feels closer to visiting a contemporary art gallery than a retail outlet.

Descending to the basement introduces a striking contrast in mood and spatial design. The ceiling drops, the lighting dims, and the sense of openness gives way



Figure 3. Photograph of the interior of Fondazione Prada in Milan, 2025. Photograph by author.

to a more intimate and controlled environment. The layout becomes fragmented and maze-like. If the ground floor evokes the openness of a proscenium, the basement resembles a backstage dressing room—private, layered, and imbued with a sense of secrecy. This area encourages a slower pace and closer attention. The spatial design closes in around you—not oppressively, but with deliberate intent. It’s a shift in tone that alters how you move through the space, how you shop, and how you feel.

Weeks later, I found myself in Milan once again, standing at the threshold of Fondazione Prada. It was my second visit, yet the institution still did not fully reveal itself. Located in the southern reaches of the city, the compound sits behind industrial walls in a slightly out-of-the-way neighborhood—a former distillery transformed into a cultural complex. Approaching the site feels like entering a self-contained world, detached from the urban surroundings.

Inside the Fondazione, the spatial experience is layered and elusive. There is no single grand reveal, no climactic architectural moment. Instead, the visitor moves through a constellation of distinct structures—gold-clad towers, stark white cubes, and raw concrete shells. Each transition between buildings is abrupt, constantly recalibrating your sense of orientation. The materials are in constant dialogue: cold metals meet warm woods, polished surfaces contrast with unfinished textures. One moment you find yourself in a minimalist gallery; the next, in a black box theater or a retro-futuristic café. The progression isn’t disorienting, exactly—it feels dreamlike.

What lingers most after the visit is not any one visual detail but the overall atmosphere. The architecture doesn’t overwhelm you or explain itself overtly. Instead, it seduces through mood, rhythm, and ambiguity. The environment invites exploration without ever fully allowing you to settle. Even the most pristine spaces retain a subtle friction. That lingering sense of ambiguity—that oscillation between clarity and complexity—is what makes Fondazione Prada unforgettable. The architecture resists finality and spectacle, and in doing so, it deepens the emotional resonance of the experience long after departure.



Figure 4. Photograph of the interior of the Prada Galleria 1913 in Milan, 2007.
Courtesy of Prada.

The Brand

Prada's longstanding commitment to architecture is not merely an aesthetic endeavor or a strategy to amplify brand prestige; it reflects a deeper ambition to interrogate the role of fashion in the contemporary world. Under the direction of Miuccia Prada and, more recently, in collaboration with Raf Simons, the brand has cultivated a distinctive spatial identity – one that merges conceptual experimentation with historical depth. Simons' background in fashion design and his intellectual engagement with art and architecture complement Prada's legacy of thoughtful design and subtle subversion, reinforcing the brand's ability to oscillate between the traditional and the radical (McQuillan, 2024).

The evolution of Prada's brand identity – from Mario Prada's original 1913 boutique in Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, known for its luxury leather goods, travel accessories, and refined interior elements such as dark wood cabinetry and polished marble finishes (a design language that continues to subtly resonate across contemporary Prada stores) – to its present-day global network of immersive flagship locations, has been both materially and conceptually shaped through collaborations with prominent architects including Rem Koolhaas and Herzog & de Meuron. At the core of this transformation lies a spatial narrative that redefines the retail store as more than a site of commercial exchange: it becomes a conceptual platform that influences consumer behavior while simultaneously participating in wider cultural and aesthetic discourses (Tehrani & Field-Foster, 2024).

Visiting the Prada Epicenter at 575 Broadway in New York brought these intentions into vivid relief. From the street, the store's façade does not immediately proclaim its significance. Located in SoHo – an area saturated with commercial activity and cultural cachet – it blends into the rhythm of the city. Yet upon entering, the space opens dramatically. The iconic wave of plywood flooring, cascading from street level into the basement like a theatrical gesture, disrupts any expectation of traditional store layout. In that moment, the architectural intent is not abstract – it's felt. The space resists linear circulation. Instead, it invites



Figure 5. Photograph of the interior of the Prada flagship store on Broadway in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

wandering, pausing, even observing. I found myself moving slowly, almost instinctively, as if drawn into a choreography designed to heighten awareness of space, product, and self.

This experiential staging aligns closely with Koolhaas' ambition to reframe the retail environment as something more than transactional. The sloped floor that doubles as an amphitheater is not a mere formal flourish – it creates an atmosphere of spectacle and potential, of something about to happen. In a nearly empty store, the silence amplified the spatial drama. I was reminded of Koolhaas' characterization of luxury as involving “attention,” “waste,” and “intelligence” (McQuillan, 2020: 18–19). These ideas were not theoretical in that moment – they shaped my physical and emotional experience of the store.

Descending into the lower level, however, the tone shifted entirely. The architecture tightened; ceilings lowered, spaces compartmentalized. Here, the spatial language became more introspective, even secretive. The contrast between levels – open versus enclosed, public versus intimate – mirrored the brand's dual identity: outwardly performative, yet deeply rational. Koolhaas once noted that Prada is one of the few brands willing to rethink its own identity rather than replicate it (Weller, 2023: 193), and this quality was palpable in the SoHo store's refusal to offer a predictable experience. The design does not simply serve product display – it articulates a sensibility.

This conceptual layering also informs Prada's broader architectural strategy. The brand has repeatedly chosen to engage architects in projects that defy typological norms – such as the Prada Epicenters in New York, Los Angeles, and Tokyo – resulting in a body of work that has significantly influenced global retail architecture. The Tokyo store by Herzog & de Meuron, for instance, reinvigorated the Aoyama district, while simultaneously functioning as a public gallery. Projects like Rong Zhai in Shanghai or Ca' Corner della Regina in Venice highlight Prada's sensitivity to cultural heritage, merging preservation with contemporary use (Weller, 2023: 193).



Figure 6. Photograph of the interior of the Prada flagship store on Broadway in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

The culmination of this architectural ethos is perhaps most clearly embodied in the Fondazione Prada in Milan. On returning there for a second visit, I was struck by how the space continued to avoid firmness. Located on the fringes of the city in a former distillery complex, the Fondazione does not impose a singular vision. Rather, it presents a constellation of buildings – each materially and spatially distinct. As I moved between rough concrete structures, gilded volumes, and polished white cubes, I experienced a continual shift between clarity and disorientation. These transitions did not merely serve functional purposes; they cultivated a state of heightened attentiveness. The architecture asked something of me – not just to look, but to feel, interpret, and navigate ambiguity.

That affective register – neither purely rational nor purely emotional – is central to what Prada seeks to create through architecture. The mood, the atmosphere, the way space makes you conscious of your movement – these are all elements that persist long after the visit ends. The Fondazione does not shout its intentions. It lingers. It operates through quiet material cues and spatial rhythms that echo the understated sophistication of Prada's original Milan store, even as it explores radically new forms (Tehrani & Field-Foster, 2024).

This consistent play between legacy and innovation extends to Prada's scenographic collaborations with AMO, the research wing of OMA. Since 2004, AMO has designed the runway environments for Prada and Miu Miu – Prada's younger, more playful sibling – at the Milanese headquarters. These sets are not passive backdrops; they are integral to the narrative, constructed within an intense eight-week timeline to translate the conceptual themes of the collections into physical form (McQuillan, 2020: 6–8). The runway becomes a temporary architecture – ephemeral yet deliberate – where ideas about identity, materiality, and temporality are tested. As Van Gerrewey (2019: 14) notes, this capacity to visualize what lies just ahead is one of OMA's defining traits, and within the context of fashion, this speculative quality finds fertile ground.

What emerges from Prada's architectural collaborations is not a fixed style, but a mode of inquiry. The spaces are not designed to impose meanings, but to create conditions for experience. Whether through the lime-green walls that quietly nod



Figure 7. Photograph of the interior of the Prada flagship store on Broadway in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

to the brand's history or the experimental use of materials like Plexiglas and nylon to reframe notions of luxury, Prada's architecture becomes a living archive – a series of environments where heritage and innovation, spectacle and subtlety, commerce and culture continually intersect (*The Man Behind Prada*, 2014).

The Concept

OMA/AMO's long-term collaboration with Prada has redefined the role of architecture within the realm of fashion retail, moving beyond static design to encompass an evolving cultural practice. Rather than designing a store and stepping away, OMA/AMO remains involved well beyond the moment of inauguration – continuously shaping how the space functions, communicates, and adapts over time. This extended engagement is vividly embodied in the Prada Epicenter in SoHo, New York, where architecture is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic agent that hosts events, produces media, and blurs the boundaries between commerce, performance, and public life (Koolhaas & McGetrick, 2004: 326).

Experiencing the SoHo store firsthand, what struck me was how emphatically the space resisted conventional retail logic. The absence of immediate product displays, the theatrical quality of the central ramp, and the fragmented layout all worked together to destabilize expectations. The architecture did not attempt to guide or persuade me to buy something. Instead, it asked me to linger, to interpret, to explore. The term “Epicenter” captures this intention precisely – it's not a monument to brand identity but a site of continual rupture and reinvention, a space meant to shake loose the formulaic norms of global fashion retail (Hommert et al., 2001: Introduction).

This departure from predictability is not incidental. Koolhaas critiques the flagship store as an over-determined typology, one that reinforces brand sameness at the cost of innovation. In contrast, the Epicenter is conceived as a place of variation and experimentation. The insistence that no two Prada stores should look alike reflects OMA's broader position that luxury is not about homogeneity but about specificity – about tailored responses to cultural and urban contexts. Even



Figure 8. Photograph of the interior of the Prada flagship store on Broadway in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

recognizable features like the signature lime green wall in SoHo function not as brand templates but as historical references – subtle nods to Prada’s Milanese origins that are embedded within a constantly shifting architectural vocabulary (Hommert et al., 2001: Key Concepts). The use of this soft, lime green interior tone – famously captured in Andreas Gursky’s 1996 photograph of the original Milan boutique – is one of the most iconic visual elements that has carried through to contemporary Prada stores. This specific hue operates as more than mere decoration; it functions as a subtle but recognizable marker of Prada’s spatial identity. It is neutral enough to allow the products to remain the focal point, yet distinctive enough to evoke a sense of brand continuity. While each store is designed in response to its local context – no two spaces are exactly alike – the recurrence of such elements ensures that even the most experimental Prada spaces still carry echoes of the original (*The Man Behind Prada*, 2014).

Within the SoHo Epicenter, this logic of differentiation is materialized through spatial zoning. Rather than a linear retail progression, the store is organized into a series of zones that serve different purposes – exhibition, gathering, browsing, and performance – inviting multiple modes of interaction. On entering, the eye is drawn not to shelves or racks, but to “The Wave.” From above, I watched others move below while overhearing fragments of conversation and music filtering up. It felt more like being in a museum atrium or a public forum than a commercial boutique.

Retail, here, is secondary to atmosphere. Much of the product is hidden in modular cages or tucked into the basement, a deliberate inversion of the conventional model that places merchandise front and center. The absence of retail pressure transformed my experience from one of passive consumption to one of active exploration. In Koolhaas’ terms, luxury is not excess but “attention” – a space that offers clarity and focus in an overstimulated world (Hommert et al., 2001: Luxury is Attention).

Technological interactivity reinforces this sense of immersion. In the smart fitting rooms, the lighting settings can be changed to see garments under different conditions. Panels in the walls shift depending on the season, and mobile shelving



Figure 9. Photograph of the interior of the Prada flagship store on Broadway in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

reconfigures the space dynamically. These elements extend the architectural concept beyond form into behavior, positioning the store as an evolving interface between the brand, the user, and the environment (Quinn, 2003: 48–49).

This spatial and experiential richness is anchored by what OMA calls “multiple identity” – a rejection of the globalized, one-size-fits-all retail model in favor of architectural responses that reflect the specificity of place. In SoHo, this meant engaging with the district’s cultural legacy as a site of avant-garde art and alternative commerce, while also asserting Prada’s intellectual and aesthetic ambitions. The Epicenter does not merely occupy its urban context; it contributes to it, transforming the store into a porous cultural venue that can host exhibitions, performances, and installations alongside shopping (van den Heuvel, 2002: 118–120).

In this way, the Epicenter functions more like a laboratory than a storefront. It is a site for testing ideas about space, identity, and the future of retail. Experiencing it as both a visitor and researcher, I found myself questioning what fashion retail could become if freed from commercial imperatives. Koolhaas and OMA/AMO appear far more interested in what it means to move through a space than to shop within it. Their architecture opens up fashion to new forms of public engagement, suggesting that even in a commercial setting, design can generate meaning, provoke reflection, and reimagine how we inhabit the contemporary city.

The Store

The Prada Epicenter in New York reimagines the retail environment as a cultural and spatial experiment rather than a straightforward commercial venue. Situated in the former Guggenheim Museum SoHo, the store occupies over 2,000 square meters and is shaped around the ambition to blur the line between commerce and culture. The architecture did not guide me immediately toward merchandise. Instead, it opened up into a spatial narrative – drawing attention to form, materiality, and movement before any display of product. This echoed OMA/AMO’s broader exploration of shopping as one of the last collective urban



Figure 10. Photograph of the interior of the Prada flagship store on Broadway in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

rituals – a social act that, even in an increasingly digital world, still has the power to bring people together in physical space (Koolhaas & McGetrick, 2004: 326).

At the heart of the design is “The Wave,” a 55-meter-long curved ramp made of zebrawood that slopes downward from the ground floor to the basement, functioning simultaneously as a circulation element, seating area, display platform, and event stage. Standing atop it, I experienced the store not as a site of transaction but as a terrain of unfolding possibilities. The ramp itself invited pauses, changes in perspective, and a sense of theater. Koolhaas and his team intended this hybrid use as a reversal of contemporary trends: while museums and libraries increasingly adopt the aesthetics of shopping malls to stay relevant, the Epicenter performs the inverse – infusing a commercial environment with the spatial logic and cultural program of an institution (Hommert et al., 2001: Key Concepts).

Yet this ambition plays out unevenly. While the architecture clearly supports a flexible cultural program – talks, screenings, performances – its activation as a public venue often feels more aspirational than actual. During my visits, the potential for public engagement remained latent. The space signaled openness and experimentation through its material and spatial vocabulary, but in practice, its primary function remained retail (*Prada Epicenter New York*, 2001). The intent comes through architecturally, but not always experientially.

Still, the store creates a layered environment that accommodates change and thematic variation. The north wall acts as a curatorial surface – its rotating “Prada wallpaper” gestures toward an evolving exhibition framework. Screens embedded throughout the store stream video content; books and artworks are positioned alongside clothing and accessories. This integration of media and merchandise adds a narrative depth that reinforces the brand’s intellectual positioning (*Prada Epicenter New York*, 2001).

Technology plays a dual role: it enhances the futuristic tone while also encouraging interaction. The glass elevator doubles as a display case; smart fitting rooms allow users to alter lighting and privacy with a touch. These features

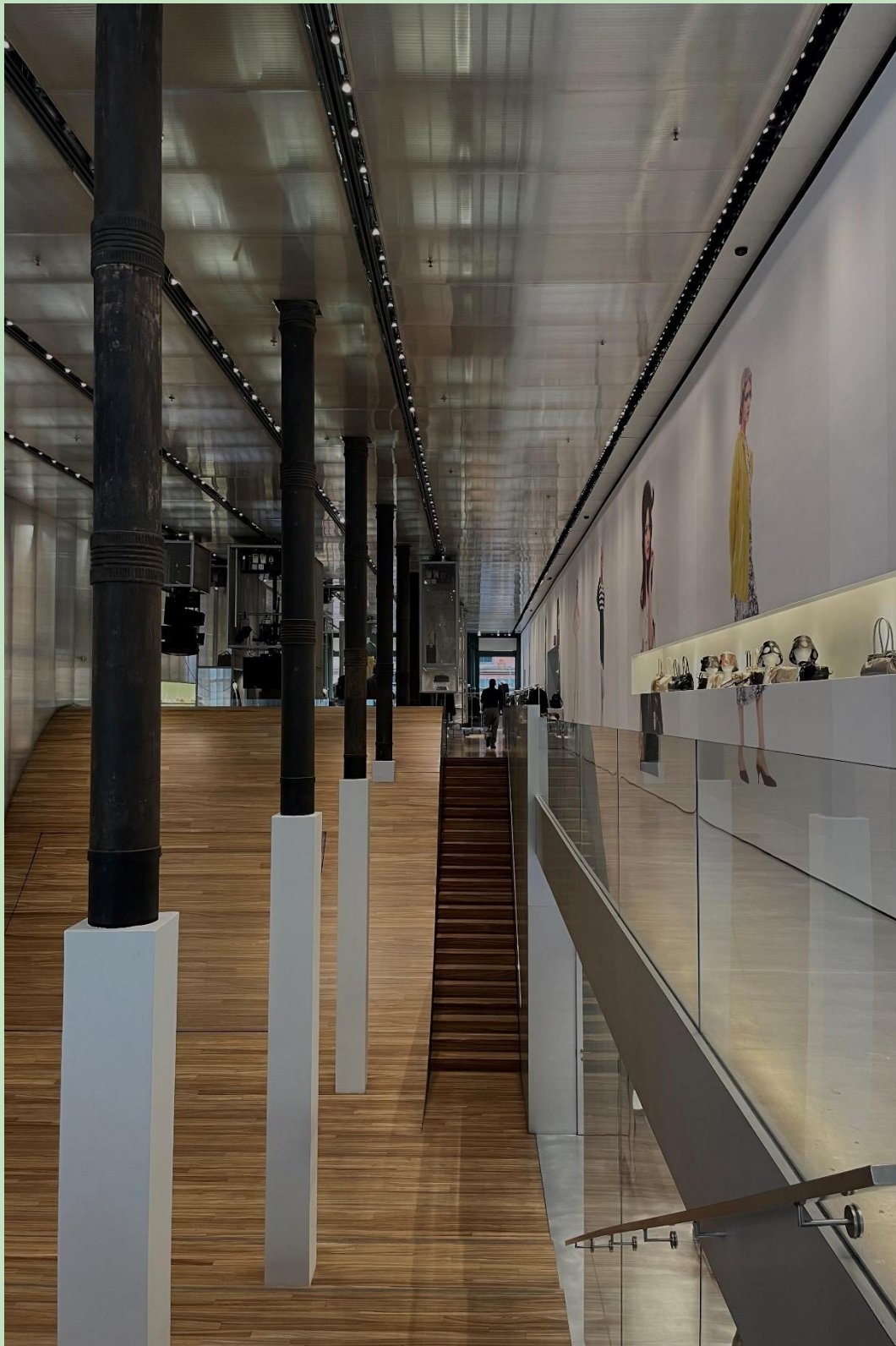


Figure 11. Photograph of the interior of the Prada flagship store on Broadway in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

suggest that the store is not just a place to browse, but a spatial interface that adapts to its users. Suspended metal cages for flexible product display, translucent plastic walls, and a minimalist “clinic” area for VIP services continue the theme of modularity and surprise (*Prada Epicenter New York*, 2001).

Materiality plays a central role in how the architecture communicates. Upstairs, the zebrawood Wave commands attention as a sculptural presence. At night, it transforms the space into a venue, with Petra Blaisse’s fabric installations suspended overhead adding theatrical dimension (Ockman, 2002: 77–78).

Downstairs, the basement evokes a different mood – lime green walls, mirrored ceilings, and checkerboard floors create a slightly surreal atmosphere. Here, digital displays present film clips, abstract imagery, and product information, blending fashion with cinematic and visual culture (Moss, 2018).

What stood out to me was the subtle inversion of retail priorities. Merchandise is present, but often peripheral. The architecture insists that the spatial experience – its rhythms, surfaces, and moods – matters more than the products themselves. This approach aligns with Koolhaas’ argument that the physical store must now compete not with other stores, but with the totalizing convenience of digital shopping. In this context, retail becomes not about acquiring goods, but about engaging with a brand’s ethos in physical, sensory, and narrative terms (Quinn, 2003: 48–49; Ockman, 2002: 77–78).

This shift – from commerce to cultural staging – is not without friction. Critics have noted that the highly conceptual nature of the Epicenter can feel disorienting to shoppers seeking a more conventional experience. Yet this is precisely the provocation Koolhaas introduces: that retail space is no longer merely transactional, but performative. It can – and should – convey identity, cultural engagement, and architectural experimentation. The store becomes a platform for testing how people encounter and interpret branded space in an age of overstimulation (Ockman, 2002: 77–78; van den Heuvel, 2002: 118–120).

The Epicenter proposes that retail architecture doesn’t need to follow a fixed typology. It can be open-ended, programmatically flexible, and culturally



Figure 12. Photograph of the interior of the Prada flagship store in Los Angeles, 2004. Photograph by Phil Meech.

ambitious. For Prada, this was never just about selling clothes – it was about creating a space capable of hosting ideas. During my visits, the store left me with a lasting impression not of luxury consumption, but of spatial curiosity. It is an architecture of possibility, where Koolhaas' vision of retail as public experiment comes through not only in form, but also – if unevenly – in experience (Moss, 2018).

The Sequel

The Prada Epicenters in New York and Los Angeles, developed between 2000 and 2004, mark a crucial point in OMA/AMO's engagement with retail as a site for architectural experimentation. In both projects, the architects explore the idea of a continuous spatial gesture – the so-called “super-wave” – that links different levels and reimagines how visitors move through commercial environments. In New York, this gesture takes the form of a dramatic wooden ramp connecting the ground floor to the basement, creating an uninterrupted spatial flow. Walking through the space, one feels swept along a fluid path that blurs distinctions between circulation and display. Many features here, such as mobile display units and reconfigurable modules, originated in earlier OMA projects like Agadir and the Cardiff Bay Opera House competition (Gargiani, 2008: 258).

In contrast, the Los Angeles Epicenter reinterprets the super-wave by folding the floor upward into a hill-like slope supporting a suspended aluminum box. The openness of the street-level façade is prominent; instead of a conventional threshold, the store simply dissolves into the urban fabric. At night, the mechanized aluminum panel rises from the ground, transforming the open street presence into a closed, glowing volume (*Prada Epicenter Los Angeles*, 2004). This dynamic adaptability anticipated later architectural experiments with the dissolving boundary between public and private space.

The Prada Transformer in Seoul (2009) pushed this logic even further, translating adaptability into kinetic form. Located next to the historic Gyeonghui Palace, the temporary pavilion could physically rotate via cranes, reconfiguring its four-sided geometry – circle, cross, hexagon, and rectangle – depending on the event it



Figure 13. Photograph of the Prada Spring/Summer 2021 fashion show in Milan, 2020. Photograph by Agostino Osio.

hosted (*Prada Transformer*, 2009). Although I did not experience the Transformer in person, documentation conveys an exhilarating commitment to architecture as active infrastructure, capable of reshaping itself in dialogue with shifting cultural programs.

In contrast to these commercial and temporary architectures, the Fondazione Prada in Milan (2015) reflects a more sustained, institutionally grounded approach. Located in the former industrial zone of Largo Isarco, the Fondazione preserves and adapts an early 20th-century gin distillery, layering it with three new structures – the Podium, Cinema, and Torre. OMA's strategy here rejects stylistic unity; instead, as I observed when visiting the site, the project foregrounds tensions between old and new. The Podium's sharp, luminous glass volumes cut through the historic buildings without trying to harmonize. The Haunted House, entirely clad in 24-carat gold leaf, strikes a heavy, almost absurd contrast against the polished aluminum of the adjacent Cinema. The Torre, with its alternating trapezoidal and rectangular floorplates and varying ceiling heights, challenges perceptions of regularity and stability (Howarth, 2018; Dunmall, 2015).

Experiencing the Fondazione firsthand, the fragmented atmosphere was evident: moving between spaces felt less like a curated journey and more like navigating competing temporalities. Koolhaas' concept of "unstable programming" – where the architecture itself demands continual renegotiation – came through clearly (Howarth, 2018). Unlike the Epicenters' commercial dynamism, the Fondazione offered a charged slowness, situating Prada within Milan's broader cultural and intellectual network.

This sensibility extends even into smaller spaces like Bar Luce, the Fondazione's café, designed by Wes Anderson. Pastel colors, faux-vaulted ceilings, and references to mid-century Italian cinema create a kitschy yet affectionate environment (Dunmall, 2015). The deliberate contrast with the austere architecture outside reinforces the Fondazione's broader embrace of heterogeneity over singularity.



Figure 14. Photograph of the Prada Spring/Summer 2024 fashion show in Milan, 2023. Photograph by Antonio Calanni.

Since 2004, AMO has similarly used fashion show scenography to explore architecture's capacity for constant reinvention. The Prada runway shows typically take place within the Deposito, an adaptable industrial space at the brand's Milan headquarters – not within the Fondazione itself. The Deposito's raw materiality – bare concrete walls, high ceilings, minimal interventions – has provided an elastic framework for AMO's scenographic experiments (*A timeline of Prada and OMA / AMO catwalk collaborations*, 2012).

In the early stages of AMO's collaborations with Prada, spatial interventions were relatively restrained. For the Spring/Summer 2010 show, a simple partitioned wall featuring seven doorways was introduced, subtly modulating the models' entrances and exits. The Fall/Winter 2011 presentation took a more architectural approach, incorporating a two-story domestic structure that evoked themes of intimacy and enclosure (*A timeline of Prada and OMA / AMO catwalk collaborations*, 2012). However, by Spring/Summer 2012, AMO's choreographic ambitions became significantly more experimental. The traditional runway was dismantled and replaced with a synthetic grass floor scattered with irregular blue foam blocks, disrupting linear circulation and fracturing visual continuity. These interventions challenged conventional modes of fashion spectatorship, collapsing spatial hierarchies and transforming the show into an unpredictable and participatory environment (Grieco, 2011).

Subsequent Prada shows curated by AMO fluctuated between minimalist restraint and theatrical spectacle. The 2015–2016 presentations explored the tension between natural and artificial environments. For the Spring/Summer 2016 show, translucent ceiling panels were employed to manipulate spatial perception through layered reflections and amplified depth (Stevens, 2015). In contrast, the Fall/Winter 2016 collection introduced OSB-clad balconies within the venue, creating a fragmented, multi-level environment that reinforced the show's architectural complexity while engaging the audience as part of the scenography (Kwok, 2016).

By 2017, AMO introduced the concept of “total space,” exemplified in the Fall/Winter show, which reconstructed domestic interiors using materials such as



Figure 15. Photograph of the interior of the Prada Aoyama flagship store in Tokyo, 2003. Courtesy of Herzog & de Meuron.

wood paneling and terrazzo. This approach generated a sense of uncanny familiarity, blurring the line between fashion presentation and everyday environment (Kwok, 2017). In 2018, the women's show marked a significant shift by relocating to the recently completed Torre at Fondazione Prada. This change integrated the Milan skyline into the scenographic composition, embedding the urban context directly into the visual and spatial narrative of the show (Marchese, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a temporary retreat into media experimentation. The Spring/Summer 2021 women's show transformed the Deposito into a curtained television studio; screens replaced spectators. The menswear show played with camera viewpoints, reversing traditional runway dynamics ("close-up from the back") (McQuillan, 2020: 29–30; Hawkins, 2022c). Physicality returned with Fall/Winter 2022: models traversed neon-lit cinema tunnels (McQuillan, 2022). In Spring/Summer 2023, AMO treated paper as an architectural medium, constructing entire shows around fictional houses made of black or white paper (*2023 SS Prada Women - Touch of Crude*, 2022; *2023 SS Prada Man*, 2022).

More recently, Prada's shows have explored the materiality of verticality and liquidity. Fall/Winter 2023 used retractable ceilings and descending floral chandeliers (Parkes, 2023a). Spring/Summer 2024 featured translucent pink slime coursing beside the runway – a mesmerizing, grotesque fluidity that Koolhaas termed "organic minimalism" (Carlson, 2023). The tension between beauty and revulsion was tangible, aligning with Prada's ongoing themes of ambiguity. In Fall/Winter 2025, AMO constructed a three-story scaffolding grid inside the Deposito, embedding models and guests alike into a dense, vertical steel matrix (*2025 FW Prada Show*, 2025).

Despite the extensiveness of experimentation, Koolhaas emphasizes that the Prada collaborations are not about architectural influence on fashion, but about maintaining a productive conversation over time: "We instinctively embraced Prada's ambitions to challenge convention, to experiment with uniforms and uniformity" (McQuillan, 2024).



Figure 16. Photograph of the interior of the Miu Miu Aoyama flagship store in Tokyo, 2015. Courtesy of Herzog & de Meuron.

Parallel to OMA/AMO, Herzog & de Meuron have taken a different but equally experimental route in fashion retail. Their Prada Aoyama Epicenter (2003) in Tokyo rethinks façade and structure simultaneously. The rhomboid glass panels act as both enclosure and skeleton, fragmenting views and dissolving interior-exterior boundaries. Inside, material contrasts – synthetic and organic, soft and hard – create a heightened sensory atmosphere. Embedded monitors discreetly track customer behavior, hinting at the nascent integration of digital infrastructures (178 *Prada Aoyama*, 2003; Fischli et al., 2021: 495; Sudjic, 2023).

In 2015, Herzog & de Meuron completed the Miu Miu Aoyama store across the street. Unlike Prada's open spectacle, Miu Miu's polished copper façade reads as almost residential, concealing rather than displaying. Entering the store, the atmosphere shifts completely: brocade-lined walls, upholstered sofas, and muted lighting create a hushed, private setting (412 *Miu Miu Aoyama*, 2015).

Both spaces reveal a profound difference in approach to commerce. Prada Aoyama is extroverted, kaleidoscopic, and participatory; Miu Miu Aoyama is introverted, secretive, and emotionally textured. Both projects refuse the standard retail equation of transparency and accessibility, instead proposing new modes of spatial and emotional engagement.

The Prada and OMA/AMO collaboration – and its parallel experiments with Herzog & de Meuron – demonstrates that architecture and fashion do not need to imitate each other. They just have to stay in conversation. Innovation here isn't driven by novelty, but by continuity: the kind that allows a set, a building, or even a garment to remain in question long after the show is over (McQuillan, 2024).



Figure 17. Photograph of the façade of the Comme des Garçons flagship store in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

B BEAUTIFUL CHAOS

Comme des Garçons by Rei Kawakubo

(Dover Street Market, London, 2004)

The Visit: “Where Fashion Hides in Plain Sight”

On a cold Tuesday afternoon in early February, I made my way to Dover Street Market in New York. Nestled in a corner building at Lexington Avenue and 30th Street—far from the traditional luxury retail zones of SoHo or Fifth Avenue—the store doesn’t immediately declare itself as a destination. The façade is unassuming, industrial, neoclassical. But once inside, the experience shifts: the interior draws you into a vertical world that seems to unfold endlessly. Seven floors reveal themselves one after another, forming a layered collage where each level offers a new iteration of organized chaos.

There is no defined path for circulation. Instead, the spatial arrangement encourages aimless wandering—turning corners, climbing stairs, backtracking—without any fixed sequence. Each floor presents a distinct character, yet all of them are unified by a shared aesthetic tension: rough concrete juxtaposed with velvet curtains, mirrored surfaces clashing against raw plywood, sculptural installations intersecting garment racks. The environment feels more like a city imagined by artists than one laid out by urban planners. Art is not merely displayed on the walls—it is embedded in the structure itself, emerging from ceilings and lurking behind corners.

The crowd added to the sense of difference. Unlike the hushed, clinical stillness typical of high-end boutiques, the atmosphere here was lively and animated. Shoppers wandered freely, chatted, took photographs, lingered on seats, and drifted between racks as if exploring an exhibition rather than simply browsing merchandise. At times the store resembled a public plaza; at others, it felt like a backstage area. That friction—the continual shift in mood and tone—is what made



Figure 18. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Paris, 2025.
Photograph by author.

the experience memorable. Dover Street Market New York is a space where fashion hides in plain sight, camouflaged by art, architecture, and ambient noise.

Later that day, I traveled west to the Comme des Garçons store on 22nd Street in Chelsea. While DSM New York is a celebration of layering and abundance, this store presented its conceptual inverse: stripped-down, discreet, and nearly spectral. The entrance offered no clear signage—no logo, no store name—just a graffitied exterior and a sleek silver tunnel cutting through the building like a futuristic passageway. It was the sort of place one might pass repeatedly without ever realizing what lay within.

Inside, the tone shifted dramatically. The architecture opened into tall ceilings, golden curved walls, and stark lighting. The space felt theatrical yet subdued. There was no background music, only a faint floral fragrance that grounded the experience in a quiet sensory stillness. Though there were no watchful attendants, the design created a sense that your attention was being gently guided. The interior felt choreographed, like a script rendered in architecture—with its dramatic pauses, spatial surprises, and deliberate transitions. Compared to DSM's exuberant chaos, the Chelsea store was an exercise in atmosphere, precision, and restraint.

In March, my exploration continued across the Atlantic—first to Paris, then to London. The Paris outpost of Dover Street Market is tucked into a quiet corner of the Marais. Upon entering, the familiar DSM aesthetic returned: materials layered like a collage, abrupt shifts in lighting, and playful spatial interruptions. The Paris store felt more compact and enclosed than its New York counterpart, yet retained the same improvisational energy. Navigation remained non-linear, with unexpected ramps, concealed staircases, and ambiguous thresholds—all seemingly designed not to disorient, but to ignite curiosity.

London, home to the original Dover Street Market, presented a more anchored presence. Housed in a historic building in Haymarket, the space carried a sense of institutional permanence, with a more resolved spatial identity. Yet even here, the signature layering persisted: installations by artists and designers intertwined with



Figure 19. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Haymarket in London, 2016. Courtesy of Dover Street Market.

the retail structure, and visitors moved with the same fluid mix of aimlessness and intent. In both Paris and London, the integration of art felt less like structural intervention and more like visual backdrop—less embedded than in New York—but the overarching rhythm, the mood, and the wandering crowd remained consistent across locations.

What stands out across all three cities isn't any single design element, artwork, or layout feature—it's the refusal of these spaces to fully explain themselves. Each store cultivates a sense of ambiguity. Visitors are never quite certain what lies around the next corner or even how to orient themselves within the building. This tension—between openness and secrecy, between what is shown and what is concealed—is the heart of the experience. You are welcomed in, but left to navigate on your own. The result is a retail environment that demands active engagement: an architecture of fashion that feels alive, unpredictable, and perpetually just beyond complete understanding.

The Brand

Rei Kawakubo's practice – most notably through her brand Comme des Garçons (CdG) – represents a sustained and deliberate blurring of boundaries between fashion and architecture. Her work engages directly with questions of how cities change, how spaces are occupied, and how meaning is embedded in material form. The connection between her garments and the environments in which they are displayed is not incidental but foundational (Crewe, 2018: 25). Visiting CdG and Dover Street Market locations firsthand, it becomes evident that Kawakubo does not merely design clothing or retail spaces; she constructs conceptual worlds in which the garments, architecture, and broader cultural discourses cohere into a singular, embodied experience.

Kawakubo's approach to fashion, particularly since the 1970s, has consistently rejected normative values around beauty, perfection, and function. Her clothes often appear unfinished or deconstructed – garments turned inside out, irregularly stitched, or composed of reused materials. These strategies question how value is assigned to objects and reflect her broader interest in reimagining



Figure 20. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Haymarket in London, 2016. Courtesy of Dover Street Market.

systems of production and consumption (Crewe, 2018: 25). Experiencing her stores, these ideas are made spatial. The Chelsea Comme des Garçons boutique in New York, for instance, is unmarked from the street, its entrance hidden behind a graffiti-covered façade. Stepping through the narrow, silver tunnel into a golden, scent-infused space feels like a passage into an entirely different register of experience – one that resists traditional retail logic and instead enacts the same spirit of disorientation and reflection found in her clothing.

Kawakubo's resistance to conventions is not limited to aesthetics; it is also political and philosophical. Her work repeatedly challenges entrenched assumptions about gender, comfort, and the body – both in terms of what clothing should do and how spaces should function (Fischli et al., 2021: 450). This skepticism toward fashion's emphasis on functionality carries over into her architecture, where spaces frequently subvert expectations. One of her most provocative projects involved opening an entirely empty boutique – a gesture not of minimalism but of critique. It asked customers to confront the act of shopping itself, and, by extension, their participation in consumer culture (Crewe, 2018: 23).

This conceptual layering is most vividly expressed in her Dover Street Market stores. Visiting the New York DSM location, I was immediately struck by how the space defied conventional organization. With seven levels connected through shifting materials – rough concrete, plush carpets, mirrored panels – the store is designed less as a sequence and more as a spatial collage. There are no clear wayfinding signs; instead, movement is intuitive, driven by curiosity rather than logic. Each turn or staircase opens onto something unexpected – an artwork embedded in the architecture, a change in lighting or texture, a sudden shift in acoustics. These choices materialize Kawakubo's ethos of embracing the “off,” where intentional roughness and unpredictability become the foundation for a kind of spatial experiment.

In this context, Kawakubo's motto – “thinking forward by looking backward” – becomes more than a design philosophy; it is an operational strategy for how space and fashion can be used to rethink the present. Her stores frequently occupy marginal or transitional urban sites, drawing attention to forgotten corners



Figure 21. Photograph of the interior of the Comme des Garçons flagship store in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

of the city and reanimating them through design (Crewe, 2018: 25). In each location I visited – New York, Paris, and London – there was an obvious tension between the external anonymity of the buildings and the immersive, high-concept environments within. This inside-outside disjuncture mirrors her garments, which often invert interior and exterior surfaces. The store is not just a container for clothes, but a medium through which the ideas behind the clothing are extended, embodied, and tested in real time.

Through these experiences, Kawakubo's architectural intentions come through with clarity. The spaces are not designed for ease or efficiency; they are designed to provoke. They resist passive consumption and demand presence, attention, and a willingness to be disoriented. In doing so, they offer a rare example of how fashion retail can function as a critical, experiential practice – one where the public discourse around identity, gender, value, and urban change is actively performed.

The Concept

Rei Kawakubo's work through Comme des Garçons presents a sustained investigation into how fashion and architecture can operate together as a unified spatial and cultural language. Her stores are not conceived as neutral backdrops for selling garments, but rather as spatial extensions of the conceptual frameworks behind her collections. As someone who has visited several CdG and Dover Street Market (DSM) locations, I have experienced firsthand how Kawakubo's design approach translates from the body to the built environment. Each store expresses a distinctive spatial identity while maintaining a connection to the core values of the brand – disruption, experimentation, and aesthetic dissonance. These are not mere retail spaces; they are immersive environments where architecture materializes the intellectual and emotional currents of the collections themselves.

In the early CdG boutiques, architectural simplicity mirrored the construction of her garments – angular forms, exposed surfaces, and sharp contrasts between light and shadow. But even in their minimalism, these spaces conveyed the same



Figure 22. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Haymarket in London, 2016. Courtesy of Dover Street Market.

enigmatic complexity as the clothes. Over time, as CdG expanded globally, Kawakubo's architectural vision evolved into something more layered and performative. The stores became spatial narratives, each one responding to its urban context while also contributing to a broader brand mythology. The coherence between garment and space is not aesthetic alone; it is conceptual. As I moved through the Comme des Garçons store in New York's Chelsea neighborhood – a seemingly abandoned façade giving way to a sculptural, scented interior – I was reminded that Kawakubo does not design with commercial accessibility in mind. Instead, she curates a sense of encounter, of discovery, that aligns with the broader themes of transgression and ambiguity in her work (Quinn, 2003: 49–50).

At the core of CdG's design and retail philosophy is the idea of "kachikan," a Japanese term referring to a unique "sense of values." Creativity for Kawakubo is not a goal but a mode of operation – one that resists the conventions of both fashion and business. Over four decades, together with her partner Adrian Joffe, she has developed a decentralized and dynamic retail ecology that includes guerrilla stores, flagship boutiques, and the more hybrid Dover Street Market. These varied formats are not market-driven innovations, but manifestations of the brand's ideological commitments. Kawakubo has stated that CdG is about "finding new ways to do things" – a mandate that applies as much to architectural space as to fashion objects (Butler, 2022: 27). That ethos is evident in the unexpected transitions, material contrasts, and anti-linear circulation paths that define her stores. Her spaces, much like her garments, invite disorientation and sustained attention.

Joffe's role in translating Kawakubo's often abstract ideas into working systems – both architectural and commercial – has been crucial. While Kawakubo shapes the vision, Joffe introduces the operational logic that allows it to exist at scale. The result is not a compromise, but a symbiosis: spaces where cultural experimentation and retail practice converge. This partnership is key to understanding the ways in which CdG sustains an "anti-establishment" identity while still functioning within the commercial ecosystem of global fashion (Butler,



Figure 23. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Haymarket in London, 2016. Courtesy of Dover Street Market.

2022: 28). Visiting DSM in Paris and London, I noticed how this balance between intuition and strategy plays out in space: there is a looseness to the layout, a willingness to let each designer shape their corner of the store, yet there is also a clearly orchestrated rhythm. The absence of traditional signage, the constant reconfiguration of the interiors, and the embedded artworks all foster a sense of organized improvisation – a kind of spatial jazz that resists passive consumption.

Among CdG's most radical retail experiments are the guerrilla stores launched in the early 2000s. I didn't visit one personally – most were short-lived – but their ethos is clearly echoed in more permanent CdG spaces. These pop-up locations were temporary, minimally branded, and deliberately unpolished. Often set up in disused urban spaces like squatted buildings or old bookshops, the stores featured exposed pipes, industrial fixtures, and ad-hoc display systems. The Berlin store in 2004 exemplified this logic: it avoided mass advertising, relying instead on underground networks and a stark visual language of black-and-white posters bearing the phrase "Guerrilla Rules." These were not simply anti-retail statements, but critiques of how space is commercialized, controlled, and aestheticized in mainstream fashion culture (Crewe, 2018: 25).

The guerrilla stores were temporary, but not insignificant. Their ephemerality was a design strategy – a rejection of permanence and an embrace of "wabi-sabi," the Japanese aesthetic of impermanence and imperfection. This sensibility also shaped their location strategies: targeting cities like Barcelona, Warsaw, or Singapore, and embedding themselves in neighborhoods with a subcultural edge. They mirrored the guerrilla metaphor not only in mobility but in intention: these stores offered flexibility, low investment, and the possibility to test new markets while maintaining a strong ideological stance. This deliberate impermanence functioned as both economic tactic and aesthetic gesture, reflecting Kawakubo's ambivalence toward consumerism even while participating in its systems (English, 2011: 86–88).

The launch of Dover Street Market in London in 2004 marked a shift in scale and ambition but continued the brand's interrogation of space, value, and authorship. Unlike the guerrilla stores, DSM was designed to be ongoing, but it retained many



Figure 24. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Haymarket in London, 2016. Courtesy of Dover Street Market.

of the same experimental principles. Designers are given freedom to construct their own areas within the store, which is reconfigured twice a year through a ritual known as “tachiagari” – Japanese for “new beginnings.” This cyclical redesign introduces instability into what is typically a stable retail typology, aligning with Kawakubo’s preference for disruption over repetition (English, 2011: 89-90). My visits to DSM revealed the spatial consequences of this philosophy: the stores feel alive, in flux, filled with dissonant materials and unexpected transitions.

Kawakubo’s vision for DSM encompasses not just architecture but everything from the staff uniforms to the curated art installations that punctuate the space. Each store becomes a cultural venue as much as a commercial one, drawing together fashion, design, and urbanism in a way that few other retailers attempt. What unites all of CdG’s spatial strategies – whether permanent or ephemeral, refined or raw – is their resistance to predictability. Kawakubo is not content with simply selling clothes; she is invested in shaping environments that reflect and amplify her values: intellectual rigor, aesthetic risk, and cultural critique. Her architecture makes those values tangible. It engages the body, the senses, and the mind, producing spaces that ask not just how we shop, but why (Butler, 2022: 40–41).

Through these strategies, Comme des Garçons has helped redefine what fashion retail can be – not merely a site of consumption but a platform for experimentation. By aligning the spatial and the sartorial, Kawakubo creates immersive experiences that challenge traditional hierarchies of culture, style, and commerce. The architect’s intentions do more than come through – they structure the experience entirely.

The Store

In 2004, Rei Kawakubo and Adrian Joffe opened the original Dover Street Market at 17 Dover Street in London, translating their radical retail philosophy into physical form. The chosen site – a Brutalist structure formerly housing the Institute of Contemporary Arts – was more than a neutral container; it carried with



Figure 25. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Haymarket in London, 2016. Courtesy of Dover Street Market.

it an art-historical gravitas, having hosted exhibitions by figures like Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, and Pablo Picasso. The building's rawness and cultural legacy resonated with Kawakubo's own values: a preference for imperfection, temporality, and cultural hybridity. Stepping into that first DSM felt less like entering a luxury store and more like stumbling upon a curated excavation site – layered, experimental, and animated by a sense of discovery (Kaufman, 2022).

Although DSM initially established itself at that address, its 2016 relocation to Haymarket was driven by rising rents – another reminder of how commercial realities continually shape creative practice. Yet the move did not dilute the store's vision. If anything, the new space deepened it. Set within a former Burberry headquarters, the Haymarket site offered more room for spatial experimentation and gave Kawakubo the chance to reimagine the entire retail experience on a larger scale. The architecture was restructured to accommodate the store's signature "beautiful chaos" – a mix of brands, aesthetics, and materials that defy conventional zoning (Kaufman, 2022). Walking through it, one is constantly shifting: from concrete and mirrors to floral wallpaper, from an industrial grid to a wooden hut. This movement is not only physical but conceptual, echoing Kawakubo's long-standing interest in contradiction, layering, and the disruption of categories.

Despite its function as a retail environment, DSM is structured more like a market in the traditional sense – fluid, crowded, and full of unexpected juxtapositions. This was a deliberate nod to spaces like Kensington Market, which Kawakubo and Joffe admired for their chaotic eclecticism and sense of democratic inclusivity. The presence of Comme des Garçons lines – including Homme, CdG Shirt, and CdG Play – serves as the brand's anchor, but they are displayed alongside a curated array of other labels that span both luxury and emerging categories (Eleuterio, 2023a). What struck me when I visited DSM London was the equality of presence: a young designer's installation could command as much attention as a Balenciaga display. The store doesn't just show fashion; it stages it, allowing ideas to collide and circulate freely.



Figure 26. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Haymarket in London, 2016. Courtesy of Dover Street Market.

Over the years, DSM has cultivated a significant presence in both the high fashion and streetwear spheres. Brands like Stüssy and Nike appear alongside Miu Miu and Prada, and this curation feels less like a marketing strategy than a cultural proposition. The store isn't segmented by price point or target demographic but by atmosphere and theme. Collaborative projects – such as the DSM x The North Face puffer jacket or the fifteenth-anniversary trench coat with Burberry – don't read as brand synergies, but as moments of shared authorship, made possible by the store's open curatorial logic. These aren't just products; they are propositions about what fashion can be when liberated from traditional brand hierarchies (Eleuterio, 2023a).

What DSM ultimately offers is not a shopping experience, but a cultural one. It has become a magnet for students, designers, artists, and cultural workers, many of whom treat it as a kind of informal institution. The staff are not merely sales associates; they act as intermediaries – translators of both the spatial and sartorial experience. Events like the launch of Marc Jacobs' "Heaven" line or the long-anticipated archival sales are not just product drops; they are moments of public congregation, where fashion becomes performative, participatory, and even communal. These events reveal how the store functions within the wider discourse of fashion – offering not only garments but a sense of belonging and narrative (Eleuterio, 2023a).

In this sense, Kawakubo's architectural and curatorial intentions are fully legible in the experience of the space. DSM resists the sanitized efficiency of traditional luxury retail and instead proposes an alternative model – one that embraces contingency, spatial disorder, and cultural complexity. It is a space where architecture is not background but actor, shaping how people move, encounter, and interpret fashion. Through this, Kawakubo and Joffe have redefined what a store can be: not a place of passive consumption, but a stage for experimental living.



Figure 27. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in New York City, 2025.
Photograph by author.

The Sequel

In 2008, the first Comme des Garçons guerrilla store in the United States opened in a derelict, century-old building in downtown Los Angeles – a deliberately stark and jarring environment that embodied Rei Kawakubo's anti-commercial ethos. The cracked white tiles on the walls conjured up the raw sterility of a public bathroom, while clothing hung from industrial pipes embedded in ceiling beams. The entire store seemed to reject the idea of comfort or luxury, echoing the guerrilla retail concept's larger critique of mainstream consumerism. The experience was disorienting but also intensely focused – everything about the space pushed attention back onto the garments themselves and the ideology they carried. That same year in Tokyo, Kawakubo launched Comme des Garçons II, a more fluid, open store designed to encourage movement and interaction, signaling a shift from confrontation to engagement (English, 2011: 88).

This interplay between memory, materiality, and spatial experience became a defining feature of Dover Street Market, which has since grown into a global network of experiential retail environments. By 2024, DSM had expanded from its London origins to Tokyo (2012), New York (2013), Singapore (2017), Beijing and Los Angeles (2018), and Paris (2024). Each store is a unique architectural and cultural proposition that reflects both its urban context and Kawakubo's ongoing experiment in spatial storytelling. The Tokyo location, for example, occupies a 1946 office building in the traditional luxury district of Ginza. Ten artists collaborated on its transformation, creating surreal installations – from oversized insects by Michael Howells to an elephant used in a Louis Vuitton collaboration. Each room presents a new aesthetic logic, from Craig Green to Fornasetti, blurring the line between art and commerce (Kaufman, 2022).

The New York City DSM further exemplifies Kawakubo's refusal to conform to retail norms. Located at Lexington Avenue and East 30th Street, far from the fashion centers of SoHo or the Meatpacking District, the building once housed the New York School of Applied Design for Women. Kawakubo reportedly discovered it by chance, drawn to its historical gravity. Upon entering, one is



Figure 28. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Los Angeles, 2018. Photograph by Eric Staudenmaier.

struck by the verticality of the space – seven floors linked by a glass elevator that allowed one to see the cacophony of textures, styles, and materials stacked above and below. Architectural interventions include freestanding retail huts made from scrap materials, non-structural columns wrapped in yarn or collaged debris, and a playful escalator designed by Madeline Gins to “combat aging” – an intervention that felt more poetic than functional. The result is an environment where fashion operates as spatial sculpture: Junya Watanabe’s fringe garments, André Walker’s conceptual dresses, all presented with the visual gravitas of an art exhibition. Even the ground-floor café functions as a respite from the sensory overload, creating a rhythm of intensity and calm that aligns with Kawakubo’s concept of “beautiful chaos” (Jacobs, 2014).

Since 2018, DSM Los Angeles occupies a warehouse in the Arts District. The industrial setting allows for a continuation of Kawakubo’s interest in raw materials and artistic collaboration. Exposed beams and concrete floors house installations by artists like Warren Muller and Stuart Haygarth, while scrap-metal huts serve as fitting rooms and cashier stations – design choices that resist polish in favor of process. Here, too, the juxtaposition of brands like Raf Simons and Maison Margiela with contemporary artwork reinforces DSM’s commitment to a multisensory, cross-disciplinary approach to fashion. A visit feels like navigating a curated maze, where the physicality of the space shapes how the garments are perceived – less as commodities and more as propositions within an unfolding aesthetic dialogue (Cogley, 2018).

The Paris location, inaugurated in 2024, offers perhaps the clearest distillation of Kawakubo’s architectural vision. Situated in the 17th-century Hôtel de Coulanges, the renovation respected the building’s historical significance while introducing futuristic, curved white-walled structures that hover within the original shell. These inserted zones never touch the building’s fabric – a symbolic gesture of reverence and intervention. The basement, called “The Helix,” functions as an event space for concerts and fashion shows, and reinforces Kawakubo and Joffe’s commitment to using architecture as a site of continuous reinvention (Leitch, 2024). During my visit, one transitioned from a historically ornate baroque



Figure 29. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Paris, 2025.
Photograph by author.

façade into an interior that evoked a distinctly futuristic atmosphere. The contrast extended beyond visual appearance, revealing a conceptual tension – where architectural heritage enveloped a vision of futurism, and luxury was reimagined as porous, fluid, and dynamic.

Across all DSM locations, Kawakubo and Joffe have carried forward the spirit of the guerrilla stores – ephemeral, subversive, spatially unexpected – while elevating it into something more sustained and architecturally resolved. The emphasis on spontaneity and collaboration remains central. Joffe has emphasized that physical retail continues to matter deeply to Kawakubo: fabric, light, and spatial arrangement must be experienced directly for their emotional resonance to emerge (Leitch, 2024). This perspective aligns with my own experience – where traditional store layouts tend to flatten the affective dimensions of shopping, DSM expands them. Each store offers not only a commercial experience but a temporal and sensory one, where past and future, decay and invention, luxury and street collide in meticulously curated friction. The architectural intentions are not only present – they are felt, physically and intellectually, as one moves through spaces that are as much about thinking and feeling as they are about buying.



Figure 30. Photograph of the interior of the CHANEL flagship store on 57th Street in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

C BRANDED BUILDING

CHANEL by Peter Marino

(Flagship Store, Tokyo, 2006)

The Visit: “Architecture of Exclusion”

It was a chilly Tuesday afternoon in early February when I made my way through Midtown Manhattan to visit two CHANEL boutiques—one on 57th Street, the other tucked into the corner of 730 Fifth Avenue. These boutiques are among the most iconic retail spaces in the city, situated in the heart of Manhattan’s luxury corridor, where glass towers and flagship stores vie for attention in a skyline built from brands. As I approached the 57th Street location, the store’s façade gleamed with a polished restraint that signaled wealth without uttering a word—black lacquer and a subtle logo. The building didn’t exactly invite visitors inside; instead, it projected an imposing presence, more like a monolith than a boutique.

Inside the 57th Street store, the atmosphere changed—but not in a way that offered any comfort. The interior was hushed, overly curated, and oddly empty. Mirrors stretched across the walls like portals that reflected only surface and surveillance, amplifying the sense that every movement was being tracked. The material palette was cold and pristine: glass, chrome, and high-gloss finishes dominated. The space smelled faintly of perfume and money. Sales associates noticed me immediately—their glances scanning my outfit, posture, and unspoken intentions. No one greeted me; instead, I was silently appraised, as though my presence required quiet assessment rather than welcome.

I walked slowly—not out of fascination, though the store was rich in visual detail—but because the layout dictated a measured pace. The boutique was arranged like a ceremonial procession: a deliberate sequence of pauses, where each handbag or heel was presented like a sacred object. Yet rather than inspiring awe, the space evoked discomfort. I didn’t want to touch anything. I felt as though touching wasn’t permitted. The environment seemed to declare: “This is not for you.”



Figure 31. Photograph of the interior of the CHANEL flagship store on Fifth Avenue in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

Later, at the Fifth Avenue boutique—located in a grander setting between Tiffany and Trump Tower—the sense of exclusion was even more pronounced. The store’s exterior exuded majesty and institutional prestige. Upon stepping inside, I noticed the temperature drop—both literally and figuratively. The interior was brighter and more expansive than the 57th Street location, but it retained the same guarded quality. As I moved through the space, I became hyperaware of my physical presence: how I stood, what I looked at, how long I lingered. The experience felt performative, but I couldn’t identify who the performance was for.

There were other shoppers, of course. They were polished, confident, dressed in understated luxury that spoke in whispers rather than declarations. They appeared at ease in the space. The staff engaged them fluidly—opening drawers, offering selections, maintaining warm eye contact. With me, the interaction was different. Not hostile, but distanced. There was a gentle but undeniable barrier—a soft wall of exclusion. It felt as if the very architecture had already made a decision about who did or did not belong.

These boutiques weren’t simply places to buy luxury goods; they operated as systems. Systems designed to recognize and affirm specific performances of wealth, femininity, and cultural belonging. Every element—each chair, spotlight, and security-guarded display—seemed precisely calibrated to reinforce that system. I wasn’t physically barred, but symbolically, the message was unmistakable: “You’re permitted to look, but you don’t belong in the picture.”

When I stepped back out onto the street, I felt oddly erased. The familiar chaos of the city—cabs, sirens, tourists, scaffolding—rushed back in. Yet something from inside those boutiques lingered. A trace of something overly polished, entirely self-contained. These were not spaces designed to welcome or inspire beauty in a shared sense. They were architectures of exclusion. Beautiful, certainly—but also cold, controlled, and indifferent. In these spaces, shopping wasn’t just an act of consumption; it was a ritual of social proof. And if you couldn’t—or wouldn’t—participate, there was nothing there for you.

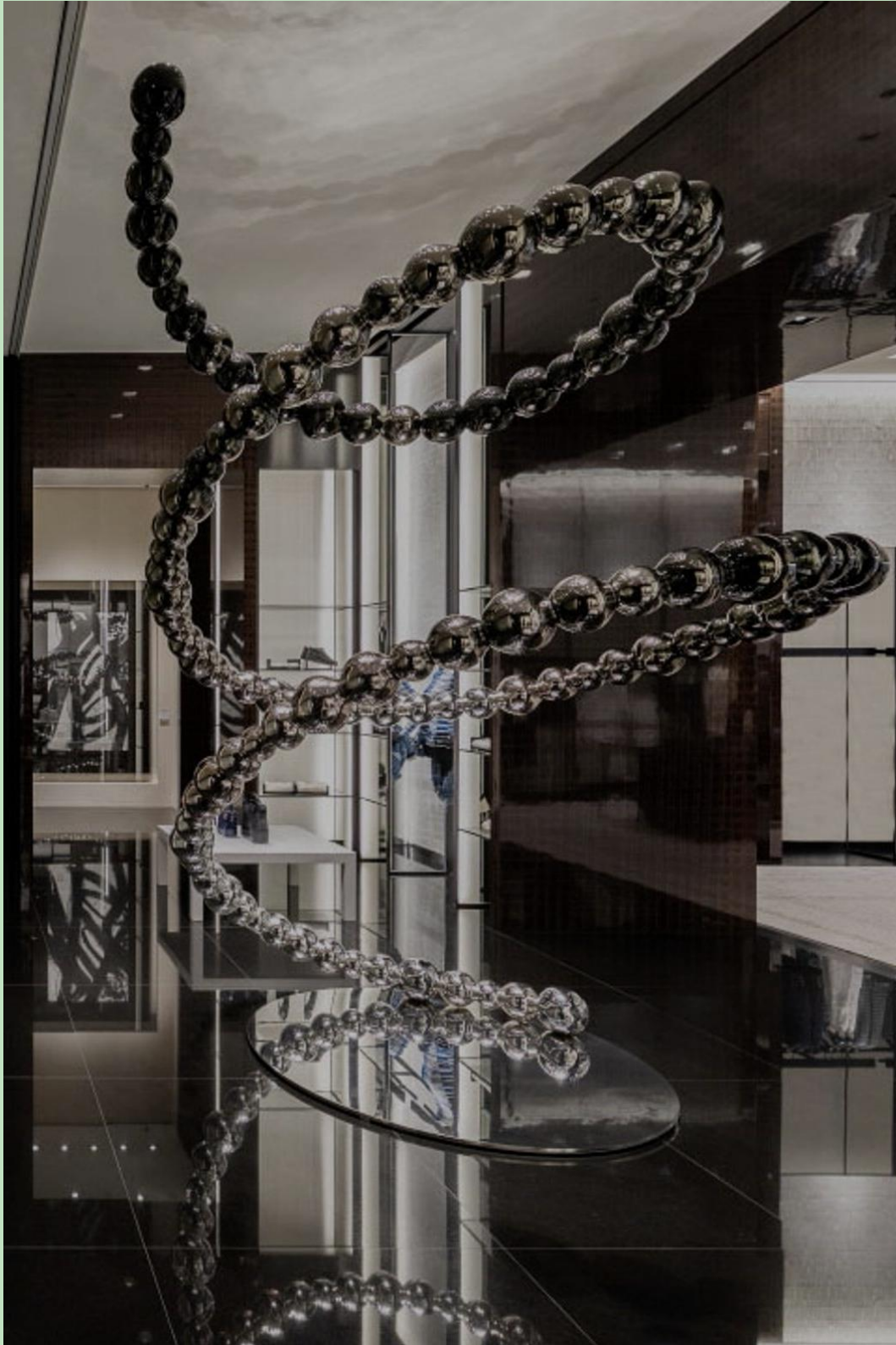


Figure 32. Photograph of the interior of the CHANEL Ginza flagship store in Tokyo, 2006. Photograph by Vincent Knapp.

The Brand

Coco Chanel famously stated, “Fashion is architecture: it is a matter of proportions” (Haedrich, 1972: 252). This assertion captures a core principle in the dialogue between fashion and architecture: both are structured systems of design, reliant on proportion, balance, and the precise manipulation of material, light, and space to create meaning. Chanel’s own legacy – particularly her deployment of black as a visual signature and the minimalism of pieces like the “little black dress” – demonstrates a deep understanding of how simplicity, when properly framed, can become iconography. This awareness of how visual codes function both in garments and in urban environments laid the groundwork for CHANEL’s architectural ambitions (Crewe, 2018: 92).

This is most apparent in the long-standing collaboration between CHANEL and architect Peter Marino. Over the past 25 years, Marino has designed more than 200 CHANEL spaces worldwide, building not just stores but architectural embodiments of the brand’s identity. Marino’s work offers not just retail experiences but immersive encounters with the brand’s mythos. Each space is tailored to its context, yet all are anchored in a shared visual vocabulary: black lacquer, reflective surfaces, and touches of softness – often via pearl motifs or tweed textures – woven into the high-gloss finishes. These spaces are hyper-curated and conceptually challenging, yet they seek to avoid a sense of coldness through gestures of intimacy, such as a soft fabric wall panel or a sculptural pearl chandelier (Hill, 2021a).

This tension – between austerity and warmth, between public spectacle and private luxury – is where Marino’s artistic background comes into play. As he himself has emphasized, his focus is less on architectural orthodoxy than on the emotive potential of material, color, and light (Hill, 2021a). His process is highly visual and tactile; CHANEL’s black-and-white palette becomes not a constraint but a generative force. “White and black is a really great color palette to work with,” Marino says. “CHANEL is lucky to have that palette”. And indeed, the palette becomes a structure through which Marino experiments with texture –



Figure 33. Photograph of the interior of the CHANEL Ginza flagship store in Tokyo, 2006. Photograph by Vincent Knapp.

glossy versus matte, stone versus fabric – producing spaces that are both recognizable and surprising (*Peter Marino and Chanel: A great love story*, 2021).

Walking into one of these boutiques, the sense of refinement is immediate. You don't simply browse – you enter a meticulously framed atmosphere. In New York, the space was hushed, gleaming, and dense with visual detail. Even the sound was designed: softened by carpeting and thick partitions, the boutique was acoustically insulated from the street. The feeling wasn't exactly of welcome, but of control – a sense that everything from your gaze to your movements had been anticipated. The architecture is clearly not passive; it shapes behavior, slows down time, and encourages a kind of reverence. And yet that control also constructs boundaries – social as much as spatial. I was aware, almost hyper-aware, of what I wore, how I stood, how I moved. Marino's spaces do not erase hierarchies; they sharpen them.

This interplay between global consistency and local sensitivity is key to CHANEL's architectural strategy. Marino notes that a boutique in Miami, with its sunlit palette and playful tones, must differ fundamentally from the more formal and restrained environments of London or New York. In each city, the architecture serves both as a retail container and as a kind of cultural signifier. Despite the visual unity across locations, no two CHANEL stores feel entirely the same (Hill, 2021a).

The Tokyo flagship in the Ginza district, completed in 2006, perhaps best exemplifies the ambitions of this partnership. The façade – a luminous grid made of glass, ceramics, and iron – includes 700,000 embedded LED lights capable of projecting CHANEL imagery into the surrounding cityscape. At night, the building becomes a screen, a beacon, and a symbol. It's able to collapse distinctions between architecture, branding, and public art; it is a narrative device in the urban fabric, turning passersby into spectators of a story about luxury, precision, and mythmaking (Crewe, 2018: 92–93).



Figure 34. Photograph of the interior of the CHANEL Ginza flagship store in Tokyo, 2006. Photograph by Vincent Knapp.

Even the former creative director Karl Lagerfeld, while not directly involved in the architectural process, reviewed all designs to ensure aesthetic coherence across disciplines. Marino's spaces are environments that communicate CHANEL's brand identity at an architectural level. They perform, in three dimensions, what the garments express in silhouette and material (Cohen, 2019).

Marino's work for CHANEL demonstrates how architecture can act as a medium of brand expression – one that doesn't merely house fashion but actively interprets it. The experience of being in these spaces, as a visitor rather than a buyer, reveals their dual function: they are as much about exclusion and status as they are about design. But that friction – between desire and distance, spectacle and silence – is what makes the architecture compelling.

The Concept

Peter Marino's design philosophy for CHANEL boutiques merges architectural structure with an unapologetic embrace of decoration, forming a cohesive yet layered spatial identity. He describes his creative process as the balancing act between "two sides" of himself: the modernist architect who shapes compelling, streamlined exteriors, and the decorator who curates opulent, highly tactile interiors. "I gather many samples as the ingredients, and I start mixing everything together to see what works," Marino says, likening his method to a chef assembling a dish (Brookins, 2021). This metaphor becomes concrete when one walks into a CHANEL boutique: every material, from the polished stone flooring to the pearl-accented light fixtures, feels as though it has been carefully selected, tested, and placed with surgical intent.

This notion of composition becomes architectural spectacle in Marino's work on the CHANEL Ginza building in Tokyo, a project he refers to as "groundbreaking" (Hill, 2021b). From a distance, the building's verticality immediately asserts itself in the clean lines of its ten-story silhouette. But it's the façade that commands attention – not only because of its scale, but because it performs. Covered in a 65.5-meter media wall, the façade integrates high-density LEDs to broadcast



Figure 35. Photograph of the interior of the CHANEL Ginza flagship store in Tokyo, 2006. Photograph by Vincent Knapp.

dynamic imagery: abstract patterns, CHANEL logos, and seasonal visual campaigns. It becomes a live surface, a screen embedded in the urban fabric, simultaneously a curtain and a window. Marino's intention here was to maintain fidelity to CHANEL's identity while exploring its capacity for reinterpretation. The familiar visual codes – black and white, tweed, the camellia – are still present, but transformed into a new digital language (Sullivan, 2007).

Collaborating with lighting designer Matthew Tanteri, Marino implemented a lighting strategy that treats the building as a communicative entity. This is not branding in the traditional sense – static logos or heavy signage – but a more ambient form of spatial messaging. As daylight fades and the façade begins to animate and the LED surface pulses softly with abstract motion, it seems less like advertising and more like public art. The building projects a visual rhythm that responds to its urban context while subtly maintaining the brand's presence (Sullivan, 2007).

Beyond its visual strategies, the CHANEL Ginza building also demonstrates architectural sophistication in terms of functionality. Marino designed it to accommodate a rooftop garden, performance spaces, galleries, high-end retail, and even a restaurant. Natural light filters through layered spaces in ways that soften the strictness of the building's geometry. The design considers practical environmental concerns – like solar heat gain and interior visibility – while maintaining its visual ambition. When inside, there is an almost seamless connection between the physical textures of the boutique and the dynamic presence of the façade just beyond the glass. One feels not only enclosed but engaged – as if the building is subtly aware of its audience (Sullivan, 2007).

Experientially, the Ginza flagship exemplifies Marino's ambition to make architecture not just a container, but an interface. It doesn't merely house CHANEL's products; it reflects and refracts the brand's ethos of innovation and luxury in a visibly participatory way. This is architecture that articulates its intent clearly – through surface, light, and rhythm – and invites the visitor into a narrative of contemporary elegance. Marino's design extends CHANEL's values into urban



Figure 36. Photograph of the façade of the CHANEL Ginza flagship store in Tokyo, 2006. Photograph by Vincent Knapp.

space, reinforcing the idea that luxury is not just a product, but a total environment (Sullivan, 2007).

The Store

The CHANEL Ginza Tower exemplifies the integration of technological innovation with brand identity, materialized through a highly engineered three-layer wall system. At its core is a sophisticated use of electrochromic glass, which adjusts its opacity in response to electrical current. During the day, the glass remains transparent, showcasing the boutique's interior and drawing the gaze inward. By night, however, it becomes a luminous screen – subtly shifting the building's role from retail space to urban display surface. This modulation of transparency and luminosity transforms the tower into an active participant in the city's nocturnal life (Sullivan, 2007).

The façade's allusion to CHANEL's iconic tweed is not merely metaphorical; it is physically encoded in the stainless-steel mesh embedded within the triple-glazed panels. This diamond-cell louver mesh creates a shimmering, textile-like effect that changes with light and perspective. From up close, the surface appears delicate and responsive, almost as if it were woven rather than constructed. In this way, Marino's design bridges the tactile intimacy of fashion with the monumentality of architecture. The mesh serves both aesthetic and functional purposes, providing solar shading and regulating the light spill from the internal LED arrays (Sullivan, 2007).

Technically, the façade's lighting system is surprisingly straightforward, despite its complex visual output. Vertical support tubes house four rows of LEDs – two directed upward, two downward – grouped into pixels approximately 20 centimeters wide. The full façade comprises 188 vertical and 98 horizontal pixels, enabling fluid, scalable video displays. At night, these lights animate the building's surface with abstract compositions and refined branding cues. Observing it in motion, one senses the building shedding its material boundaries, dissolving into a cinematic presence that resists easy categorization – neither pure media screen nor traditional architecture, but something in between (Sullivan, 2007).



Figure 37. Photograph of the façade of the CHANEL flagship store in Istanbul, 2018. Photograph by Manolo Yllera.

Tanteri, reflecting on the building's technological innovation, suggests it marks a turning point in façade lighting: "Skins will diminish in size yet perform multiple functions, and light is a scaleless thing, so we will still get the same performance". Indeed, the CHANEL Ginza Tower's illuminated skin performs at multiple registers – it communicates brand identity, enhances urban ambience, and sustains architectural legibility even as it flirts with immateriality (Sullivan, 2007).

The CHANEL Ginza Tower embodies the brand's dual commitment to innovation and heritage through Peter Marino's carefully choreographed architectural vision. The design negotiates a delicate balance between technological spectacle and material intimacy, between public display and private luxury, establishing the tower not only as a flagship retail venue but also as a significant contribution to the landscape of contemporary urban architecture.

The Sequel

The CHANEL boutique in Istanbul, completed in 2018, presents a striking manifestation of high fashion through architectural form. Its façade – an arrangement of angled white marble panels framed by blackened steel – immediately evokes the pleated blouses famously designed by Coco Chanel. Set against a gray marble plaza and anchored by a black granite reflecting pool, the boutique's exterior establishes an atmosphere of restrained luxury. The location, on the quieter Asian side of Istanbul, informed Marino's architectural approach; seeking to create a monumental yet understated entrance, he drew inspiration from the Seagram Building in New York City, particularly its minimalist treatment of the entryway. The boutique's flat white marble panels framing the glass doors and large window demonstrate Marino's dialogue with modernist ideals, adapted to CHANEL's aesthetic world (Cohen, 2019).

Upon entering, the space transitions into a gallery-like interior where Marino's material palette – crackled lacquer, textured plaster, ebonized oak, and various marbles – creates an ambiance of refinement and modernity. Key CHANEL symbols, such as pearls, folding screens, and mirrors, are seamlessly woven into the design, celebrating the brand's enduring elegance. The first three floors are



Figure 38. Photograph of the interior of the CHANEL flagship store in Miami, 2021. Courtesy of Phaidon Press.

dedicated to retail, while the upper two serve administrative purposes, culminating in a rooftop garden reserved for exclusive VIP events (Cohen, 2019).

The experiential centerpiece is the marble staircase, a deliberate homage to the mirrored stairwell at CHANEL's Paris headquarters. White marble steps paired with a caramel silk-wool runner featuring a black "necklace" motif create a powerful visual rhythm. Above the shoe salon, mirrors multiply reflections, resulting in a kaleidoscopic effect that is at once playful and sophisticated. Slipper chairs upholstered in tweed – a direct nod to CHANEL's iconic jackets – provide comfort within this visual spectacle, reinforcing Marino's commitment to blending functionality with symbolic resonance (Cohen, 2019).

In contrast, CHANEL's 57th Street boutique in New York City, also completed in 2018, explores the interplay between light and color through a purer, more minimalist vocabulary. The façade, conceived as a pristine white cube, conceals an interior articulated through glossy black surfaces punctuated by tiny, backlit perforations. This subtle manipulation of surface texture and illumination transforms the space into an immersive environment that both honors and reinterprets CHANEL's monochromatic signature (Crewe, 2018: 92). Experiencing the boutique, the tension between opacity and glow felt almost cinematic, evoking the drama and refinement at the heart of CHANEL's visual language.

The Miami Design District boutique, opened in 2021, further evolves Marino's dialogue with CHANEL's identity through a minimalist yet playful design. The exterior, a simple white stucco cube with irregularly positioned windows, references Coco Chanel's childhood in a convent, infusing the project with an understated narrative depth. Inside, a sculptural staircase bathed in natural light from a skylight becomes the organizing element of the space. Marino adheres to the brand's black-and-white palette but infuses it with a youthful, almost rebellious energy. Art installations by Gregor Hildebrandt, created from film tape, honor Coco Chanel's early fascination with cinema, while works by Vera Lutter and Chris Succo root the boutique within Miami's vibrant cultural scene (Hill, 2021a; Hill, 2021b; Brookins, 2021).



Figure 39. Photograph of the interior of the CHANEL flagship store on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, 2023. Courtesy of CHANEL.

In Beverly Hills, CHANEL's flagship boutique on Rodeo Drive, opened in 2023 after a decade of planning, offers Marino's most expansive canvas yet. Spanning over 2,700 square meters across four floors, it is CHANEL's largest U.S. boutique. The design emphasizes textural diversity: woven textiles, gray wave stone, and black-and-gold lacquered Japanese cabinets create a layered sensory environment. Unique furniture pieces – such as petrified wood tables and rock crystal chandeliers – further enrich the atmosphere. The space functions as a hybrid between boutique and art gallery, showcasing works by Heinz Mack, Mary Corse, and Vik Muniz alongside CHANEL's exclusive high jewelry and cosmetics collections (Wolff, 2023).

The 2024 opening of CHANEL's watches and fine jewelry flagship on New York's Fifth Avenue marks another evolution in Marino's architectural narrative. Designed as a "jewel box," the two-story boutique expresses Coco Chanel's artistic sensibility through a curated layering of contemporary artworks, antiques, and custom furnishings. Visitors enter through black-and-gold lacquered doors into a double-height gallery with gilded walls and historical pieces, including chandeliers by Goossens and Edo-period wooden lotus bouquets. Upstairs, the jewelry salons envelop clients in a more intimate, luxurious setting, enhanced by Ming dynasty ceramics, Louis XV furniture, and CHANEL-inspired touches like tweed lamps and coromandel screens (Jordan, 2024).

Throughout his collaborations with CHANEL, Peter Marino consistently integrates architecture, interior design, and fine art to extend Coco Chanel's legacy into spatial form. Drawing on his background in fine arts, Marino curates environments that blend Baroque opulence with modern restraint, employing materials such as tweed, gold, rock crystal, and Venetian mirrors. Across the boutiques, Marino's architecture does not simply frame CHANEL's collections; it stages an experience that is at once rooted in the brand's history and animated by contemporary artistic practices (Hill, 2021b; Jordan, 2024). Personally experiencing these spaces, it is clear that Marino's intentions come through: the boutiques become embodiments of CHANEL's timeless spirit, transforming each visit into a ritual of discovery and admiration.



Figure 40. Photograph of the interior of the (former) Paco Rabanne flagship store on Rue Cambon in Paris, 2016. Courtesy of Paco Rabanne.

D MEN OF STEEL

Paco Rabanne by OFFICE KGDVS

(Flagship Store, Paris, 2016)

The Visit: “A Space That Refused to Change Clothes”

On a lovely Saturday afternoon, March 8, 2025, I made my way down Rue Cambon in Paris, searching for the Paco Rabanne boutique at number 12. The address, nestled among the luxury heavyweights just off Place Vendôme, carried a certain expectation—something polished, futuristic, unmistakably Paco Rabanne. At least, that was the impression Google gave me.

But as I approached the location, it was immediately clear that something had changed. The sleek glass storefront now displayed a different name: Livy, a lingerie brand. For a moment, I paused and double-checked the address, confused. Had the Paco Rabanne boutique relocated? Had it closed entirely? Or had I simply made a mistake? No—the digital map hadn’t yet been updated. The Paco Rabanne store was gone, replaced quietly, almost without notice.

Still, when I stepped through the entrance, the space felt suspended in a state of transition. The original interior design by OFFICE KGDVS was unmistakably still present. While Livy’s branding now occupied the visual foreground, the foundational architectural language of the space remained unchanged: metallic surfaces, seamless flooring, and sharply focused lighting that still conveyed a sense of futuristic minimalism—traits that had defined Paco Rabanne’s aesthetic.

The boutique itself was smaller than I had imagined. Photographs had inflated its scale in my mind, but in reality, the layout was compact and deliberately choreographed. The interior didn’t encourage idle browsing. Instead, the spatial design subtly directed visitors along a premeditated path. Every visual axis seemed calculated, every surface employed to manage perception and flow.



Figure 41. Photograph of the façade of the (former) Paco Rabanne flagship store on Rue Cambon in Paris, 2016. Courtesy of Paco Rabanne.

Even with a new brand inhabiting the space, the store's physical structure continued to assert its original identity. The cold sheen of the metal finishes, the austere material palette, and the precise, clinical lighting all seemed at odds with Livy's softer, more intimate aesthetic. It was as if the architectural framework refused to conform—still communicating Paco Rabanne's signature vision through every reflection and angle.

The atmosphere inside was eerily quiet. Only a few shoppers drifted through, their movements barely disrupting the controlled stillness. As I walked the length of the boutique, I felt like I was passing through a ghost—an environment that no longer matched its outward identity, yet had not fully embraced its new one either. The space lingered in a kind of architectural limbo, a spatial afterimage that refused to fade.

The Brand

Francisco “Paco” Rabaneda Cuervo, known for his boundary-pushing contributions to fashion, began his career in architecture before transitioning into couture. This architectural background profoundly shaped his experimental approach to materiality and form, earning him accolades from figures such as Salvador Dalí, who called him “the second genius of Spain,” and Coco Chanel, who dubbed him the “metallurgist of fashion.” His early career in the 1960s designing jewelry for Givenchy, Dior, and Balenciaga set the stage for the radical vision he would soon bring to his own label (Pasquinelli, 2023).

Rabanne's 1966 debut collection, “Manifesto: 12 Unwearable Dresses in Contemporary Materials,” challenged traditional notions of couture, utilizing unconventional materials like aluminum, plastic, and paper, all fastened together with wire and glue. This act of defiance blurred the lines between fashion, art, and architecture, introducing garments as sculptural objects rather than functional clothing (Pasquinelli, 2023). His ethos extended beyond fashion into fragrance, where Rabanne established an enduring legacy. Although he retired from the fashion world in 1999, his experimental spirit remains central to the brand, now led by creative director Julien Dossena since 2013 (Sehmer, 2016).



Figure 42. Photograph of the interior of the (former) Paco Rabanne flagship store on Rue Cambon in Paris, 2016. Courtesy of Paco Rabanne.

The Paco Rabanne flagship store on Rue Cambon in Paris, opened in 2016 after a fourteen-year hiatus from brick-and-mortar retail, materialized this experimental legacy in architectural form. Designed by Belgian architects Kersten Geers and David Van Severen of OFFICE KGDVS, the boutique sat near the iconic Rue Saint-Honoré, in a neighborhood synonymous with fashion innovation. Approaching the store, one encountered an almost understated exterior compared to the brand's flamboyant reputation, a gesture that immediately hinted at the tension between minimalism and boldness at the core of Rabanne's identity (Fischli et al., 2021: 254).

Stepping inside, the experience was immersive: the boutique's pared-back geometry, combined with materials like metal, leather, and aluminum, embodied a restrained yet unmistakably powerful aesthetic. OFFICE KGDVS's emphasis on simplicity and functional enhancement was evident. The spatial organization directed movement with precision, echoing the careful choreography found in Rabanne's early dress designs. As a visitor, one sensed the intentionality of every surface, every junction – a space that asked to be engaged with physically, not just visually (*OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen*, 2018).

Experiencing the store firsthand revealed the lingering influence of Rabanne's architectural training. The boutique did not merely serve as a container for products; rather, it performed as an active participant in the brand narrative. The contrasting textures – smooth metal planes against supple leather – mirrored Rabanne's interest in juxtaposing hard and soft, futuristic and tactile. Even the lighting choices emphasized this duality, creating a controlled, almost cinematic atmosphere that heightened the interplay between material and form. Here, the architect's and the fashion designer's intentions converged: both sought to reframe conventional perceptions of utility and beauty.

OFFICE KGDVS, established in 2002, is known for projects that balance theoretical rigor with material experimentation, often emphasizing abstraction and geometry. Their work on the Paco Rabanne store – significantly, their first retail project outside Belgium – benefited from a degree of creative freedom rare in



Figure 43. Photograph of the interior of the (former) Paco Rabanne flagship store on Rue Cambon in Paris, 2016. Courtesy of Paco Rabanne.

commercial architecture (*OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen*, 2018). This latitude is palpable in the space's refusal to follow standard retail tropes; instead, it offers an environment that prioritizes experience over consumption, aligning perfectly with Rabanne's avant-garde heritage.

The flagship's opening was part of a broader strategy under Dossena to reintroduce and expand Paco Rabanne's presence globally. Alongside the boutique, a new visual identity, an updated e-commerce platform for Europe, and collaborations with Barneys in North America and Farfetch internationally marked a coordinated effort to bridge physical and digital spaces while maintaining the brand's radical DNA (Fischli et al., 2021: 254).

Standing inside the Rue Cambon boutique, it became clear that this store was a spatial manifesto. It embodied Paco Rabanne's lifelong commitment to reimagining form, material, and experience. The boutique reflected not only his Basque and French heritage – his upbringing in France after fleeing the Spanish Civil War, and his education at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris – but also his consistent drive to merge the artistic, architectural, and sartorial worlds. Through its architecture, the store communicated the same creative rebellion that Rabanne embedded in his first “unwearable” dresses, offering visitors an environment that continues to question and expand the possibilities of fashion and space (Sehmer, 2016).

The Concept

Entering the Paco Rabanne boutique on Rue Cambon, the first element to draw the eye – and the feet – was the flooring: a soft, clay-colored leather arranged in triangular tiles. This unexpected material choice, described by Julien Dossena as a deliberate reference to Paco Rabanne's legacy of material innovation, set the tone for the entire space (Verner, 2016). Visually arresting and tactile underfoot, the leather evoked a strange blend of luxury and industrial roughness, aligning with Rabanne's history of challenging aesthetic and functional norms. Although questions arose regarding the practicality and longevity of leather flooring in a high-traffic commercial setting, the choice felt fundamentally true to the brand's



Figure 44. Photograph of the interior of the (former) Paco Rabanne flagship store on Rue Cambon in Paris, 2016. Courtesy of Paco Rabanne.

ethos of embracing risk and experimentation.

The boutique represented a significant moment in the brand's history: it was the first physical store opened under Dossena's leadership and Paco Rabanne's return to brick-and-mortar retail after a fourteen-year absence. Without the constraints of adapting to an existing corporate identity, Dossena and the architectural firm OFFICE KGDVS were free to develop a space that simultaneously reintroduced and redefined the brand. The concept of a "toolbox" underpinned the design, with modular, adjustable components such as perforated aluminum panels, sliding displays, and corrugated metal ventilation features. These practical elements were integrated seamlessly into the store's spatial language, balancing functionality with a raw, almost industrial character that paradoxically did not sacrifice intimacy (Verner, 2016).

Walking through the store, the spatial strategy of OFFICE KGDVS became clear: rather than imposing a rigid layout, the architects created a "space within a space" by offsetting panel walls and deliberately avoiding traditional right angles. This approach, drawing from the influence of 1930s architectural modernism and the anti-ornamentation theories of Adolf Loos, ensured that despite the futuristic materials and open plan, the environment maintains a fundamentally human scale (Verner, 2016).

The architects initially approached the project with hesitation, wary of compromising their architectural values within a commercial framework. However, after encountering Dossena's open-ended brief – which referenced visionary precedents like Kisho Kurokawa's Nakagin Capsule Tower and Gae Aulenti's adaptive reuse of the Musée d'Orsay – they embraced the opportunity. The absence of prescriptive constraints allowed them to explore new modes of expression within a retail context, blending historical allusion with futuristic aspiration (O'Kelly, 2022).

The material palette – perforated aluminum, sliding rails, yellow lacquer highlights, and the signature leather floor – constructed an environment that feels simultaneously experimental and luxurious. The leather flooring nodded to artist



Figure 45. Photograph of the interior of the (former) Paco Rabanne flagship store on Rue Cambon in Paris, 2016. Courtesy of Paco Rabanne.

Joseph Beuys, whose use of organic materials imbued his works with conceptual depth. Meanwhile, the use of aluminum directly connected back to Paco Rabanne's "12 Unwearable Dresses in Contemporary Materials," reasserting aluminum's symbolic role in the brand's visual identity and cultural history (O'Kelly, 2022).

The combination of industrial materials and carefully staged spatial sequences evoked a sensation of stepping into a capsule of the future – a microcosm where high-tech aestheticism met Parisian craftsmanship. In the subtly shifting perspectives enabled by the offset walls and modular elements, the architecture itself seemed to breathe and adapt, mirroring Rabanne's own blending of rigid form and kinetic possibility (O'Kelly, 2022).

Dossena's decision to work with OFFICE KGDVS was strongly influenced by the architects' previous work, particularly a 2012 villa in Brussels that combined marble, leather, and raw concrete to powerful effect. The same nuanced dialogue between industrial and refined materials was present in the Rue Cambon store, where the "industrial toolbox" aesthetic was elevated into a sophisticated spatial experience. Here, functionality and luxury were not opposites but partners in the construction of a new type of retail environment (O'Kelly, 2022).

The Paco Rabanne boutique on Rue Cambon exemplified OFFICE KGDVS's broader architectural philosophy. Since founding their practice in 2002, Geers and Van Severen have pursued a minimal, expressive design language, stripping away decorative excess to focus on the essential qualities of space and material. Their principle of "respect it and then abduct it" in dealing with historic structures is clearly visible here: by inserting a modern, abstracted interior within the 18th-century building shell, they respected the existing architecture's dignity while simultaneously transforming it (O'Kelly, 2022). Experiencing the boutique firsthand confirmed that the architects' and Dossena's intentions came through: the space was both a homage to the past and a manifesto for the future.



Figure 46. Photograph of the interior of the (former) Paco Rabanne flagship store on Rue Cambon in Paris, 2016. Courtesy of Paco Rabanne.

The Store

The Paco Rabanne boutique on Rue Cambon in Paris offered a carefully orchestrated balance between openness and enclosure, with the entrance threshold playing a decisive role in setting the tone for the spatial experience. As I approached the store, the minimalist façade gave little away, creating a sense of anticipation. Passing through the sliding glass door, I immediately encountered the tactile warmth of a triangular cowhide floor. The soft leather underfoot contrasted sharply with the cool minimalism of the surroundings, subtly marking the shift from public to private space. This careful modulation of sensory experience reflected the boutique's broader architectural intention: to create an environment that was intimate yet accessible, focused on technology, luxury, and refinement without succumbing to design clichés (Princen, 2016).

The material palette inside was deliberately simple yet sophisticated. The spatial organization centered around a structured perimeter, functioning almost like a “room within a room.” This aluminum-lined boundary acted not only as a display surface but also as a flexible framework, incorporating doors and shelving units, that enabled a variety of visual and functional configurations. The design was not merely about static presentation, but about adaptability – allowing the boutique to evolve over time, just as Rabanne's own work continuously challenged material and stylistic conventions (Princen, 2016).

The influence of fashion's material experimentation was evident but interpreted through architecture: the perforated aluminum surfaces of the semi-cupboards subtly evoked Rabanne's historic fascination with unconventional materials like chainmail, while leaving enough openness for future reinterpretations of the brand's identity. This approach became evident as one interacted with the display units, where aluminum doors pivoted open at varying angles, revealing items like jewelry, handbags, and knitwear. The backlit shelving created a graphic interplay of light and shadow, echoing both the texture of Rabanne's early designs and the linear elegance found in Dossena's contemporary collections (Thawley, 2022).



Figure 47. Photograph of the interior of the (former) Paco Rabanne flagship store on Rue Cambon in Paris, 2016. Courtesy of Paco Rabanne.

Despite its modest footprint of just 65 square meters, the boutique felt spacious and dynamic due to the clear articulation of two key elements: the aluminum perimeter and the so-called “Loos space.” This latter section nodded to the principles of Adolf Loos, whose rejection of unnecessary ornamentation in favor of material richness was reinterpreted here. Rather than adhering dogmatically to Loos’ philosophy, OFFICE KGDVS introduced a nuanced version of ornament – subtle contrasts between textures, minimalist lacquered finishes, and fine detailing – that generates a sophisticated spatial dialogue between austerity and refinement (Princen, 2016).

Moving deeper into the boutique, the fitting rooms continued this careful choreography of intimacy and display. Equipped with black-framed mirrors, soft lighting, and beige cabinetry showcasing seasonal handbags, these spaces offered a temporary retreat from the otherwise open plan of the store. The mirrored surfaces and subdued finishes extended the visual language of the main space, maintaining a sense of cohesion while enhancing the feeling of personal privacy (Thawley, 2022).

Adding an olfactory dimension to the architectural experience, a custom fragrance by perfumer Dominique Ropion once filled the air. Its sharp yet smooth character mirrored the tactile and visual sensations of the materials surrounding the visitor. This scent completed the boutique’s sensory landscape, reinforcing the minimalist but luxurious atmosphere carefully cultivated by both the architects and Dossena (Sehmer, 2016; Thawley, 2022).

The boutique stands as a powerful extension of Dossena’s broader project of repositioning Paco Rabanne as a contemporary leader in fashion: innovative, materially daring, and unmistakably Parisian.

The Sequel

Following the unveiling of Paco Rabanne’s Fall 2020 collection in Paris, Julien Dossena expanded his vision for the brand with the opening of a pop-up boutique at 54 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Occupying the ground floor of one of Paco Rabanne’s Paris offices – a location steeped in the tradition of high fashion – the



Figure 48. Photograph of the interior of the Paco Rabanne pop-up store on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris, 2020. Courtesy of Paco Rabanne.

boutique was conceived not simply as a commercial space, but as a complete immersion into the brand's evolving identity (Abad, 2020; *Paco Rabanne New Boutique In Paris*, 2020).

One immediately sensed Dossena's ambition to move beyond conventional retail environments. The boutique synthesized all facets of the Paco Rabanne universe: womenswear, menswear, accessories, fragrances, and heritage collections such as the Spring 2020 '70s-inspired line and the "Pacollection" perfumes. As Dossena himself emphasized: "A store is the final, and maybe the most compelling manifestation of a brand expression" (Abad, 2020). This conviction clearly guided the collaboration with OFFICE KGDVS, who helped translate the brand's radical spirit into an architectural experience that is at once sharp, precise, and unexpectedly relaxed (Newbold, 2020).

Material and spatial choices throughout the boutique reflected Paco Rabanne's signature language of futurism and craft. Metal mesh, mirrored surfaces, and chainmail textures, so integral to the brand's identity since the 1960s, were reinterpreted within a contemporary digital context. High-resolution window displays and immersive screens populated every floor, creating a constantly shifting sensory environment that engaged visitors at both visual and tactile levels (Abad, 2020).

The boutique spanned three levels across 153 square meters, balancing sleek, iridescent displays with pockets of intimacy. Shimmering shelving prominently showcased avant-garde accessories – including the 1969 Iconic, Nano, and Sparkle bags – while more secluded, residential-style niches, equipped with headphones and televisions, allowed visitors to engage with Julien Dossena's retro-futuristic "Paco-verse" in a reflective, personalized manner. This spatial juxtaposition – between high-concept display and immersive, contemplative environments – reflects the brand's broader ambition to merge innovation with accessibility (Newbold, 2020). Simultaneously, the boutique maintained a dialogue with the brand's past. A dedicated heritage area presented rotating exhibits of archival pieces alongside Dossena's reinterpretations, illuminating a lineage that stretches from the metallic radicalism of the 1960s to more



Figure 49. Photograph of the interior of the Paco Rabanne pop-up store on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris, 2020. Courtesy of Paco Rabanne.

technologically attuned contemporary designs. In doing so, the space underscored how Rabanne's founding principles continue to inform and inspire the brand's current identity (*Paco Rabanne New Boutique in Paris*, 2020).

Architecturally, the design further dissolved traditional boundaries between retail and experience. Rough concrete-framed windows blurred the transition from exterior to interior, offering fragmented glimpses into the boutique from the street. Inside, mirrored fixtures transformed into dynamic visual installations, reinforcing the space's futuristic ethos without becoming overbearing. These gestures maintained a coherent spatial narrative that aligned with Paco Rabanne's ongoing legacy of material experimentation and formal subversion (*Paco Rabanne New Boutique In Paris*, 2020).



Figure 50. Photograph of the façade of the (former) Off-White flagship store on Rue de Castiglione in Paris, 2025. Photograph by author.

E CORNY STORES

Off-White by Virgil Abloh

(Flagship Store, Miami, 2018)

The Visit: “Off-White Has Taken Off”

On the afternoon of Saturday, March 8, 2025, I made my way to 8 Rue de Castiglione in Paris to visit the Off-White flagship store. Nestled between the historic Place Vendôme and the bustling Rue Saint-Honoré, the store’s location felt appropriate for a brand so invested in the conversation between luxury tradition and streetwear rebellion. The surrounding neighborhood is dense with symbols of Parisian prestige—glittering storefronts, carefully curated window displays, and the ever-present, muted hum of affluence.

As I approached the address, weaving past tourists and impeccably dressed locals, I anticipated the typical Off-White experience: bold visual gestures, architectural ingenuity, and perhaps a cheeky disruption of the street’s otherwise polished façade. Instead, I encountered absence. The store was unmistakably, and quite permanently, closed. The iconic Off-White logo still clung above the doorway, standing out with a kind of defiant inertia, but the windows were completely obscured with plain white adhesive film, blocking any view of the interior. The visual effect was unsettling—it felt as though the brand had begun erasing its presence from the location, but hadn’t fully completed the act of disappearance.

There was no entrance to step through, no threshold to cross. I lingered on the sidewalk, trying to reconstruct a sense of the store’s former identity from the few remnants left behind. The contrast was stark: the exterior still carried traces of Off-White’s past life, while the blanked-out windows suggested total erasure within. This dissonance was particularly striking given the brand’s former emphasis on visibility, transparency, and layered meaning. What had once been a site of over-articulated branding was now reduced to a silent, opaque façade—its messaging gone, its interior sealed off from view.



Figure 51. Photograph of the interior of the Off-White flagship store in Miami, 2018. Courtesy of Off-White.

Yet even in its dormant state, the space communicated something. There was an unintentional architecture at play—an architecture of vacancy. The empty shell of the boutique made a powerful statement about the implications of shutting down a space so intimately tied to an active, living brand identity. The store’s closure didn’t feel decisive or resolved; rather, it came across as incomplete, as if the space itself hadn’t yet accepted its new fate. The scene served as a quiet but haunting reminder that even brands built on constant reinvention and spectacle can fade into silence, leaving behind retail spaces that feel like glitches in the urban fabric—half-erased, not yet forgotten.

The Brand

Virgil Abloh (1980-2021) emerged as one of the most influential multidisciplinary figures of his generation, bridging art, architecture, fashion, and design. His educational background – beginning with a degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and culminating in a Master’s in Architecture from the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) – laid the foundation for his hybrid approach to creativity. At IIT, under the lingering influence of Mies van der Rohe’s Bauhaus principles, Abloh absorbed a philosophy that emphasized the fusion of art, craft, and technology. This education instilled in him a belief that architecture’s true power could extend far beyond the traditional act of erecting buildings (Keighran & Nielsen, 2021).

A defining articulation of this belief came in 2017, when Abloh delivered his lecture “Everything in Quotes” at Columbia University. Speaking to a new generation of architecture students, he provocatively argued: “Young architects can change the world by not building buildings”. Having experienced early in his studies the discouraging acknowledgment that only a few graduates would ever build, Abloh chose to see this as an opportunity rather than a limitation. His professional trajectory thereafter – into fashion, music, art, and design – demonstrated how architectural thinking could inform spaces, systems, and experiences outside conventional architectural practice (Keighran & Nielsen, 2021).



Figure 52. Photograph of the interior of the Off-White flagship store in Miami, 2018. Courtesy of Off-White.

Although he never worked as a traditional architect, Abloh's influence on spatial design was profound. His projects consistently revealed an architect's sensitivity to materiality, structure, and public interaction. In 2012, he founded Off-White, a fashion and home goods label that became synonymous with deconstructivist aesthetics and cultural commentary. Alongside his work for Kanye West's Donda agency and his historic appointment as the first Black artistic director at Louis Vuitton, Abloh redefined the possibilities for applying architectural training across fields (Keighran & Nielsen, 2021).

Abloh's skepticism towards traditional retail models was also rooted in his critical approach to space. His often quoted remark, "Stores are corny," reflected a deeper understanding of how traditional retail environments often fail to engage meaningfully with consumers. Abloh's spaces rejected the high-pressure atmosphere of typical luxury boutiques. Instead of aggressively selling products, they created conditions for discovery and experience, allowing visitors to move through spaces that felt curated rather than commercialized. His approach aligned with broader shifts in retail, as brands struggled to adapt to the realities of a digital-first consumer culture. Unlike others that awkwardly inserted digital technology into physical stores, Abloh's designs wove technological awareness and cultural storytelling into the very fabric of the spatial experience (Wray, 2017).

This philosophy found full expression in Off-White's 2018 flagship store in Miami's Design District, designed in collaboration with Samir Bantal, director of AMO. When visiting the Miami store, one immediately senses the difference: the space resists categorization as purely commercial or purely cultural. It blends showroom, fulfillment center, and event venue into one fluid environment. The architectural design does not impose a fixed narrative on visitors but instead offers multiple ways to engage – with products, with ideas, and with each other. Walking through the space, it becomes evident that Abloh's architectural training, coupled with his broader cultural insights, enabled him to design retail environments that responded to the contemporary condition of fluid, networked experience (Gibson, 2020a).



Figure 53. Photograph of the interior of the Off-White flagship store in Miami, 2018. Courtesy of Off-White.

Abloh often emphasized that his generation possessed unique tools to democratize creativity. “We can unveil the mask, give the kids the tools, and let them create,” he declared at Columbia. His work in retail design reflected this ethos: he created spaces that did not merely serve commercial functions but encouraged exploration, participation, and agency. As a visitor, one could feel this intention materialize – not through heavy-handed messaging, but through the very spatial strategies he deployed. In this way, Abloh’s architectural thinking came through powerfully: not by building traditional monuments, but by crafting environments where new kinds of creative and cultural exchange could occur (Keighran & Nielsen, 2021).

The Concept

Virgil Abloh consistently challenged the traditional boundaries between creative fields, proposing a vision of architecture not confined to the act of building but as a broader cultural methodology. His conviction that architectural principles could extend into fashion, art, and product design fundamentally shaped his career and the development of his brand Off-White (Gibson, 2020a).

Entering an Off-White store – even before engaging with any products – feels like entering an experimental spatial concept. Abloh’s rejection of rigid disciplinary borders is noticeable: the environment immediately communicates that architecture can be lived, worn, and experienced rather than merely observed. His idea of the “architecture brain” – the capacity to think systematically about space, form, and interaction – is manifest well beyond the traditional practice of designing buildings (Gibson, 2020b).

Abloh’s collaboration with AMO further amplified this interdisciplinary ethos. Describing AMO as a “nucleus” of contemporary architectural thinking, Abloh found in their conceptual approach a mirror to his own expansive understanding of design. The Off-White flagship store in Miami’s Design District, a project born from this collaboration, materializes these ideas vividly. Approaching the store, located amidst Miami’s highly stylized luxury retail landscape, it resists the hyper-polished commercial aesthetic typical of the area. Its physical identity – raw,



Figure 54. Photograph of the interior of the Off-White flagship store in Miami, 2018. Courtesy of Off-White.

flexible, almost provisional – sets it apart even before stepping inside (Gibson, 2020b).

The interior experience reinforces this sense of deliberate ambiguity. Far from a traditional retail layout, the space functions as an adaptable platform: hosting exhibitions, fashion shows, discussions, and, incidentally, offering products for sale. Walking through, one cannot ignore that Abloh's question during the design process – “What does architecture mean today?” – was not rhetorical but actively at work. The store's spatial arrangements invite fluid movement, casual gathering, and unexpected encounters, thereby subverting the expectation of linear consumption (Gibson, 2020b).

The design process, as described by Abloh and Samir Bantal of AMO, embodied an iterative, collaborative ethos: “Let's put something on paper, let's start challenging it” (Gibson, 2020b). Traditional commercial markers – the cash wrap, promotional signage, window displays – were downplayed, while open, transformable areas encouraged engagement beyond the transactional. In a time dominated by e-commerce, the Miami flagship proposes a hybrid model: it is a fulfillment center, a showroom, a community hub (Gibson, 2020a).

Abloh's broader practice reinforced this approach. His collaboration with AMO on *Figures of Speech* (2019) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, his Off-White home collection, and even projects like the customized Mercedes-Benz G-Class all demonstrated his commitment to using architecture as a conceptual lens through which to reframe cultural production (Gibson, 2020b).

Central to Abloh's practice was also a profound commitment to diversity as a driver of innovation. As he and Bantal articulated, diversity was not merely a political statement but an essential condition for creative vitality. “We have authority to put our ideas to the forefront without having to run them through a filter,” Abloh affirmed, recognizing the importance of authentic representation in shaping new cultural narratives (Gibson, 2020b).

Addressing contemporary issues such as sustainability and social equity was also part of Abloh and Bantal's agenda. They questioned architecture's traditional



Figure 55. Photograph of the façade of the Off-White flagship store in Miami, 2018. Courtesy of Off-White.

service to narrow demographics, advocating instead for spaces that could foster broader accessibility and resilience (Gibson, 2020b).

The fundamental question that underpinned their collaboration – “Is shopping relevant?” – is keenly felt throughout the space. The store resists easy answers. Instead, it operates as an experimental ground where commerce is one possibility among many, subordinate to a larger cultural mission. As Abloh summarized, the store “will be what the environment needs it to be.” This sense of spatial adaptability, more than any single design feature, was where the designer’s intention most clearly came through (Gibson, 2020a).

Across his collaborations with AMO and beyond, Abloh demonstrated how architecture, when freed from traditional expectations, could reframe the ways we experience art, fashion, music, and everyday life. His work exemplified a generative model of interdisciplinarity – one in which the boundaries between fields were not simply blurred but actively reimaged (Gibson, 2020a).

The Store

Located at 127 NE 41st Street in Miami’s Design District, the Off-White flagship store is a striking presence among the area’s luxury boutiques. Spanning two stories and covering 262 square meters, the store was conceived not merely as a point of sale but as a hybrid space where art, community engagement, and commerce intersect (*Off-White Flagship Store Miami*, 2018).

The building’s exterior, made of opaque polycarbonate, presents a bold, monolithic figure. The material’s translucent quality creates a diffuse glow, softening the structure’s weight while maintaining a strong visual identity. Prominently featured is a graphic of two hands raised with an orange-red “X” over the word “SHOP” – a clear commentary on the nature of consumerism itself. This image, layered with Off-White’s familiar branding, resists traditional commercial signage, communicating instead a sense of critical distance. The use of a movable wall along the façade further underlines the space’s intended flexibility: when open, it transforms the front into an accessible plaza for events, thus blurring the threshold between public space and private retail. This gesture



Figure 56. Photograph of the interior of the Off-White flagship store in Miami, 2018. Courtesy of Off-White.

immediately resonated with Abloh's ambition to dismantle rigid disciplinary boundaries (*Off-White Flagship Store Miami*, 2018).

Upon entering, the interior's minimalist, industrial atmosphere further reframes expectations of what a fashion store can be. Lightly stained concrete floors and corrugated metal walls evoke the raw pragmatism of a fulfillment center rather than the polished luxury of a typical boutique. Mesh ceilings with tubular lighting, stainless steel display units, and marble shelving in black Marquina and white Carrara created a dialogue between the utilitarian and the refined. Moving through the space, the aesthetic choices intentionally make the merchandise secondary to the experience of the architecture itself (*Off-White Flagship Store Miami*, 2018).

One of the most notable aspects of the store's interior is its kinetic potential. Almost every element – from shelving to display units – is mounted on wheels or designed to breakdown, facilitating rapid reconfiguration. This adaptability is not incidental but central to the store's concept as a dynamic, evolving platform rather than a fixed retail environment. Even the transparent, glass-enclosed 41-square-meter stockroom underscores this philosophy, making visible the operational back-end traditionally hidden from view and emphasizing the space's functional transparency (*Off-White Flagship Store Miami*, 2018).

A striking visual counterpoint within the largely muted palette is the electric blue staircase leading to the upper floor. Its boldness recalls Miami's iconic neon landscape, embedding a local cultural reference within the otherwise global, minimalist language of the design. Ascending the staircase, the first floor, intended for more intimate events such as private dinners or small gatherings, feels more secluded, reinforcing the store's secondary function as a site for deeper brand immersion and community-building (Gibson, 2020a).

Inside, the minimalism serves more than aesthetic restraint: it creates a mutable canvas for rotating artworks and installations. This decision not only supports Off-White's identity as a brand situated at the intersection of fashion and contemporary art but also reflects a deeper commitment to cultural dialogue.



Figure 57. Photograph of the Louis Vuitton Fall/Winter 2021 fashion show in Paris, 2021. Courtesy of Louis Vuitton.

Materials, spatial organization, and programmatic flexibility all cohere into a space designed to evolve with time and context, resisting fixed definition (Gibson, 2020a).

The way the store interfaces with the urban environment is particularly telling of Abloh's intentions. The movable polycarbonate façade allows the building's public face to transform depending on its use. As Bantal described: "You almost push everything that is retail and compress it in the space behind... the façade opens the front of the store to be used for any function." Standing in front of the fully open façade, the architecture performs as both a storefront and a public forum, enacting a fluid relationship between brand, city, and citizen (Gibson, 2020a).

The store is not simply a vessel for selling products but a living space for cultural experimentation, community interaction, and critical engagement with the rituals of consumption. It embodies Abloh's broader project of rethinking how architecture can operate in the contemporary world: not as a static monument, but as an adaptable, participatory framework for social life.

The Sequel

Virgil Abloh's impact on contemporary fashion, particularly in the realm of streetwear and the advancement of Black creatives within the industry, is both profound and lasting. His career was defined by a consistent effort to dismantle traditional disciplinary boundaries, blending fashion, architecture, art, and design into a unified, multidimensional practice (Adams, 2023). This interdisciplinary approach was not merely aesthetic; it was grounded in Abloh's architectural education, which endowed his work with a distinctive structural logic and conceptual rigor that set him apart from his contemporaries.

This architectural sensibility was evident not only in Abloh's fashion collections but also in the environments he designed for presenting his work. In the Louis Vuitton Spring/Summer 2019 menswear collection, for example, Abloh transformed the runway into an immersive urban landscape. Graffiti-inspired prints and clear, layered fabrics evoked the material textures of city life, creating a space that felt more like an experiential architectural installation than a

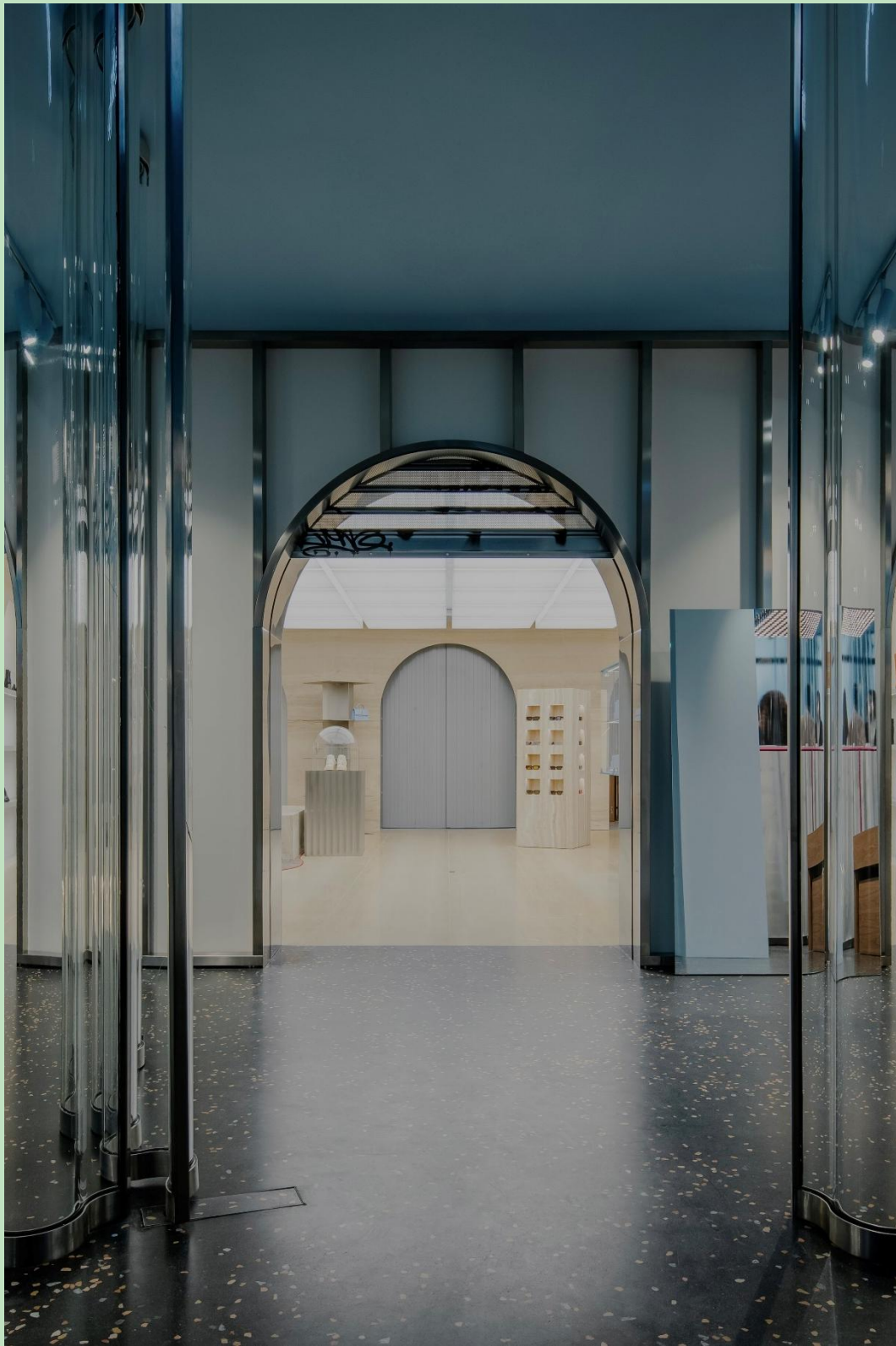


Figure 58. Photograph of the interior of the (former) Off-White flagship store on Rue de Castiglione in Paris, 2021. Photograph by Benoit Florençon.

conventional fashion show (Adams, 2023). Attending one of his shows – or in my case, viewing documentation of them – highlighted how the garments were not isolated objects but integral parts of a broader environmental narrative.

Abloh's architectural references became even more explicit in his Fall/Winter 2021 Louis Vuitton menswear collection, where he paid homage to Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich's Barcelona Pavilion. The show's staging – emerald-green marble walls, Barcelona chairs, and a minimalist formal vocabulary – established a direct dialogue with one of modern architecture's canonical works. The garments themselves, such as oversized puffer jackets printed with images of the Eiffel Tower, intertwined urban iconography with the textures and forms of modernist design. Abloh was not simply layering references for aesthetic effect; he was constructing spatial narratives that challenged viewers to rethink the relationship between body, clothing, and environment (Adams, 2023).

Abloh's commitment to integrating fashion, architecture, and cultural specificity was equally apparent in his retail designs. The Off-White flagship store in Paris, opened in 2021, stood as a testament to his ability to create spaces that are not only functional but also narratively and contextually rich. Housed in a 19th-century building near Place Vendôme, Abloh skillfully layered historical references with contemporary interventions to produce a dynamic, immersive experience across three distinct levels (*Off-White Flagship Store Paris*, 2021).

Upon entering from Rue de Castiglione, visitors were greeted by a semi-circular vestibule constructed from corrugated glass, which led into a reinterpretation of a traditional Parisian courtyard. Framed by arches modeled after the neighborhood's iconic porticos and clad in white travertine, the courtyard served as a serene stage for the women's collection while retaining the flexibility to transform into a venue for performances or installations (*Off-White Flagship Store Paris*, 2021).

The store's dual entrances created a distinct spatial dialogue: the Rue du Mont Thabor side, with its light blue walls, black terrazzo floors, and AMO-designed furnishings, felt livelier and more experimental, showcasing Off-White's



Figure 59. Photograph of the interior of the (former) Off-White flagship store on Rue de Castiglione in Paris, 2021. Photograph by Benoit Florençon.

collaborations and streetwear ethos. Meanwhile, the quieter, more refined Castiglione side spoke to the brand's high-fashion ambitions. This contrast was not accidental; it embodied Off-White's identity as both a luxury and streetwear label, seamlessly integrated within a single architectural narrative (*Off-White Flagship Store Paris*, 2021).

Ascending the staircase reinforced the experiential layering of the space. The mezzanine, with its compressed ceilings, created an intimate environment for the display of Off-White's kids' and homeware collections, punctuated by curated exhibition walls. The second floor, more expansive and filled with natural light, housed the men's collection. Here, a foldable red box containing a hidden bar and storage underscored the space's inherent flexibility, allowing it to be easily adapted for concerts, art exhibitions, or other. The use of metallic racks, wooden tables, and travertine shelving created a tactile richness that evoked a modern reinterpretation of the Parisian flea market – a subtle but pointed commentary on the intersections of commerce, culture, and everyday life events (*Off-White Flagship Store Paris*, 2021).

Abloh's architectural thinking was not a background influence but a driving force, shaping how collections were experienced, how retail environments were navigated, and how fashion itself could engage with broader social and historical contexts. Through his synthesis of fashion, architecture, and cultural commentary, he redefined what it means to be a designer in the 21st century, leaving a legacy that continues to challenge and inspire (Adams, 2023; *Off-White Flagship Store Paris*, 2021).



Figure 60. Photograph of the façade of the Alexander McQueen flagship store on Old Bond Street in London, 2025. Photograph by author.

F DOMESTIC LABYRINTH

Alexander McQueen by Smiljan Radić

(Flagship Store, London, 2019)

The Visit: “Design Déjà Vu”

On a sunny Monday morning, February 3, 2025, I made my way to the Alexander McQueen store in New York City. Set within Manhattan’s bustling retail landscape, the storefront projected an austere yet elegant presence. Its muted tones and minimalist signage established a serious, almost reverent mood—one that subtly aligned with the refined façades of neighboring luxury brands. As I approached the entrance, the usual street noise seemed to recede. The exterior design had a calming effect, as if it were intentionally muffling the chaos outside and preparing visitors for a more contemplative experience inside.

When the door attendant opened the heavy entrance door and I stepped inside, the store interior gradually unfolded before me. The environment felt like a meticulously staged world apart—pristine, sculptural, and charged with a theatrical kind of tension. Every surface and every line of sight seemed deliberately composed. I had hoped to see the insect installation that had once animated the store’s window display, but a staff member explained that the piece had been removed following the appointment of a new creative director. Without the installation, the mood of the space had shifted slightly, but the core essence of McQueen’s vision still lingered. At the center of the boutique, a monumental sculptural element dominated the room, anchoring the entire space with a magnetic, almost gravitational intensity.

During my visit, the store was nearly empty—just me and the quietly attentive staff. The silence felt strange at first, amplifying the impression that I was walking through a private gallery rather than a commercial retail space. But the solitude proved a gift: it allowed me to engage slowly and fully with the store’s physicality—the way light danced across textured walls, the cold glint of marble blocks, the



Figure 61. Photograph of the interior of the Alexander McQueen flagship store on Old Bond Street in London, 2023. Courtesy of Johnson Pinney Architects.

deep richness of dark wooden surfaces. The overall atmosphere walked a fine line between stark austerity and rich sensuality, a spatial translation of McQueen's unique design language.

Six weeks later, on a clear Saturday morning in London, I found myself outside another Alexander McQueen boutique—this one on Old Bond Street. Even from across the street, the store's visual identity was unmistakable. Tucked among Mayfair's grand Georgian façades, this location echoed the same refined restraint I had encountered in New York. Despite feeling ill and less alert than usual, I found myself drawn toward the entrance by a kind of muscle memory, compelled by familiarity.

Crossing the threshold in London was like stepping into a parallel version of the New York store. The interior mirrored its transatlantic counterpart almost exactly—identical in tone, material palette, and spatial rhythm, despite the 6,000 kilometers between them. The same sculptural centerpiece, the same quiet drama in the lighting, the same careful orchestration of ambient scent and sound—every detail had been replicated with precision. In my feverish state, that consistency felt strangely comforting. It was as though the brand had created a portal from one global city to another, ensuring a seamless continuity of experience regardless of geography. Even without the clarity of full attention, I could sense that the essential DNA of Alexander McQueen—the dramatic restraint, the tactile reverence for craftsmanship—had traveled flawlessly across continents, unfazed by distance or time.

The Brand

Alexander McQueen launched his eponymous label in 1992, quickly establishing a reputation for redefining the boundaries of fashion. His training in traditional British tailoring, particularly his time on London's Savile Row, instilled in him a technical precision that he consistently disrupted with theatricality and conceptual provocation. McQueen's runway shows – such as “Highland Rape” and “Plato's Atlantis” – became emblematic of his ability to intertwine personal memory, historical trauma, and dramatic spectacle, using fashion not simply as

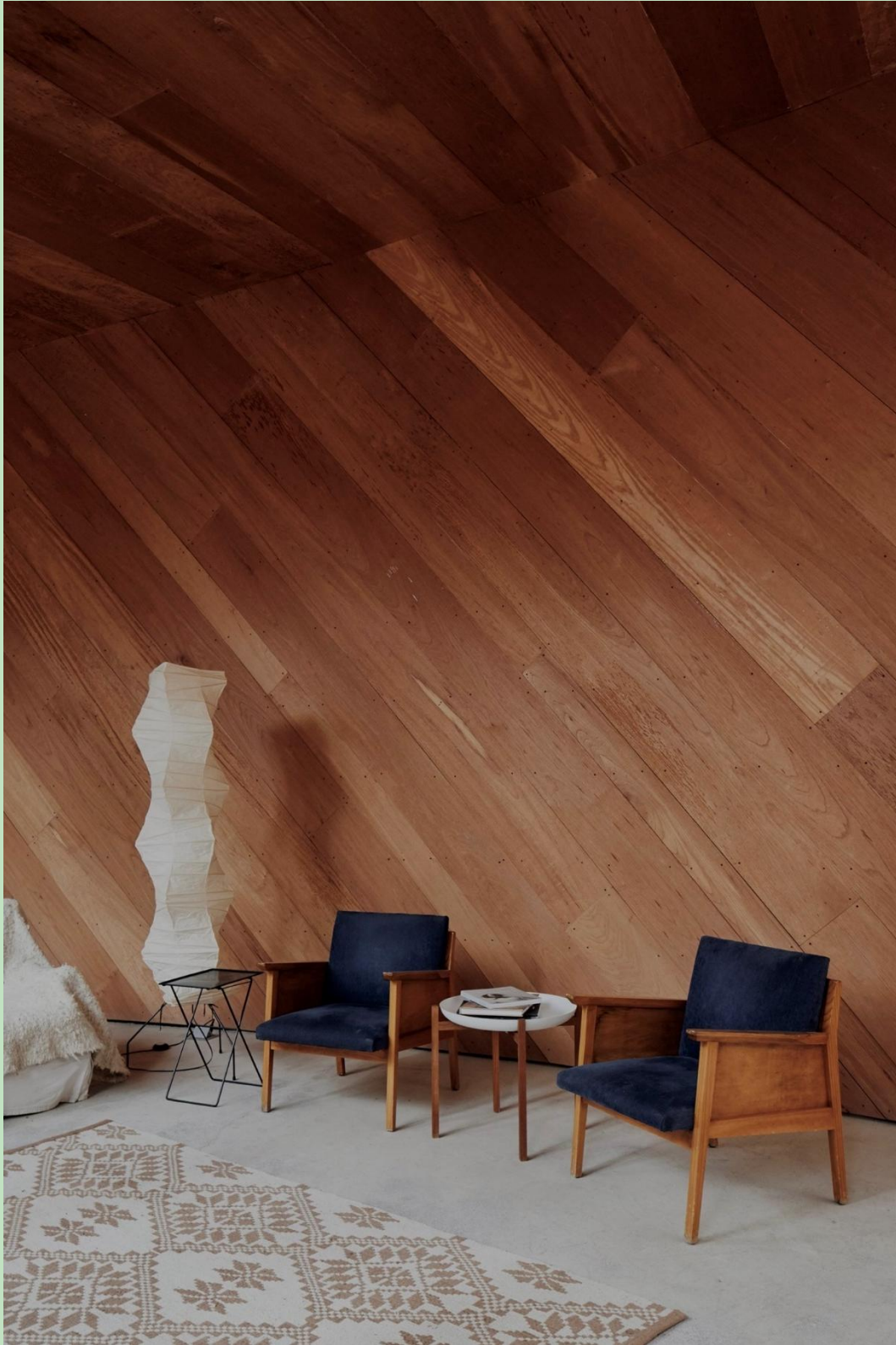


Figure 62. Photograph of the interior of the House for the Poem of the Right Angle in Vilches, Chile, 2012. Photograph by Cristobal Palma.

adornment, but as a vehicle for emotional intensity and critical commentary (*Alexander McQueen – an Introduction*, 2017).

Following McQueen's passing in 2010, Sarah Burton, a longtime collaborator within the brand, assumed the role of creative director. Over more than a decade, Burton carefully evolved McQueen's vision, maintaining its core emphasis on craftsmanship, narrative, and emotional depth while inflecting it with her own sensibilities. In 2023, Seán McGirr succeeded her, marking a new chapter in the brand's ongoing transformation. Nevertheless, the essential McQueen identity – an interplay between sharp tailoring, conceptual rigor, and theatrical presentation – has remained intact, even as the brand continues to evolve (*Alexander McQueen – an Introduction*, 2017).

A critical evolution in McQueen's spatial identity emerged in 2012, when Chilean architect Smiljan Radić designed a house in Vilches, Chile, loosely inspired by Le Corbusier's book *The Poem of the Right Angle* (1955). Radić's approach was unconventional: the house, composed of black concrete with uneven proportions, suspended furniture, and sculptures by Radić's wife and longtime collaborator, Marcela Correa, functioned as a hybrid between a domestic space and an installation. Its three expansive roof lights and asymmetrical forms created an environment that felt simultaneously sheltering and secretive. Radić described the project as a site where architecture, human presence, and art objects coexist without hierarchy – a description that resonates deeply with McQueen's own blending of form, content, and emotional atmosphere (*Alexander McQueen Store Design by Smiljan Radic*, 2019; Jordan, 2022).

Sarah Burton's invitation to Radić to redesign the Alexander McQueen flagship store on Old Bond Street in London thus reflected a deliberate alignment of sensibilities. Visiting the store today, it is immediately evident how Radić's architectural language has been woven into the brand's retail identity. As one approaches the store from the historic thoroughfare of Old Bond Street, the façade presents a restrained presence, with expansive continuous windows that offer an unobstructed view into the interior. Upon entering, the space unfolds with sculptural irregularity, textured materials, and unexpected sightlines.



Figure 63. Photograph of the interior of the Alexander McQueen flagship store on Old Bond Street in London, 2023. Courtesy of Johnson Pinney Architects.

The interior recalls Radić's earlier work in Vilches – not simply through material choices, but in the way space is treated as a narrative medium. Walking through the store, one senses that garments are not merely displayed but are situated within a carefully composed environment that invites slower movement, closer attention, and a heightened awareness of spatial relationships. The absence of rigid symmetry, the interplay of polished and raw surfaces, and the subtle integration of sculptural forms all contribute to a setting that feels simultaneously curated and organic (*Alexander McQueen Store Design by Smiljan Radic*, 2019).

This is not a neutral commercial backdrop, but an immersive environment that frames McQueen's collections as part of a larger aesthetic and conceptual dialogue. It reflects a continuation of the brand's commitment to unsettling expectations – not only in the clothes themselves but in the very space where they are encountered (*Alexander McQueen Store Design by Smiljan Radic*, 2019).

The Concept

The Alexander McQueen flagship store on Old Bond Street in London opened in 2019 as a deliberate challenge to traditional retail norms. Visible from the street yet situated within the store, natural stones are scattered across the space, creating an atmosphere that feels both uncanny and theatrical. This use of materials blurs the boundary between the authentic and the artificial, an intentional move by Radić, who noted that architecture rarely operates within fixed categories of “real” or “fake” (Fischli et al., 2021: 260).

Radić's design draws on theatrical principles but grounds them firmly within architectural reasoning. My own experience of moving through the store reflects this dual intention: the objects, from the rocks to the mannequins and fitting rooms, are not organized along conventional, predictable lines. Instead, they are scattered in a seemingly haphazard way that encourages exploration. There is a subtle sense of disorientation, but not discomfort; it is as if the space invites visitors to lose their bearings momentarily in order to engage more deeply with the garments and the atmosphere. In this sense, Radić's aim to create a global

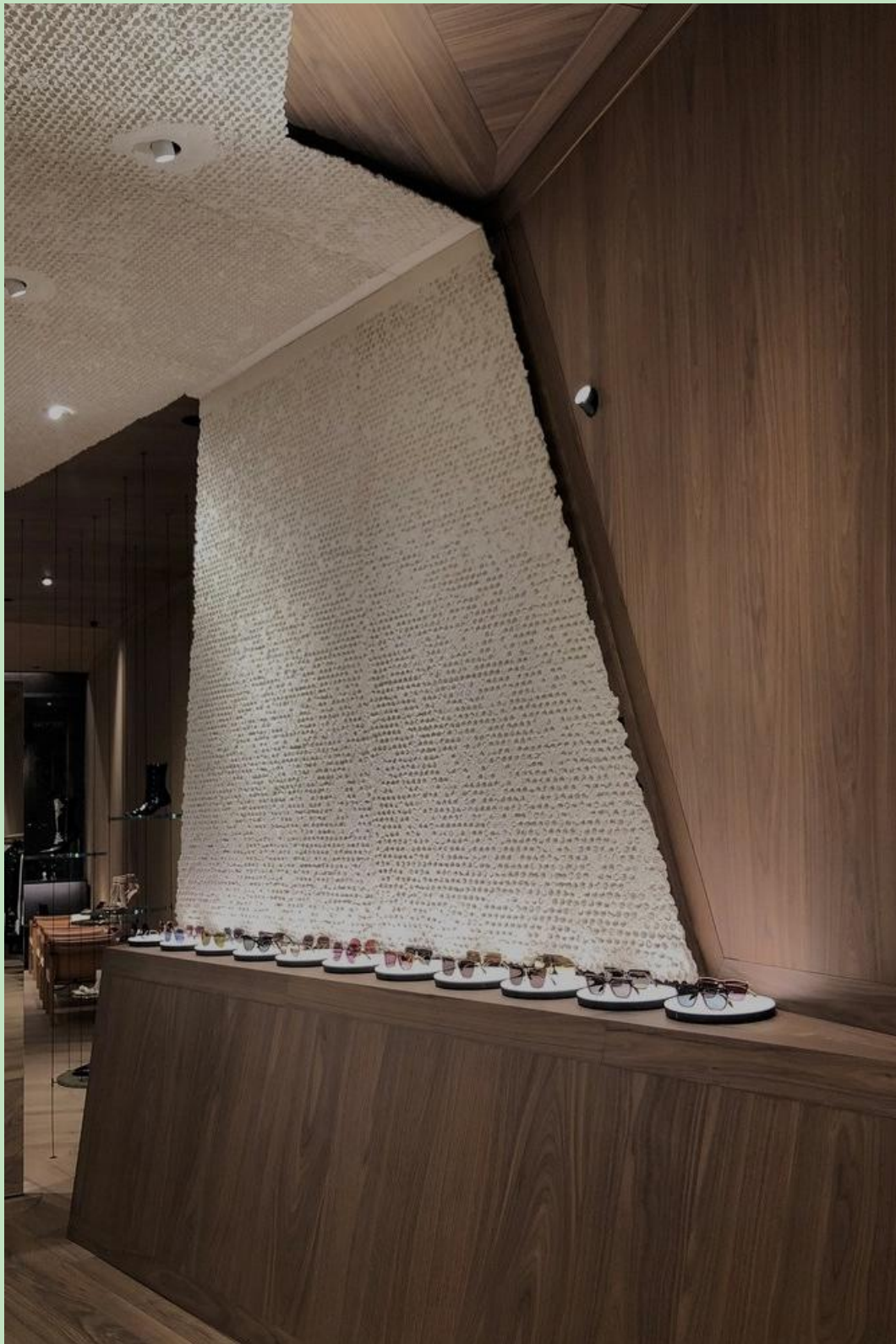


Figure 64. Photograph of the interior of the Alexander McQueen flagship store on Old Bond Street in London, 2023. Courtesy of Johnson Pinney Architects.

vocabulary that is site-responsive and yet adaptable comes through (Fischli et al., 2021: 260).

In conversation about the wider state of retail architecture, Radić emphasized his resistance to trends. He approaches each project individually, much like any other architectural commission, rejecting the formulaic, commercially-driven designs typical of luxury retail. His critique of standard retail environments – where only surface materials change seasonally while layouts remain static – resonates strongly with the store's refusal to guide customers along rigid, preordained paths. The spatial experience is not designed for rapid consumption but for slow navigation, encouraging a personal relationship with the products (Fischli et al., 2021: 260).

Radić also noted his fascination with artifacts from the Radical Design Movement, recognizing that although the movement's emphasis on temporary architectural gestures aligns with the inherent impermanence of retail, its political critique of consumerism remains at odds with the aims of a luxury brand (Fischli et al., 2021: 261). Even so, as one moves through the McQueen store, a tangible tension between permanence and ephemerality emerges: the rough stones, the play of shifting light across textured surfaces, and the provisional quality of the spatial arrangement all point to an environment that welcomes change rather than opposing it.

The theme of impermanence extends beyond aesthetic choices. Radić, drawing from his Chilean background where non-permanence is embedded in the architectural tradition, considers impermanence as a pragmatic, even necessary condition in an era of global instability. He speculates that architecture's future may oscillate between ephemeral structures and hyper-durable forms designed to withstand environmental extremes (Fischli et al., 2021: 261).

Radić and Sarah Burton described their design concept as a “domestic labyrinth,” an idea that is immediately perceptible when visiting. The store layout encourages intuitive movement, as if navigating a private landscape rather than a commercial showroom. Rather than orchestrating a direct route from entrance to checkout,



Figure 65. Photograph of the interior of the Alexander McQueen flagship store on Old Bond Street in London, 2023. Courtesy of Johnson Pinney Architects.

the space unfolds unpredictably, fostering moments of discovery and intimacy with the products. Where luxury often imposes distance, here the material palette, spatial organization, and subdued theatricality cultivate a sense of welcome and connection. As Radić remarked, the project sought to “redefine luxury” not through ostentatious display, but by creating a new spatial context for it – one that prioritizes emotional engagement over spectacle (Jordan, 2022).

The Old Bond Street flagship stands as a tangible realization of Radić’s architectural thinking and Burton’s vision for McQueen: a space where theatricality is tempered by intimacy, where the familiar is made strange, and where the conventional language of luxury is quietly, but decisively, rewritten.

The Store

Smiljan Radić’s architectural language is fundamentally shaped by an engagement with organic forms and raw, unrefined materials. His design philosophy draws deeply from the natural world, taking inspiration from the irregular curves of tree trunks, the rough surfaces of rocks, and the shifting qualities of natural light. Radić’s work consistently explores themes of material transparency, spatial delicacy, and the grounding presence of mass, producing buildings that can feel either as light as an iridescent shell or as monumental as structures resting precariously atop giant boulders (Hawkins, 2022b). At a time when urban life increasingly distances people from natural landscapes, Radić’s architectural sensibility seems particularly timely, offering a reconnection to elemental experiences of space and material.

This commitment to natural materiality and organic formality is strongly evident in Radić’s House for the Poem of the Right Angle, a residential project utilizing wood, concrete, and granite in unexpected ways. These same materials – reimagined and recontextualized – reappear in the Alexander McQueen flagship store on Old Bond Street, London. Visiting the store, one immediately senses a deliberate departure from the typical visual language of luxury fashion retail, which often prioritizes spectacle and excess. Instead, the space emphasizes restraint, tactility, and intimacy with materials (Clark, 2020).



Figure 66. Photograph of the interior of the Alexander McQueen flagship store on Old Bond Street in London, 2023. Courtesy of Johnson Pinney Architects.

Moving through the store, the influence of sculptor Marcela Correa becomes apparent. Correa's sculptural interventions – abstract forms resembling rocks and tree trunks – punctuate the store's interior, subtly directing the visitor's path through the space (Clark, 2020). During my visit, these sculptural elements did not feel merely ornamental; they became part of the navigational logic of the store, anchoring the layout and offering points of rest and reflection amidst the flow of garments and displays. The positioning of these sculptures underlines Radić's spatial strategy: rather than guiding visitors through a strict commercial sequence, the store invites a more intuitive, exploratory movement, akin to wandering through a curated natural landscape.

The integration between architecture and fashion at the McQueen flagship extends beyond static design. Each season, the interior configuration shifts to reflect and support the new collections, ensuring that the space and the clothing exist in dynamic dialogue (Clark, 2020). In my experience, this made the visit feel more like stepping into a living installation, where garments and environment coalesce into a single atmospheric experience.

The architectural choices resonate deeply with the enduring ethos of Alexander McQueen himself, whose work consistently intertwined fashion with the forces and aesthetics of the natural world. Burton preserved and extended this connection in the store's design. The abundant use of oak and walnut, the modulation of natural light, and the earthy, muted tones create an ambiance that feels simultaneously luxurious and grounded – a woodland retreat within the heart of London's commercial district (Maoui, 2019). The calming effect of these choices stand in sharp contrast to the sensory overload typical of neighboring retail environments.

Architecturally, the McQueen store achieves a sense of seamless fluidity: walls, ceilings, and floors curve and fold into each other without sharp breaks, echoing the flowing silhouettes often found in McQueen's fashion collections. This spatial continuity enhances the feeling of immersion, allowing the visitor to experience the environment as an enveloping whole rather than a series of discrete zones. Importantly, the store is not just a vehicle for current collections; it also houses

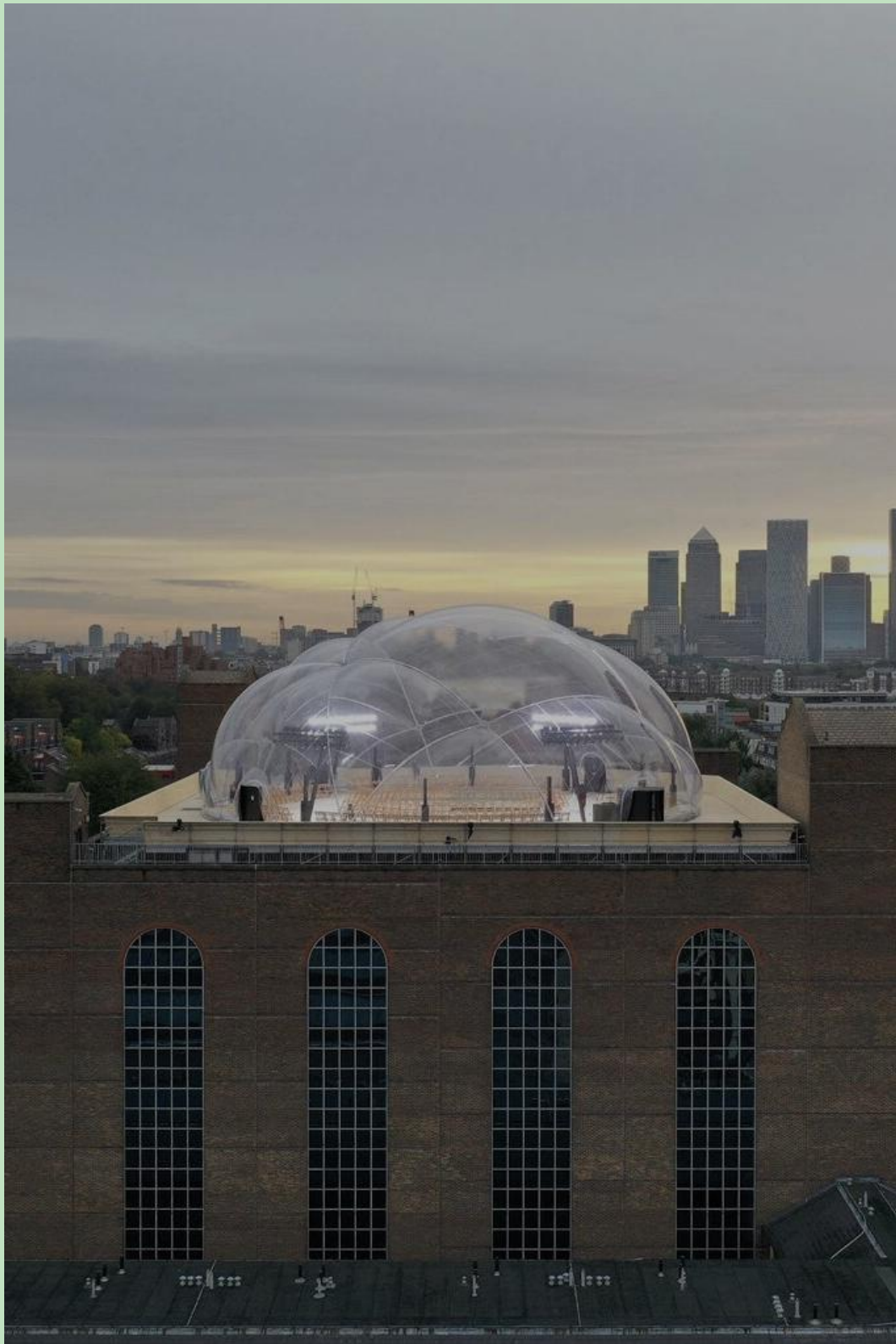


Figure 67. Photograph of the exterior of the Alexander McQueen Spring/Summer 2022 fashion show in London, 2021. Courtesy of Alexander McQueen.

the McQueen archives – past collections, photographs, and artworks – which enrich the visitor’s understanding of the brand’s ongoing narrative. Encountering these archives within the same fluid spatial language underscores the store’s dual role as both commercial space and site of memory, honoring the creative legacy of Alexander McQueen while continuing to evolve in dialogue with it (Maoui, 2019).

In this way, the space transcends traditional retail objectives to offer a richer, multi-sensory experience that mirrors McQueen’s lifelong project: to reconnect the human body, through design, to deeper natural and emotional forces.

The Sequel

In October 2021, Alexander McQueen returned to London to present its Spring/Summer 2022 womenswear collection after two decades of showcasing in Paris. The event, titled “London Skies,” was held atop Tobacco Dock’s car park in East London, marking both a symbolic and physical re-grounding of the brand. Smiljan Radić was commissioned to design the show’s setting: a transparent, cloud-like dome that floated above the city’s industrial landscape. The architectural concept drew directly from the view outside Sarah Burton’s studio windows – ever-changing skies that became a metaphor for emotional flux and creative renewal (Myers, 2021; Parkes, 2021a).

Upon entering the structure, visitors encountered an atmosphere that was strikingly different from conventional fashion venues. The space blurred the boundary between enclosure and exposure: the translucent membrane filtered the London light, allowing glimpses of the dynamic sky above while creating a contained, almost dreamlike environment inside. The fragility of the structure heightened the ephemeral qualities of the collection itself – light dresses floating like clouds, skirts imprinted with abstract weather patterns, and shimmering sequins that caught the light like falling rain. Radić’s dome allowed the natural instability of the weather to become part of the show, reinforcing Burton’s embrace of unpredictability and emotional openness – a concept she described as “storm chasing” (Hawkins, 2022a).



Figure 68. Photograph of the interior of the Alexander McQueen flagship store on Greene Street in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

The technical realization of the space was a collaborative effort between Radić, structural specialists ES Global, and the creative agency Gainsbury&Whiting. The design featured a raised platform to counter the sloping surface of the car park and exposed scaffolding that emphasized the provisional nature of the intervention. Steel cables held the structure's membrane in tension, giving it the appearance of gentle, organic expansion. Inside, simple wooden folding chairs were arranged in curved rows, while a set of utilitarian stairs led the models onto the platform. Moving through this space, one could not help but notice the deliberate contrast between the raw industrial base and the ethereal upper dome – a tension characteristic of Radić's broader architectural practice (Parkes, 2021a).

Further enhancing the project's sustainability ethos, the inflatable membrane was kept aloft by a continuous airflow system powered by a generator running on hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO). The revolving doors minimized air loss, and the entire installation was designed for disassembly and reuse, echoing McQueen's growing commitment to environmental responsibility. This careful consideration of lifecycle and material reusability not only aligned with Radić's architectural values but also provided a subtle critique of the typical excess associated with fashion spectacle (Parkes, 2021a).

The transparent structure reappeared in 2022 for McQueen's Spring/Summer show at the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich. Set against the formal lawns and historic architecture, the inflatable dome was again raised on scaffolding, this time reflecting the axial symmetry of the garden layout. The spatial experience felt more ceremonial and grounded, with backstage functions now tucked discreetly beneath the raised platform. Inside, the environment had evolved: minimalist white floors, half-walls, and plinths replaced the previous year's more ad hoc arrangement. The atmosphere suggested a purified, almost gallery-like quality that mirrored the thematic focus of the collection on emotional connection and human individuality, symbolized through the recurring motif of the eye (Parkes, 2022e).



Figure 69. Photograph of the interior of the Alexander McQueen flagship store on Greene Street in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

Radić's collaboration with Alexander McQueen extended beyond ephemeral runway installations into permanent retail spaces, notably the brand's 2020 flagship boutique in New York's SoHo district. The interior features alabaster slabs and oak and walnut surfaces, and used to feature a curtain embroidered with insect badges, creating an environment where organic references dominate the luxury retail setting. Particularly striking is the cylindrical dressing room: a glass chamber lined with a butterfly-embossed quilt, where a customer can pivot a cut-out for privacy. This interactive, almost playful feature exemplifies Radić's interest in blending material innovation with human-scale experiences (Abbas, 2020; Kelly, 2020).

Walking through the store, it became evident that the space resisted the expected tropes of opulence and distance. Instead, Radić's design approach emphasized intimacy, tactility, and connection – qualities that also underpinned the runway installations. The store, much like the shows, prioritizes engagement with the visitor's senses and emotions, fulfilling McQueen's broader goal of creating holistic, transformative environments that transcend the conventional boundaries of fashion presentation.

Through both temporary and permanent projects, Radić's architectural intentions – favoring organic materiality, structural transparency, and emotional resonance – are clearly articulated. My experience of these spaces confirmed that, in collaboration with Sarah Burton and the McQueen team, Radić expanded the brand's narrative into architecture – crafting spaces that feel simultaneously delicate and monumental, immediate and timeless.



Figure 70. Photograph of the façade of the Maison Margiela flagship store on Avenue Montaigne in Paris, 2025. Photograph by author.

G WHITE IS THE NEW BLACK

Maison Margiela by Studio Anne Holtrop

(Flagship Store, London, 2021)

The Visit: “Whispers in White Plaster”

On the afternoon of Saturday, March 8, 2025, I made my way down Avenue Montaigne, one of Paris’ most prestigious shopping streets, lined with heavyweights of haute couture. Behind one of the grand façades, the Maison Margiela boutique emerged almost discreetly, hiding in plain sight. There was no bold signage or lavish window display—only a quiet confidence in the store’s understated exterior that invited closer attention. Walking toward the door felt less like arriving at a major fashion house and more like stepping through the modest front yard of a private residence.

Inside the boutique, the din of the street disappeared, replaced by a hushed stillness that felt almost sacred. The interior revealed itself in a muted palette, defined by the pale textures of gypsum plaster. Scattered throughout the space were tall, chalky columns—seemingly relics from an unknown history. These vertical forms stood silently, serving no apparent function, existing purely as sculptural presences that neither guided nor obstructed one’s movement. Their strange, slightly ghostly character felt quintessentially Margiela: quietly radical, subtly disorienting, and entirely intentional. The layout of the boutique encouraged a fluid, meandering journey, prompting visitors to explore at a gentle, wandering pace. However, this serene rhythm was interrupted at the far end of the space, where the ceiling unexpectedly dropped. The lowered height compressed the room, breaking the otherwise consistent spatial harmony. Still, the visit remained immersive overall—an architectural manifestation of the brand’s language of quiet subversion.

Exactly one week later, on the morning of March 15, I found myself on Bruton Street in London’s Mayfair. The Georgian architecture of the neighborhood framed



Figure 71. Photograph of the façade of the Maison Margiela flagship store in London, 2025. Photograph by author.

the Maison Margiela store in a similarly understated way. Though I was feeling distinctly under the weather and unsure how much I could take in, the approach to the boutique felt inviting rather than intimidating—even in my foggy state of mind.

Once inside, the interior opened into a long, narrow plan that surprisingly never felt confining. Overhead, a series of skylights softened the atmosphere, filtering in gentle daylight that illuminated the pale surfaces and eased the compressed proportions of the layout. As I slowly moved through the store, a staff member noticed my tentative pace and kindly offered a guided walkthrough, pointing out subtle design elements I might have overlooked on my own. The gypsum columns were present in this space as well—the same enigmatic structures I had seen in Paris—now carrying their fragile weight and faint sense of melancholy into a new urban setting. In this context, they still felt entirely appropriate, as though they had always belonged to both cities simultaneously.

The London store, like its Parisian counterpart, preserved Margiela's world of quiet strangeness and worn beauty. Even through the haze of illness, the atmosphere was unmistakable: slightly detached, gently haunting, yet ultimately welcoming—a space that invited your attention without ever insisting upon it.

The Brand

Maison Margiela (MM) offers a compelling case study of how white is mobilized not simply as a visual element, but as a fundamental expression of the brand's identity. According to Maison Margiela: "White means the strength of fragility and the fragility of the passage of time. An expression of unity, purity and honesty. It is never just white." In this context, white is not neutral; it carries emotional and philosophical weight (Crewe, 2018: 20). During my visits to Margiela stores, it became immediately clear that white frames every experience: it is not an absence but a quiet, pervasive presence that governs how space, objects, and even the passage of time are perceived.

This conceptual use of white is reflected throughout Maison Margiela's retail environments, which deliberately break from conventional luxury retail models. Rather than functioning as mere backgrounds for merchandise, the interiors are



Figure 72. Photograph of the interior of the Maison Margiela flagship store in London, 2021. Photograph by Henry Bourne.

populated with numbers, objects, and fragments of text that seem only implicitly related to the clothing itself. It is an architecture of subtle disruption, and the experience is immersive. The staff, dressed uniformly in “blouses blanches” – white coats recalling both scientific laboratories and haute couture ateliers – reinforce this ethos of understated craftsmanship. In these spaces, identity is not imposed through spectacle, but quietly revealed through material and spatial choices (Crewe, 2018: 20).

Maison Margiela’s attitude toward fashion itself mirrors this approach to space. Deeply skeptical of conventional models of consumption, the brand places emphasis on recycling, repurposing, and reimagining garments. Wearing Margiela feels less like putting on a new item and more like inheriting an object already marked by another life. This philosophy extends to the store environments as well, which evoke the atmosphere of what founder Martin Margiela once described as “wastelands” or “warzones” – spaces of abandonment and potential rebirth (Crewe, 2018: 26). When moving through these interiors, with their rough textures and imperfect surfaces, the connection between garment and environment becomes tangible: both are treated as living structures that bear traces of time and use.

The brand’s strategic positioning within cities reinforces this ethos. Margiela boutiques are rarely located along the main commercial arteries; instead, they are tucked away on quieter side streets or in less immediately visible locations (Crewe, 2018: 28). I experienced this when trying to find the Bruton Street store in London – its muted exterior, devoid of logos or typical retail markers, required intentional searching and created a feeling of retreat from the consumer spectacle outside.

This same commitment to anonymity and deconstruction shapes Maison Margiela’s garments as well. Traditional branding is abandoned; instead, a numeric code replaces the designer’s name on each label. Collections like “Replica” and “Artisanal” further this concept by reconstructing vintage garments, emphasizing collective authorship over individual genius. Seams are left exposed, linings become exteriors, and materials are intentionally distressed, revealing the hidden

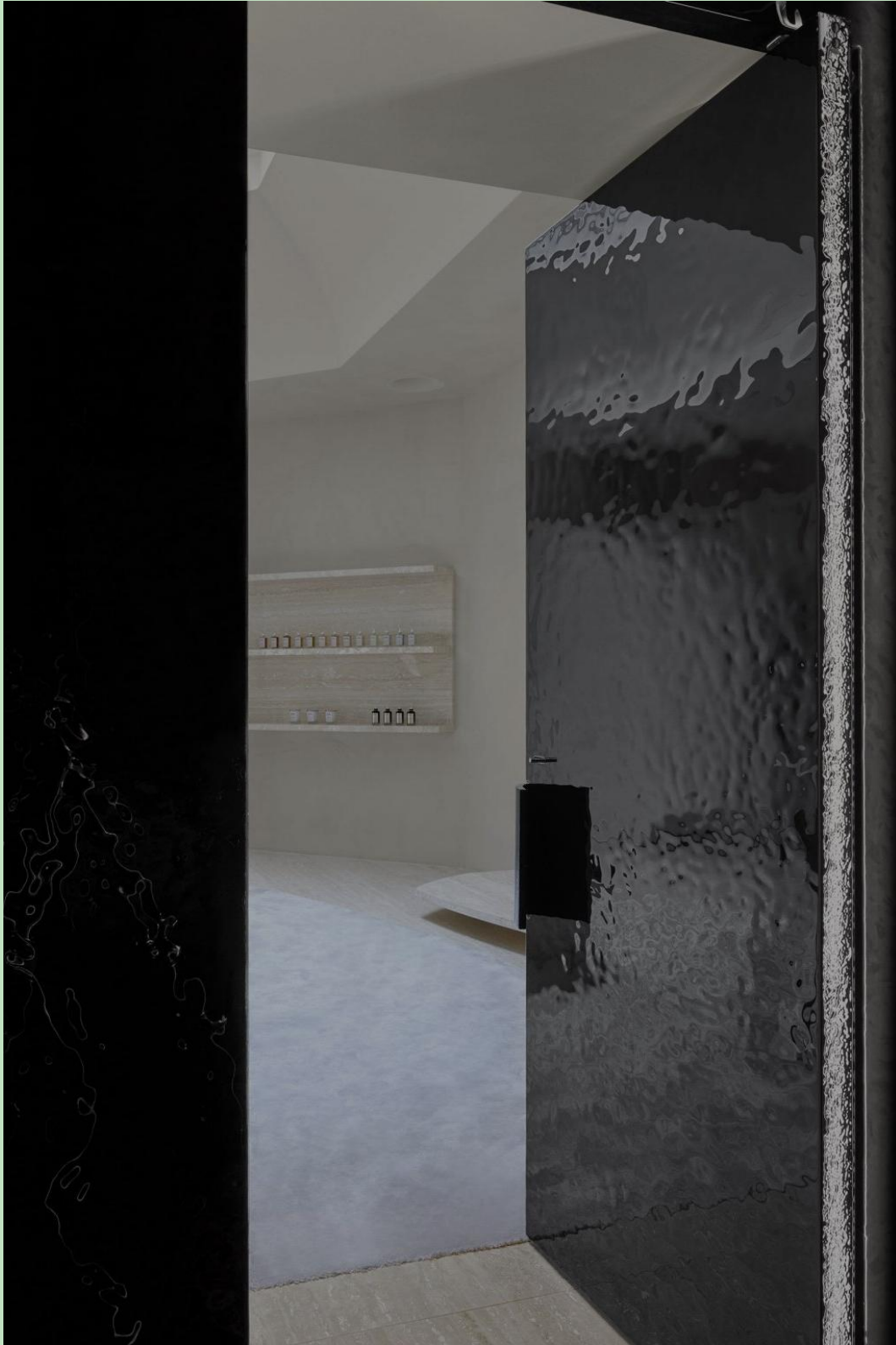


Figure 73. Photograph of the interior of the Maison Margiela flagship store in London, 2021. Photograph by Henry Bourne.

structures beneath. In Maison Margiela's universe, imperfection is not masked – it is celebrated (Menconi, 2021).

These core principles remained central throughout John Galiano's tenure as creative director from 2014 to 2024. The brand continued to challenge the polished surfaces typical of luxury fashion, instead offering garments and spaces that were intellectually provocative and emotionally resonant (Menconi, 2021).

The architectural articulation of these ideas has been powerfully extended through the work of Anne Holtrop, founder of Studio Anne Holtrop in Amsterdam. Holtrop's collaboration with the Maison in locations such as Paris, Osaka, Shanghai, and later Bruton Street in London, brings physical form to Martin Margiela's conceptual legacy (Hughes, 2021). In my experience, Holtrop's designs felt less like traditional interiors and more like carefully orchestrated interventions into the act of retail itself. Walls appeared like sculpted surfaces rather than rigid partitions – their plaster finishes carrying the imperfections of hand-making rather than the sterility of mass production. Walking through these spaces, the intention behind every gesture – every uneven texture, every slightly off-center alignment – was evident. Martin Margiela's ideals were physically, spatially enacted.

The Concept

Maison Margiela's reopening of its London flagship at 22 Bruton Street marks a significant moment in the evolution of the brand's architectural identity under John Galiano's creative direction. Designed by Studio Anne Holtrop, the boutique introduces a spatial language that translates the Maison's unconventional codes into architecture. The interior is cast in textured gypsum; this is not a store calling for attention but rather a space asking to be discovered. The design, first introduced in the Maison's "Artisanal" Fall/Winter 2018 show, appropriates the "inappropriate" – using raw, irregular materials typically deemed unsuitable for luxury spaces to create an atmosphere of transformation and authenticity (Hughes, 2021).

Studio Anne Holtrop's architectural approach builds directly on Margiela's aesthetic philosophy, particularly the ideas of "dressing in haste" and



Figure 74. Photograph of the interior of the Maison Margiela flagship store in London, 2021. Photograph by Henry Bourne.

“décortiqué” – concepts introduced by Galliano that emphasize spontaneity and the revelation of internal structures. The gypsum-cast elements, created with textile formwork, capture folds, creases, and softness usually absent from hard architectural materials. The walls and columns bear the imprints of their making, as if the fabric that once shaped them still whispers beneath the hardened surfaces. This method does not merely imitate Maison Margiela’s garment techniques; it transposes them materially into space, making the construction process part of the aesthetic experience (Fischli et al., 2021: 102).

From the outset of their collaboration, Galliano provided Holtrop with codes that defined Maison Margiela’s identity, including the “anonymity of the lining” and the aesthetic of the “décortiqué.” These codes served not merely as thematic guidelines but as operational principles for designing the spaces (Fischli et al., 2021: 100). In the Bruton Street store, these principles are physically felt: walls that seem inside-out, surfaces where structural processes are made visible, and an overall sense of garments and architecture sharing a common ontology of exposure and transformation.

This architectural translation of fashion’s experimental ethos became even more evident when considering the broader context of Galliano’s work. Holtrop recalls that after initial discussions, Galliano began integrating images of the gypsum casts into his own collections, particularly the “Artisanal” Fall/Winter 2018 show, where layered, nomadic silhouettes echoed the layered, semi-fluid qualities of the cast elements (Fischli et al., 2021: 100). During my time in the store, this resonance between fashion and architecture felt immediate; the plaster walls and the garments on display spoke the same tactile, layered language.

The importance of color, particularly the use of white, is also crucial to both the Maison’s and Anne Holtrop’s philosophies. White in this context is not a blank neutrality but an active materiality. Holtrop chose to work with naturally white materials – gypsum, white-stained travertine – allowing their intrinsic textures and imperfections to remain visible. Rather than masking the stone’s natural porosity with color-matched epoxy, a simple white epoxy was used, letting materiality take precedence over surface perfection (Fischli et al., 2021: 100). Walking through the



Figure 75. Photograph of the interior of the Maison Margiela flagship store in London, 2021. Photograph by Henry Bourne.

boutique, this commitment to authentic material presence felt consistent with the Maison's long-standing use of white to express fragility, honesty, and unity.

The pursuit of beauty through unexpected, even initially "inappropriate" combinations is another axis on which Holtrop's architecture aligns with Maison Margiela's radical fashion language. Holtrop himself notes that beauty often emerges from materials and forms that seem strange or uncomfortable at first glance. In the Bruton Street boutique, the rawness of the plaster surfaces, the uneven transitions between floor and wall, and the lingering sense of instability produce an unsettling, but ultimately captivating, environment. It is a beauty that reveals itself over time, demanding patience and attention – much like Martin Margiela's garments, which often challenge normative standards of elegance (Fischli et al., 2021: 101).

Central to the architectural concept is the use of textile formwork for casting gypsum elements. By sewing fabric into soft, suspended forms, and then pouring the plaster into these unstable molds, Studio Anne Holtrop allowed the material to shape itself within external constraints. The resulting columns and walls are unique, bearing individual traces of their making. This process-driven approach, aided by the work of Italian artisans, emphasized the variability and imperfection of the built environment, linking the architecture to the artisanal methods of the Maison's couture collections (Menconi, 2021).

The experience of walking through the store underscored how every surface felt alive with memory: folds, creases, and scars of the material's semi-fluid past remained etched into the solidified gypsum. Each wall and column had its own character, adapted to the specific space, ensuring that while a consistent architectural language unites Margiela boutiques globally, no two are identical (Menconi, 2021).

Maison Margiela's new boutique architecture, as implemented by Studio Anne Holtrop, thus represents not just a design refresh but a profound rearticulation of the brand's core principles into physical space. This approach is being extended across Maison Margiela stores worldwide, signaling a broader transformation in



Figure 76. Photograph of the interior of the Maison Margiela flagship store in London, 2021. Photograph by Henry Bourne.

how the Maison's radical fashion philosophy is embodied architecturally (Menconi, 2021).

The Store

The Maison Margiela boutique on Bruton Street in London occupies 190 square meters and presents the Maison's "Co-Ed" collections, encompassing both men's and women's ready-to-wear, alongside a curated selection of shoes, jewelry, and eyewear. Upon entering the space, the experience departs immediately from conventional retail environments. Rather than blending into the architecture as purely functional elements, the walls and columns assert themselves as independent sculptural presences. Moving through the store, one becomes aware that these structures are not neutral backdrops but active participants in the spatial narrative. Handmade and cast using textile molds, they distort familiar expectations of solidity and stability. Columns lean, fold, and bear subtle imprints of the soft fabrics that once shaped them, embodying the Maison's concept of "dressing in haste" through architectural means (A. Morris, 2021).

The tactile presence of the plaster surfaces is immediately striking: they preserve the textures of woven textiles, the slight puckers and folds of fabric, and even the incidental dents left by the casting process. Moving alongside these walls, the impulse to reach out and touch them feels almost inevitable. This material immediacy cultivates an unusually intimate relationship between visitor and space, emphasizing the manual processes central to both architecture and fashion-making. The natural, unfinished tone of the plaster reinforces Maison Margiela's characteristic use of white, resonating with the brand's ongoing theme of the "anonymity of the lining" – a minimalist yet profoundly expressive approach that redefines invisibility as a deliberate form of articulation (Hughes, 2021).

The furnishings extend this deconstructive logic. At first glance, they nod to classical forms, yet on closer inspection, they have been subtly reworked, distorted, or destabilized. Chairs and tables appear as if caught mid-collapse or mid-transformation, echoing the Maison's philosophy of revealing structure and process rather than concealing it. The application of the "décortiqué" approach is



Figure 77. Photograph of the interior of the Maison Margiela flagship store in London, 2021. Photograph by Henry Bourne.

particularly evident in the use of stained travertine: its porous surface is filled with white epoxy resin that deliberately highlights rather than hides the stone's natural flaws. This tension between solidity and fluidity, between permanence and imperfection, adds a compelling visual and conceptual depth to the environment (Hughes, 2021).

The fitting rooms, often overlooked in retail design, reveal yet another layer of the boutique's experiential intent. Finished in a deep, dark green, these spaces offer a moment of intimate retreat. Multiple layers of hand-brushed, high-gloss paint create a shimmering, almost lacquer-like surface that refracts light softly across the small enclosures. In stepping into one of these fitting rooms, the visitor moves from the raw tactility of the main space into a quieter, more introspective atmosphere. This shift underscores a broader narrative: while the main retail floor exposes process and imperfection, the fitting rooms offer a controlled, enclosed glamour – suggesting that transformation and self-fashioning are personal acts that happen away from public view (Hughes, 2021).

The Bruton Street boutique, therefore, does not simply showcase Maison Margiela's collections; it materializes the brand's philosophical and aesthetic codes through architecture. Studio Anne Holtrop's interventions succeed in making these codes physical. By engaging directly with texture, imperfection, and deconstruction, the store invites visitors not just to shop but to participate in a spatial and sensory interpretation of the Maison's ongoing dialogue between fashion, architecture, and identity.

The Prequel

Anne Holtrop's design philosophy centers on an exploration of form and material, with each project beginning from a careful, almost investigative engagement with these elements. Eschewing architectural clichés, Holtrop allows spaces to evolve organically, taking on new shapes and meanings rather than adhering to conventional norms. His collaboration with Maison Margiela, initiated in 2018, exemplifies this approach. Together, they developed a new spatial vision for the brand, translating Maison Margiela's conceptual and emotional language into



Figure 78. Photograph of the interior of the Maison Margiela flagship store on Avenue Montaigne in Paris, 2025. Photograph by author.

physical form. Gypsum walls twist and wrap fluidly around columns, doors, and corners, physically embodying the themes of the Maison's "Artisanal" collection and extending its experimental spirit into architecture (C. Morris, 2021).

Visiting the Margiela store on Avenue Montaigne in Paris, one is immediately struck by how Holtrop's interventions capture the brand's essence. The design draws from the gypsum-cast set originally conceived for the Fall/Winter 2018 couture show, creating a dialogue between fashion presentation and retail space. Walking through the two-story, 250-square-meter boutique, the fusion of classical and avant-garde elements becomes evident: the minimalism of white plaster surfaces contrasts with the highly sculptural forms that define the interiors. Here, what John Galliano described as the "raw, undiluted essence" of Maison Margiela is made spatial (C. Morris, 2021).

A tactile and highly material-driven atmosphere defines the experience of the Paris boutique. Hand-cast plaster walls and columns, rich with the imprints of textile textures and artisanal manipulation, invite not just observation but physical engagement. The experience of touching these surfaces – still bearing the traces of their making – reinforces the brand's emphasis on craftsmanship and the hand-made. Throughout the store, familiar forms such as shelving and tables are not simply reproduced but deconstructed and reimaged. Carved from stained travertine and filled with contrasting white epoxy resin, these furnishings continue Margiela's tradition of "appropriating the inappropriate" by celebrating imperfection and rawness as aesthetic values (C. Morris, 2021).

The spatial narrative shifts in the fitting rooms, where surfaces painted in dark, high-gloss green create an intimate, almost secretive environment. The lacquered finish recalls Japanese cabinetry, offering a rich, sensual contrast to the raw tactility of the main spaces. Entering these rooms, one feels a sudden withdrawal from the openness of the store, aligning with Margiela's enduring fascination with privacy, transformation, and the hidden self (C. Morris, 2021).

A similar sensibility pervades the Maison Margiela store in Shanghai, completed by Studio Anne Holtrop in 2020 within the Reel Department Store.



Figure 79. Photograph of the interior of the Maison Margiela flagship store in Shanghai, 2020. Courtesy of Studio Anne Holtrop.

Although smaller at 160 square meters, the Shanghai space continues the architectural language first articulated in Paris, while adapting it to a new urban context. Here, the same deconstructed gypsum surfaces are present, bearing the textile imprints that speak to the Maison's codes of "dressing in haste," "the memory of," and "décortiqué." The effect is consistent yet distinct: the walls and columns, treated almost as free-standing sculptural objects, offer a fragmented, shifting sense of enclosure that enhances the visitor's awareness of movement and materiality (Gualandris, 2021).

Walking through the Shanghai store, the folding and bending of familiar shapes becomes a subtle, almost subconscious experience. Tables, shelves, and seating pieces, again crafted from stained travertine and infilled with white epoxy resin, appear at once sturdy and incomplete – inviting the visitor to question the boundaries between finished and unfinished, between form and gesture. This visual and tactile instability evokes Martin Margiela's fundamental questioning of traditional fashion and luxury norms (Gualandris, 2021).

The fitting rooms in Shanghai, too, create a deliberate contrast to the main space. Finished in a deep, high-gloss green, they echo the intimacy and understated luxury of the Paris store while offering a local reinterpretation of atmosphere and mood. As in Paris, stepping into these lacquered spaces creates a moment of withdrawal, an opportunity for self-reinvention that resonates deeply with Margiela's fascination with anonymity and transformation (Gualandris, 2021).

Overall, the collaboration between Studio Anne Holtrop and Maison Margiela has resulted in a coherent yet evolving architectural language. Holtrop's use of material processes and his sensitivity to form allow Margiela's conceptual fashion codes to be translated into physical space without resorting to superficial imitation. Instead, architecture and fashion intersect organically: both engage with memory, materiality, imperfection, and transformation (Gualandris, 2021). Personal experience reveals that the design's intent – to offer a raw, tactile, emotionally charged space – is not only seen, but also felt.

Along the way, it became clear that we're no longer talking about fashion in one corner and architecture in the other. The two have become entwined – sharing space, swapping roles, and together shaping how we feel the environments we move through. From Prada's theatrical Epicenter in New York to Anne Holtrop's poetic Maison Margiela interiors, fashion spaces today are no longer mere containers. They are sensorial experiences, emotional encounters, places where identity gets tried on, felt in the body, and sometimes – just sometimes – transformed.

Much of architecture's traditional language is still rooted in exteriors: façades, forms, materials, and geometry. We talk about how buildings look, how they sit in a city. But the truth is, most of the fashion spaces I studied – aside from a few striking CHANEL façades – weren't waving at you from the street. They were hiding in plain sight, waiting to be entered. It's inside where the brand's real story unfolds. Through light and layout, through texture underfoot or an echo overhead, these interiors ask you not just to look – but to feel. To inhabit (Goldberger, 2022: 115–119).

That's where architecture and fashion find their strongest overlap: in the body. We wear spaces (almost) like we wear clothes. They press against us, provoke a shiver, a memory, an emotion. A tight corridor may unsettle; a warmly lit room might soothe. A garment brushing the skin can comfort or confront. These sensations happen before language kicks in – “under the skin,” as it were – and they shape who we are, or who we think we might become. That's affect. That's identity. That's the real architecture of fashion (Crewe, 2010: 2105–2106).

Throughout this thesis, I've explored how architecture doesn't just house fashion – it amplifies it. These aren't just spaces in which fashion is sold; they are where fashion is performed. Where brand values become something you can walk through, hear, smell, and yes – Instagram. Whether it's through rhythmic spatial sequencing, contrasting materials, or carefully choreographed lighting, architecture invites us into fashion's world not as passive consumers but as participants (Goldberger, 2022: 120–132).

Flagship stores, in particular, have emerged as the new cultural monuments of the city – not just selling things, but making statements. They are part gallery, part theatre, part selfie backdrop. And in doing so, they blur all the lines: between private desire and public identity, between high design and mass consumption, between art and commerce. These spaces – Prada’s Epicenter, DSM, Margiela – are not just commercial hubs. They are spatial manifestos, cultural landmarks, and, yes, carefully branded dreams (Crewe, 2010: 2105–2106; Potvin, 2009: 4–5; Nobbs et al., 2012: 927).

Of course, it’s not all shimmer and inspiration. These spaces can also be exclusive, intimidating, and embedded in systems of capital and aspiration that not everyone can – or wants to – access. They reflect broader tensions: about privilege, place, and the power of the image. But even in their contradictions, they tell us something about how space is used to shape feeling, and how feeling gets used to shape culture.

Ultimately, this thesis suggests that the relationship between fashion and architecture is more than just a stylish alliance – it’s a lived, breathing interaction. A kind of duet that invites both disciplines to think beyond their usual boundaries. It’s about architecture with feeling, and fashion with form. Together, they create not just places to buy or watch, but places to be. Places that become part of us.

The hope is that this research opens a door – not to a finished room, but to a corridor of questions. Ideally, all case studies would have been experienced firsthand given how central affect and embodied experience are to this topic. This limitation underscores the necessity of further research prioritizing sensory and emotional engagement not only in flagship stores and runway shows, but also in a wider array of fashion spaces. As fashion and architecture evolve under the pressures of sustainability, digital mediation, and global expansion, there is an opportunity to delve deeper. In this sense, this thesis should be seen not as a conclusion but as a beginning – a point of departure for more tactile, inclusive, and affect-driven explorations.

Because in the end, architecture only matters when it's lived. And in fashion, this means spaces that don't just display garments, but ask us to inhabit them – bodily, emotionally, memorably. It's in this moment – when fabric meets skin, when space shapes movement – that identity emerges.

That's where architecture meets fashion. That's where design becomes feeling. And that's where this story, for now, bows out – though the performance, I suspect, is far from over.



Figure 80. Photograph of the interior of the Giorgio Armani flagship store in London, 2003. Courtesy of Claudio Silvestrin Architects.

2001

OMA redefines luxury retail with **Prada's** New York Epicenter, choreographing spatial movement through a sweeping plywood wave and immersive material contrasts.

2002

Opening Ceremony establishes a globally influential flagship store in New York City, fusing fashion, culture, and curation through an experimental retail model.

Herzog & de Meuron design **Prada's** New York Headquarters as a minimalist, efficient space reflecting the brand's commitment to architectural clarity and operational rigor.

2003

Claudio Silvestrin crafts **Giorgio Armani's** London flagship store with monolithic surfaces and muted materials, embodying the designer's philosophy of serene minimalism.

Herzog & de Meuron construct **Prada's** Aoyama flagship store in Tokyo as a crystalline lattice of rhomboid glass, collapsing boundaries between interior and cityscape.



Figure 81. Photograph of the interior of the Comme des Garçons guerrilla store in Los Angeles, 2008. Photograph by unknown.

2004

Rei Kawakubo inaugurates the first **Comme des Garçons** guerrilla store in Berlin, inserting high fashion into transient, raw urban voids.

Dover Street Market launches in London as Kawakubo's radical retail vision – a fragmented, multi-brand environment that blurs art, commerce, and installation.

OMA completes **Prada's** Los Angeles Epicenter, integrating a folding floor and aluminum façade to dissolve distinctions between store and street.

2006

Peter Marino designs **CHANEL's** Tokyo flagship store as a vertical architectural narrative layered with luminosity, tactility, and brand codes.

2008

Rei Kawakubo introduces a **Comme des Garçons** guerrilla store in Los Angeles, transforming vacant space into a temporal stage for avant-garde fashion.



Figure 82. Photograph of the Prada Spring/Summer 2010 fashion show in Milan, 2009. Photograph by Marco Beck Peccoz.

Comme des Garçons unveils its Tokyo flagship store with Kawakubo's hallmark of spatial austerity, emphasizing sculptural display and conceptual dissonance.

2009

AMO designs Prada's Spring/Summer 2010 show in Milan, segmenting the runway with freestanding partitions that modulate audience sightlines and proximity.

OMA constructs the Prada Transformer in Seoul – a rotating tetrahedral pavilion that morphs its shape to accommodate fashion, cinema, art, and exhibition.

2010

Fashion enters a new phase of digital transformation as luxury brands begin to explore virtual environments, while the launch of Instagram reconfigures industry communication by enabling users to produce, curate, and disseminate fashion imagery instantaneously.

2011

Fashion blogging reaches a critical mass with over 18 million active platforms, democratizing style discourse and accelerating the production, circulation, and consumption of trends.

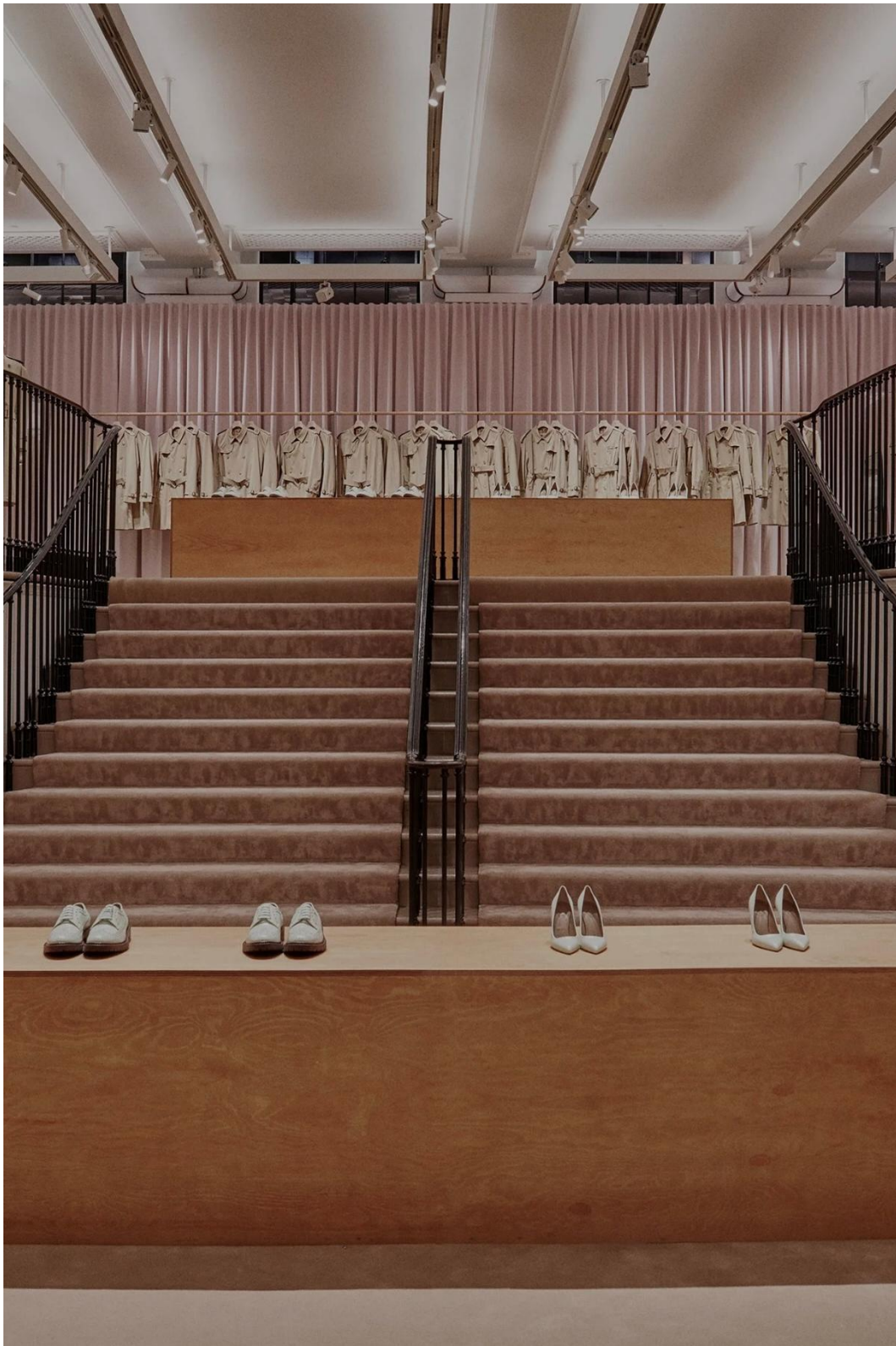


Figure 83. Photograph of the interior of the Burberry flagship store in London, 2012. Courtesy of Burberry.

AMO choreographs **Prada's**

Fall/Winter 2011 show using geometric repetition and domestic motifs to challenge the linearity of runway presentation.

AMO disrupts **Prada's**

Spring/Summer 2012 show with blue foam blocks scattered across synthetic turf, fragmenting spatial perception and audience alignment.

2012

Burberry unveils its London flagship store on Regent Street as a digitally immersive brand environment integrating heritage, technology, and architectural refinement.

Rei Kawakubo opens **Dover Street Market** in Tokyo, intensifying the brand's architectural experimentation with layered fragmentation and spatial disorientation.

2013

Comme des Garçons launches its New York flagship store with a raw, sculptural interior that emphasizes material contrast and spatial restraint.



Figure 84. Photograph of the façade of the Paul Smith flagship store in London, 2025.
Photograph by author.

Dover Street Market opens in New York City, staging fashion within a curated architectural collage of art installations, industrial elements, and brand zones.

6a architects design Paul Smith's flagship store in London as an eclectic composition of textures and modernist details.

2014

The fashion industry confronts both ecological and conceptual frontiers, as the first global used clothing conferences advance sustainable practices through reuse and circular economy strategies, while the exhibition Simon Costin's Impossible Catwalk Shows in London presents experimental scenographies that challenge the spatial conventions of traditional runway formats.

Bureau Betak stages Dior's Spring/Summer 2015 show as a skeletal scaffold structure in Paris, merging fashion spectacle with construction-site aesthetics.

Jonathan Anderson debuts at Loewe's Spring/Summer 2015 show with a sculptural, tactile set at Paris' UNESCO building.



Figure 85. Photograph of the Prada Fall/Winter 2016 fashion show in Milan, 2016.
Photograph by Agostino Osio.

2015

Herzog & de Meuron complete **Miu Miu's** Tokyo flagship store as a jewel-like structure of reflective surfaces, blending intimacy with urban exposure.

OMA opens Fondazione **Prada** in Milan, curating a fragmented cultural campus that juxtaposes industrial remnants with minimalist volumes and curatorial precision.

AMO reimagines **Prada's** Spring/Summer 2016 show as a study in artificial and natural contrasts, using translucent ceiling panels to manipulate light and spatial perception.

2016

OFFICE KGDVS designs **Paco Rabanne's** Paris flagship store as a stark, brutalist interior where metallic futurism meets architectural austerity.

AMO stages **Prada's** Fall/Winter 2016 show as a tactile exploration of domesticity and abstraction, using OSB-clad balconies to distort depth and frame the urban setting.



Figure 86. Photograph of the interior of Dover Street Market in Singapore, 2017. Courtesy of Dover Street Market.

2017

*The closure of **Colette's** influential Paris store marks the end of a formative era in concept retail, concluding two decades of curating fashion, art, and lifestyle in one experiential space.*

Smiljan Radić designs **Céline's** pavilion for Paris Fashion Week as an inflated nylon bubble that conforms to a tennis court, obscuring the site to create a self-contained show environment.

Dover Street Market opens in Singapore, expanding Kawakubo's immersive, installation-based retail model into Southeast Asia.

AMO pioneers "total space" in **Prada's** Fall/Winter 2017 show, turning the runway into domestic interiors of wood and terrazzo.

2018

Fashion exhibitions reflect historical depth and critical experimentation: Catwalking: Fashion through the Lens of Chris Moore surveys five decades of runway photography, while Eckhaus Latta: Possessed merges installation, retail, and performance to critique consumer culture through immersive space.



Figure 87. Photograph of the interior of the Céline flagship store in Miami, 2018. Photograph by Mikael Olsson.

Valerio Olgiati unveils **Céline's** Miami flagship store as a stark, fortress-like abstraction, emphasizing silence, weight, and spatial purity.

Peter Marino completes **CHANEL** flagships in Istanbul and New York, channeling opulent craftsmanship through urban sophistication and refined material palettes.

Rei Kawakubo launches **Dover Street Market** in Los Angeles, embedding retail in a sculptural industrial shell that merges West Coast rawness with conceptual design.

Virgil Abloh debuts his first **Louis Vuitton** Men Spring/Summer 2019 show in Paris with a rainbow-hued runway and themes of inclusivity, emotion, and cultural narrative.

Studio Anne Holtrop designs **Maison Margiela's** Paris flagship store with hand-sculpted gypsum walls, blurring the boundaries between architecture and tailoring.



Figure 88. Photograph of the interior of the Annakiki flagship store in Chongqing, 2019. Photograph by Arttteezy.

Virgil Abloh and AMO co-design **Off-White's** Miami flagship store as a brutalist hybrid of raw concrete, luxury cues, and layered spatial narratives.

OMA/AMO completes the Torre at Fondazione **Prada**, finalizing its transformation into a multi-volume cultural complex, and stages the Fall/Winter 2018 show there, using the Milan skyline as scenographic backdrop.

2019

The exhibition Figures of Speech opens in Chicago, showcasing Virgil Abloh's multidisciplinary practice across fashion, architecture, music, and design, and framing his work as key to contemporary visual culture.

Smiljan Radić opens **Alexander McQueen's** London flagship store with domestic textures and sculptural forms that evoke memory and material history.

Joy Season Studio designs **Annakiki's** Chongqing concept store as a futuristic retail capsule with mirrored surfaces and immersive lighting.



Figure 89. Photograph of the interior of the Acne Studios flagship store in Stockholm, 2020. Courtesy of Arquitectura-G.

2020

*The closures of **Jeffrey's** and **Opening Ceremony's** New York flagships mark the end of a defining era in independent, curator-led fashion retail, reflecting a broader shift toward new paradigms of distribution, consumption, and brand engagement.*

Arquitectura-G designs **Acne Studios'** Stockholm flagship store with a calm, modular interior that highlights material tactility, natural light, and spatial clarity.

Smiljan Radić completes **Alexander McQueen's** New York flagship store as a sculptural interplay of layered textures and domestic intimacy.

Studio Anne Holtrop designs **Maison Margiela's** Shanghai flagship store with carved, raw materiality that treats architecture as wearable form.

OFFICE KGDVS creates a brutalist pop-up store for **Paco Rabanne** in Paris, distilling brand futurism into a compact envelope.

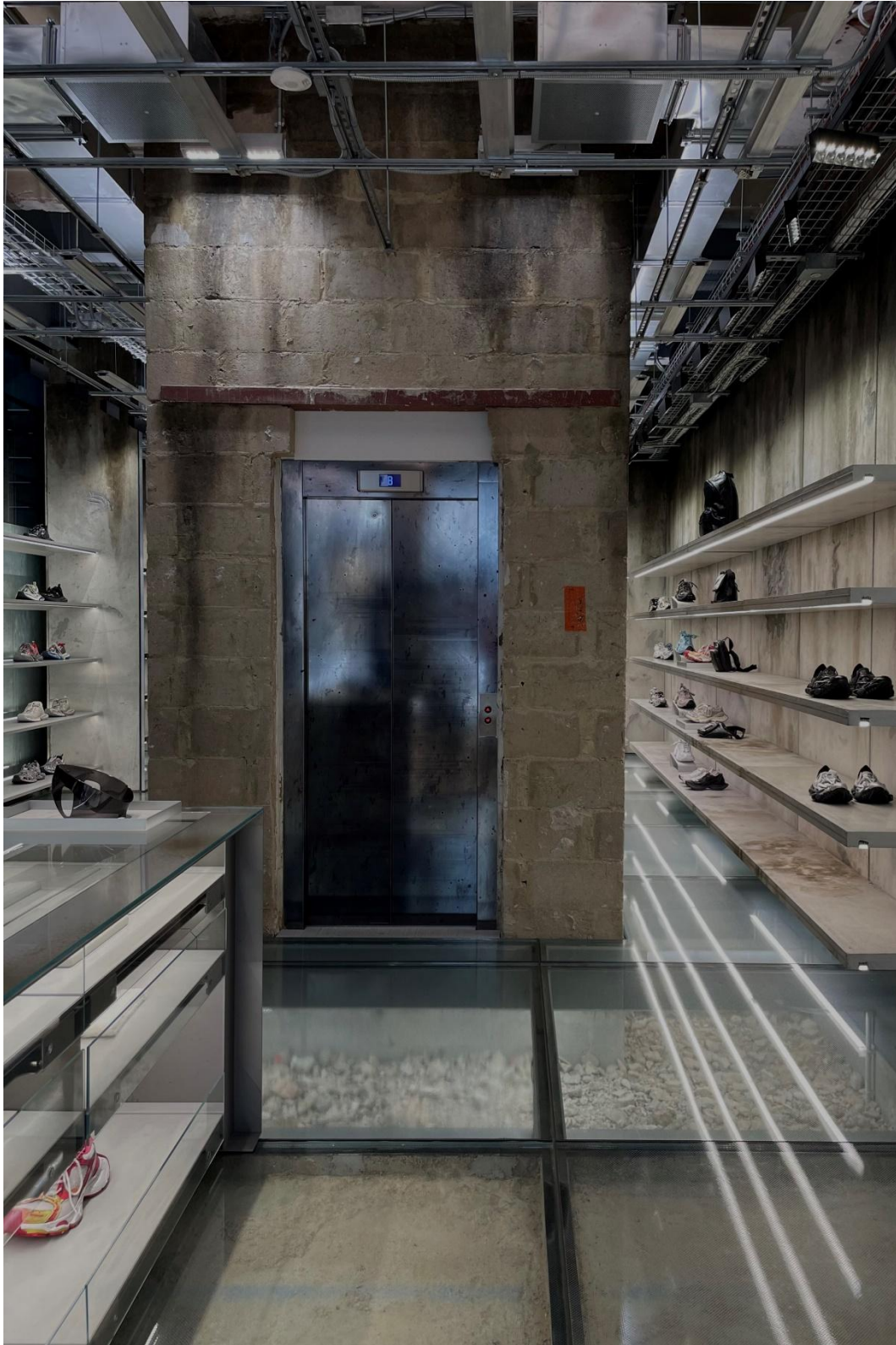


Figure 90. Photograph of the interior of the Balenciaga flagship store in London, 2025. Photograph by author.

AMO designs **Prada's**

Spring/Summer 2021 show as a hybrid runway and film studio, merging physical space and cinematic production to create an immersive environment for global digital broadcast.

2021

Smiljan Radić stages **Alexander McQueen's** Spring/Summer 2022 show beneath a transparent dome on London's rooftops, blending site, weather, and scenography.

Sub unveils **Balenciaga's** London flagship store as a hyper-industrial interior of raw concrete, exposed steel, and utilitarian design.

Peter Marino completes **CHANEL's** Miami flagship store, translating luxury into a geometric, light-filled composition of stone, bronze, and pattern.

Paf Atelier designs **Jacquemus'** "Les Fleurs" pop-up in Paris as a cobalt-blue flower shop, blending minimalism with everyday materials for a community-driven retail experience.



Figure 91. Photograph of the Prada Fall/Winter 2021 fashion show in Milan, 2021. Photograph by Agostino Osio.

Jacquemus opens the 24/24 pink pop-up in Paris, an automated boutique blending retail and installation

Virgil Abloh stages **Louis Vuitton's** Men Fall/Winter 2021 show in Paris as an homage to Mies van der Rohe and Lily Reich's Barcelona Pavilion, layering modernist architecture with themes of Black identity.

Studio Anne Holtrop opens **Maison Margiela's** flagship store in London, continuing its hand-crafted architectural series with bespoke cast textures and monolithic elegance.

Virgil Abloh designs **Off-White's** Paris flagship store as a spatial narrative of layered symbolism, industrial form, and brand storytelling.

AMO designs **Prada's** Fall/Winter 2021 show as a hybrid film-runway within a multitextural landscape, confronting material and gender norms while launching Prada's set reuse initiative for sustainable redistribution.



Figure 92. Photograph of the Bottega Veneta Fall/Winter 2022 fashion show in Milan, 2022. Photograph by Matteo Canestraro.

2022

Smiljan Radić returns for **Alexander McQueen's** Spring/Summer 2023 show, placing a transparent pavilion at Greenwich's Old Royal Naval College for a classical-meets-contemporary frame.

Balenciaga transforms its London store into a pop-up wrapped in pink faux fur, launching the "Le Cagole" collection with maximalist flair and material reuse.

Sub designs **Balenciaga's** Fall/Winter 2022 show in Paris as a dystopian simulation, staging models in a cinematic blizzard within a synthetic shell.

Sub completes **Balenciaga's** couture store in Paris, cloaking elite fashion in monastic calm and architectural purity.

Bureau Betak stages **Bottega Veneta's** Fall/Winter 2022 show inside the restored Palazzo San Fedele in Milan, juxtaposing raw textures with Italian architectural grandeur.

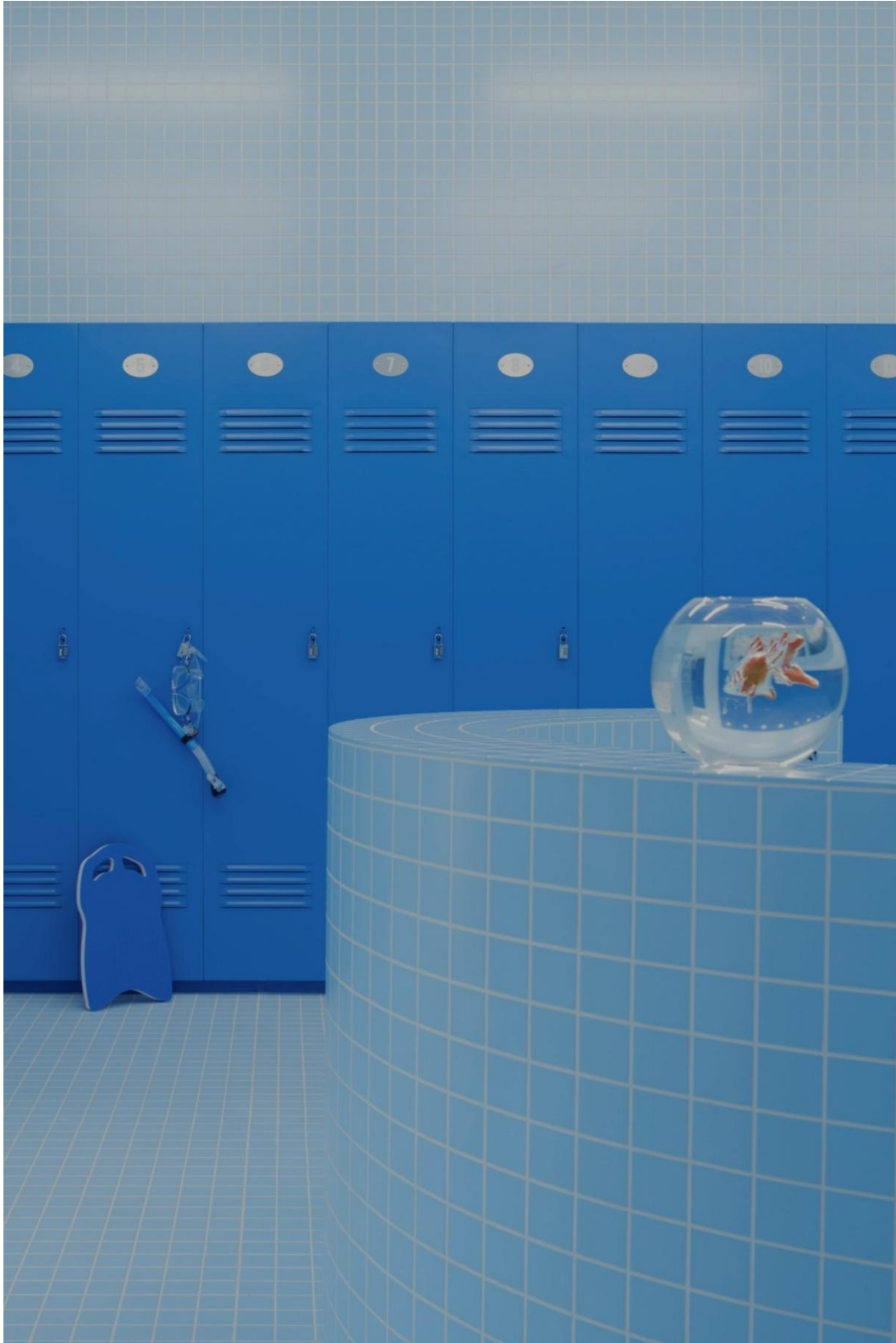


Figure 93. Photograph of the interior of the Jacquemus pop-up store in London, 2022. Courtesy of Jacquemus.

Bernard Dubois designs **Courrèges'**
New York flagship store as a retro-
futurist volume of clean geometry,
white gloss, and precise symmetry.

Villa Eugénie sets **Dior's** Men
Spring/Summer 2023 show in a
meadowed stage framed by twin
replica villas, fusing surrealism with
pastoral grandeur.

Dior opens a concept store in Seoul,
blending Parisian elegance with
Korean craft through open-air design,
Hanji paper, and locally made
furnishings.

Random Studio transforms
Jacquemus' London pop-up into a
surreal, water-themed space with
oversized bathroom elements and
immersive retail design.

Jacquemus unveils a pop-up store
in Milan, extending its visual language
of color, tactility, and architectural
simplicity.



Figure 94. Photograph of the Prada Spring/Summer 2023 fashion show in Milan, 2022. Photograph by Agostino Osio.

AMO stages **Prada's** Fall/Winter 2022 show with circular formations and mirrored intimacy, emphasizing collective perspective and spatial containment.

AMO designs **Prada's** Men Spring/Summer 2023 show around full-scale monochrome paper houses, using fragile architectural forms to explore themes of ephemerality, intimacy, and constructed domesticity.

Andreas Kostopoulos opens **Self-Portrait's** London flagship store with soft tones, sleek geometry, and contemporary elegance.

Studio Mare choreographs **Sunnei's** show at Milan Fashion Week as a minimal, experimental composition of synchronized movement and spatial rhythm.

2023

Halleroed designs **Acne Studios'** Miami flagship store with modular forms and layered materials that embody quiet luxury and architectural tactility.



Figure 95. Photograph of the interior of the BOYY flagship store in Milan, 2025.
Photograph by author.

Crosby Studios unveils **Amina Muaddi's** London flagship store as a glossy, sculptural interior of rich color and jewel-like materials.

FOS designs **BOYY'S** Milan flagship store as a concrete vessel of warm surrealism, merging brutalist form with playful detail.

Peter Marino reimagines **CHANEL'S** Beverly Hills flagship store as a luminous composition of polished luxury and classic restraint.

Villa Eugénie stages **Ferragamo's** Fall/Winter 2023 show within a deep blue infinity loop, curving space into sculptural procession.

Bureau Betak transforms **Gucci's** Fall/Winter 2023 show at the Gucci Hub in Milan into a retro-futurist interior of avocado carpeting, sunken seating, and glowing concrete forms.



Figure 96. Photograph of the interior of the Lanvin flagship store in New York City, 2025. Photograph by author.

Simon Porte opens **Jacquemus'**
"Café Fleurs" in Seoul, a minimalist
pop-up blending boutique, café, and
flower shop inspired by the Bambino
bag.

Crosby Studios stages a chrome-
drenched pop-up store for **Jimmy
Choo** in Paris, blending spectacle
with architectural gloss.

Catherine Holstein and Griffin Frazen
design **Khaite's** New York flagship
store as a fusion of brutalist concrete
and soft sculptural detailing.

Bernard Dubois opens **Lanvin's**
New York flagship store as a stripped-
back reinterpretation of historic codes
through bold spatial gestures.

Standard Architecture redesigns
Paul Smith's Los Angeles flagship
store with color and architectural wit
as a layered homage to British flair
and California cool.

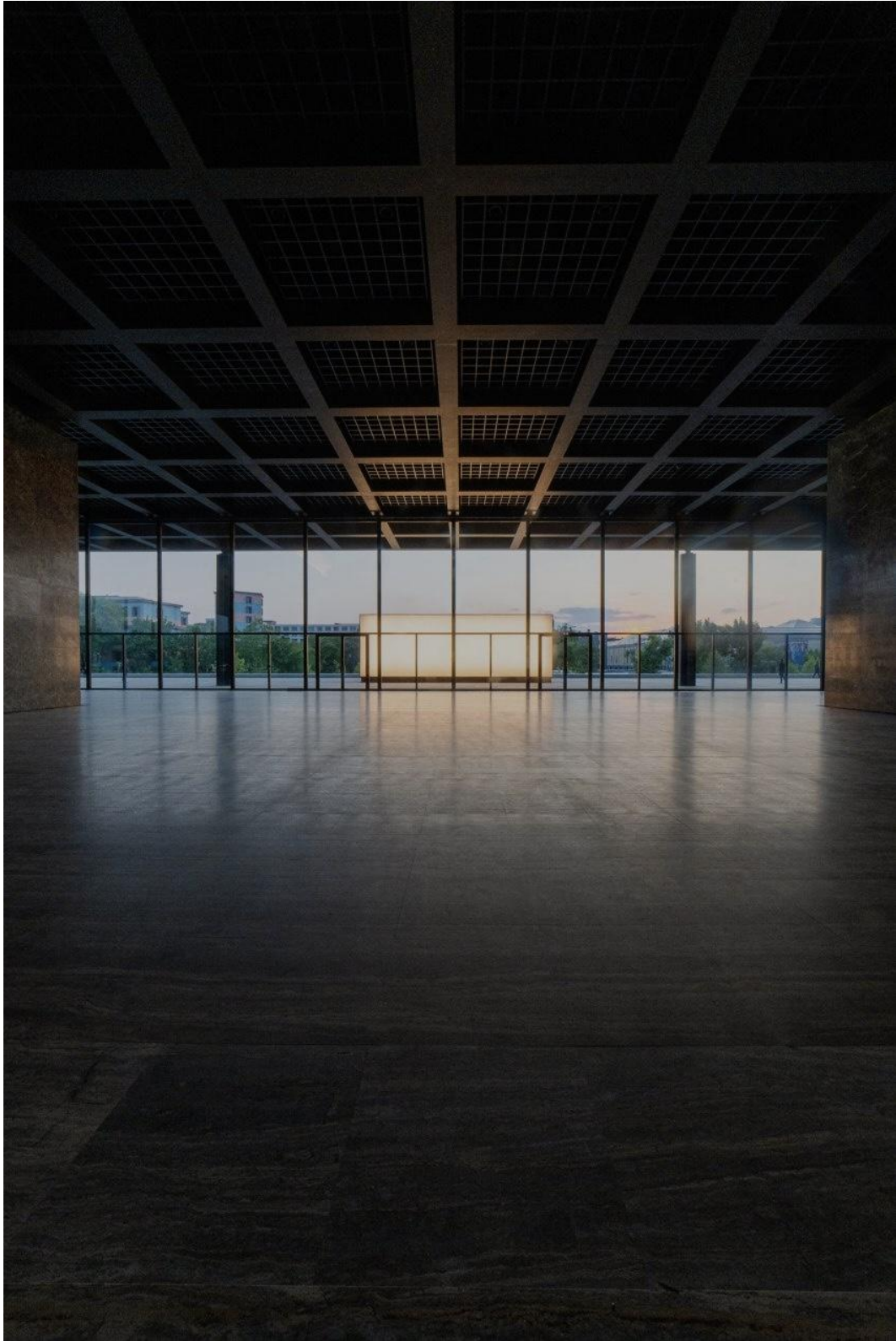


Figure 97. Photograph of the Saint Laurent Spring/Summer 2024 fashion show in Berlin, 2023. Photograph by Zoe Joubert.

AMO designs the **Prada** Fall/Winter 2023 show with retractable ceilings and cascading floral installations that emphasize verticality and fluidity.

AMO stages **Prada's** Spring/Summer 2024 show with cascading pink slime forming fluid partitions, embodying the theme of "organic minimalism."

Bureau Betak stages **Saint Laurent's** Men Spring/Summer 2024 show at Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie, framing Mies van der Rohe's pavilion with black curtains and a glowing, sunset-like light installation.

OMA opens **Stone Island's** Munich flagship store as a monolithic structure of tectonic geometries and industrial calm.

2024

*The reopening of the Grand Palais in Paris restores a key site of fashion spectacle, enabling **CHANEL** to continue its tradition of architecturally and scenographically ambitious runway presentations within a renewed monumental setting.*



Figure 98. Photograph of the Gucci Cruise 2025 fashion show in London, 2024.
Photograph by Greg White.

Peter Marino unveils **CHANEL's**
new New York flagship store as a
refined icon of precision, opulence,
and architectural craftsmanship.

Dior's Bangkok concept store,
dubbed the "Gold House," envelops
visitors in a gilded lattice façade that
merges Thai tradition with Parisian
modernism.

Rei Kawakubo debuts **Dover**
Street Market in Paris, extending
her architectural retail philosophy
through layered space and radical
form.

Sabato De Sarno stages **Gucci's**
Cruise 2025 show in Tate Modern's
Tanks, transforming the concrete
space into a lush, plant-filled "botanic
tapestry" that contrasts industrial
architecture with natural elements.

Bureau Betak envelopes **Saint**
Laurent's Fall/Winter 2024 show in
Paris with dark grandeur, monumental
form, and a cinematic sense of
isolation.



Figure 99. Photograph of the Prada Fall/Winter 2025 fashion show in Milan, 2025. Courtesy of Prada.

2025

AMO embeds **Prada's** Fall/Winter 2025 show in a towering steel scaffolding grid inside the Deposito, immersing models and guests in a dense vertical framework.

Reflection on Sustainability and the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into academic and creative processes signals a significant shift toward technologically enhanced modes of production across various disciplines, including architecture and fashion. Within the framework of this thesis, AI – specifically in the form of natural language processing tools – was employed to assist in translation, improve linguistic clarity, and assess the coherence and readability of key arguments. Importantly, this use of AI did not replace the authorial voice or diminish the intellectual labor behind the work. Instead, it functioned as a dialogic partner, supporting the refinement of ideas and aiding in their effective communication.

Nonetheless, the application of AI in academic contexts necessitates a reflective and critical stance. While such technologies can greatly enhance the accessibility and stylistic consistency of academic writing, they also raise complex questions about authorship, originality, and the risk of stylistic homogenization. These concerns highlight the importance of transparency in disclosing AI's role in the writing process and adhering to ethical standards that honor both individual intellectual effort and the evolving concept of authorship in a digitally mediated environment.

This reflection becomes especially relevant when situated within broader considerations of sustainability – understood here not only in material terms, such as environmental impact and ethical production, but also in cultural and epistemological dimensions. In both architecture and fashion, traditional models of sustainability have focused on the responsible use of physical resources. However, in a post-digital era characterized by the proliferation of virtual and hybrid environments, sustainability must also encompass the enduring relevance of cultural practices and digital content.

Fashion spaces, once confined to the temporality of physical events, have increasingly extended into what can be described as “metaspaces” – digitally sustained environments that allow fashion shows and retail experiences to be reinterpreted, shared, and archived through social media platforms. These “metaspaces” represent a form of cultural sustainability, enabling ephemeral practices to persist beyond their original contexts and to foster new layers of meaning through collective engagement. They demand new conceptual models for understanding spatiality, experience, and participation in both fashion and architecture (McQuillan, 2020: 51).

In this context, the use of AI in developing this thesis reflects and reinforces its core investigation into hybrid spaces – those that exist at the intersection of the physical and the digital, the material and the conceptual. Just as fashion experiences now unfold across “metaspaces” shaped by audience interaction and technological mediation, so too can academic writing be enriched through AI-supported processes. The collaboration between human authorship and machine assistance may be viewed not as a compromise of academic integrity, but as a reflection of the changing landscape of knowledge production in the 21st century – one that values transparency, creativity, and adaptability.

For that reason alone, architecture matters: because it is all around us, and what is all around us has to have an effect on us. That effect may be subtle and barely noticeable, or it may shake us to the core, but it will never fail to be there.

—Paul Goldberger

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