Retail revamp

WORDS CAROLINE BAUM

The synergy between architecture and high-end fashion is changing the face of luxury brands and seducing shoppers worldwide.
NOT SO LONG AGO, the main priorities of cultural tourists were a city’s churches and museums. These days, what makes a city a must-see destination is just as likely to be a flagship store for a luxury brand as it is an art gallery. It’s not so much that commerce has overpowered culture — it’s just co-opted it. For more than a decade, the savviest brands on the planet have been wooing the world’s greatest architects to create showplaces that scream style, innovation and look-at-me edginess. They’ve sought to capitalise on the success that museums have demonstrated in attracting crowds with controversial, risky buildings like Bilbao’s Guggenheim and the Louvre Pyramid by IM Pei. Competition between brands for the most celebrated “starchitects” has reached unprecedented heights as they vie for the kind of gravitas that a high-profile talent can bestow. Zaha Hadid, the first woman to win architecture’s Nobel, the Pritzker prize, affirmed the legitimacy of retail therapy when she commented that shopping is a valid way to experience a city. She has yet to be commissioned to design a store, but is perhaps already on her way, having already designed a car-manufacturing plant for BMW.

The strategy is not new; after all, packaging has always been a key part of luxury brand appeal. Those gift boxes from Tiffany in a specific, identifiable shade of robin’s egg blue are as much part of the experience as the baubles they contain. A building is just a package on a grander, more permanent scale. Pundits have christened this synergy “luxutecture.” All shopping is a form of seduction and the setting is a crucial factor in the wooing process. According to research, impulse buyers are particularly susceptible to clever window dressing. They’re looking for a total experience. Being in a store where they are made to feel glamorous once they dare to cross the threshold (intimidation is an obstacle for many would-be consumers) makes the outcome almost inevitable. They’ll want a souvenir of that feeling, however small.

The psychology and strategies behind retail therapy are getting more and more sophisticated, taking in all aspects of design, lighting, even the colour of the carpet, the shape of display vitrines and the level at which the merchandise is shelved. Nothing is left to chance. The current trend can be traced back to the mid-1990s, when Calvin Klein hired British minimalist guru John Pawson to design his stores. The two shared a similar less-is-more aesthetic that quickly spread to other brands. When Asprey, the 200-year-old Bond Street jeweller, wanted to update its image to lure a younger clientele, it chose Foster and Partners, the practice of British architect Sir Norman Foster, to design media-worthy stores in London and New York.

Frank Gehry, designer of the Bilbao Guggenheim, recently designed a range of jewellery for Tiffany featuring his trademark twists and turns, and has collaborated with radical fashion designer Issey Miyake on store concepts. Now he’s been chosen by Louis Vuitton to design an art centre in Paris, making the prestige brand/fine art alliance even closer. Other luxury brands are rushing to include a gallery or exhibition space in their retail outlets, suggesting, perhaps, that their own ranges are works of art and emphasising the limited-edition, collector’s-item aspect of exclusive products.

Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas has a long-standing relationship with Prada, having designed flagship stores for the brand in New York, Los Angeles and now Shanghai. It’s a perfect synergy of cool for both parties and a public mutual acknowledgment of their design leadership. Asia is emerging as the hub of luxury brand lust. Nowhere is the rivalry between brands more competitive than in Tokyo, where premium labels outdo each other when it comes to...
set-dressing for an audience with a highly refined shopping aesthetic. Perhaps the Wittiest interpretation of a brand signature is the “techno tweed” devised by American architect Peter Marino for the 10-storey Chanel tower in Ginza. The facade is covered with 700,000 computer-controlled LEDs (light-emitting diodes) embedded in glass. In effect, the building exterior becomes a giant pixellated screen that can project anything from an enormous swatch of Coco Chanel’s favourite tweed fabric to films of runway shows and specially commissioned video installations. The boundary between brand and building has become seamless, which seems appropriate for a label defined by couture. What next? A building that unzips? In a futuristic scene in Minority Report, Tom Cruise wanders though a mall where each outlet remembers his last purchase and addresses him personally. This vision of the future was set in 2054, but a similar kind of digital presence is already in use in several Asian luxury brand stores.

SHOP STYLE: RETAIL-MEETS-DESIGN DESTINATIONS AROUND THE GLOBE

- Renzo Piano designed the Hermès flagship store in Tokyo out of thousands of identical blocks of glass to create the impression of a crystal skin. At night the building glows like a giant Japanese lantern.

- At the Longchamp store in New York’s SoHo, the stairs have been re-imagined as a cascade of long, undulating ribbons by British designer Thomas Heatherwick.

- A new landmark for the city of Birmingham at the Bullring shopping/leisure complex, the Selfridges store, designed by architects Future Systems, is clad in thousands of spun aluminium discs that trace an undulating form.

- The Armani empire on Shanghai’s Bund was one of the first luxury retail outlets in the city, bringing a shiny new lease of life to this historic riverside address. It covers the ground floor of the Three On The Bund building, remodelled by American architect Michael Graves (the man who gave us Alessi’s whistling bird kettles).

- Claudio Silvestrin, a regular Armani collaborator, designed the interior for the more upmarket section, the Giorgio Armani boutique. The fashion house has ambitious plans for 30 more outlets across China.

- Basel-based Herzog & de Meuron is the architectural team behind Prada’s flagship store in Tokyo. One standout feature the store shares with Rem Koolhaas’ Prada Epicenter in New York is the use of Priva-Lite glass partitions that become opaque when a customer steps into the changing room.

- Jun Aoki designed Louis Vuitton’s Tokyo flagship store to look like a randomly stacked pile of travelling trunks. The exterior of the building is clad in various types of metal mesh and polished steel. Aoki has also designed the New York store for Vuitton, transforming a 1930s art deco building into a sleek expression of contemporary haut luxe. This building cleverly plays with ideas of transparency and opacity, looking especially good at dusk.

- Gucci’s eight-storey Ginza building by James Carpenter, fitted out in rosewood and marble with a sleek silver cigarette-case exterior, includes a cafe and gallery as well as an exclusive custom-order handbag service.

- Subtle references to classical Rome abound behind the striated steel facade and 9m-high windows of Fendi’s flagship outlet in New York. Designed by Peter Marino, it features a virtual fountain of the brand’s double-F logo, a palazzo-inspired resin staircase, hand-plastered walls and colour-coded, laser-cut travertine stone denoting different retail areas.
five-star style

Architects are pulling out all the stops to create luxurious resorts designed to be destinations in themselves.  

WORDS CARMEL DWYER

Amankora, Bhutan
Australia is surrounded by some of the world’s best and most famous resorts – in Bali, Malaysia, Fiji, Vanuatu and Hawaii. The Asia-Pacific region has provided extravagant competition to resort developers in Australia, mainly because of the disparity in the cost structures between countries. Paradoxically, it has also provided an opportunity for Australian architects to shine.

Grounds Kent Architects in Fremantle, Western Australia, has won awards for its resorts in a number of offshore locations, the best-known of which is the multi-award-winning Four Seasons at Jimbaran Bay in Bali. In WA, the company designed the Mirvac-owned Bunker Bay Resort in the Margaret River region, and is presently engaged on the Bâle Resort at Port Douglas in Tropical North Queensland. Australian architect Kerry Hill is Singapore-based, but also has an office in Fremantle. He is last year’s winner of the gold medal from the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) and the award-winning designer of The Datai resort in Pulau Langkawi in Malaysia and the Amanusa in Bali.

Both firms have earned accolades for sensitive treatment of each resort’s environment, incorporating elements of the local architectural vernacular into contemporary design. This has been a popular and important feature, particularly in tropical-climate resorts in South-East Asia and the Pacific.

A mankora, Bhutan

Modern architectural standards underlie the adaptation of local designs and materials in roofing treatments, garden design and pavilion-style buildings.

This approach is central to the resort concept at YTL Hotels and Properties, according to senior design consultant Zaalan Tahir of GSD Architect Malaysia. “An important part of our brand positioning is that we provide our guests with an authentic taste of the environment and region in which our resorts are placed. We strive to keep our resorts as close as possible to the local traditional styles and use local labour to ensure that traditional building methods are used.”

Kerry Hill is still working on Amankora in Bhutan, where Aman has opted for a series of lodges rather than a single
resort, offering guests the chance to experience Bhutan by moving from one lodge to another, discovering the country as they go. Each lodge is uniquely designed for its location and for the particular experience that location might offer.

Other hotel groups such as the Hyatt, Hilton, Four Seasons, Ritz-Carlton and Conrad chains have also developed outstanding resorts in the region.

Malaysian-based YTL was among the first to set the pace with its Tanjong Jara resort – designed by US firm Wimberly Allison Tong Goo (WATG) with local firm Akitek Bersekutu Malaysia – which won the 1983 Aga Khan award for architecture. The group is associated with some of the best-known resorts in the region, including The Chedi in Phuket and the Pangkor Laut resort in the Straits of Malacca.

An increasingly popular trend in resorts is to add a spa offering beauty and body treatments, including various types of massage and perhaps yoga classes.

Aman executive director Trina Dingler Ebert says the concept behind the Aman resorts is for guests to feel they are staying in a beautiful private home. “The managers operate as owner/housekeepers of the properties, which are small; 30-40 rooms is the average.”

Dingler Ebert describes the Aman service as discreet and intimate, and believes that it is the key to Aman’s success. The Aman concept has prospered since it launched nearly 20 years ago at Amanpuri in Phuket, Thailand. In subsequent years the brand has flourished in South-East Asia, India, Morocco and North America. “In reality, we have never clearly defined what we do,” she says, “and we don’t think we should because then the creativity goes away.”

This aesthetic is closely aligned with the personal taste and vision of Aman founder Adrian Zecha, who has worked on each project alongside architects such as Kerry Hill. So far, they have avoided both the cookie-cutter approach and allowing arrogance to creep into the equation.

“Arrogance will kill you,” Dingler Ebert says. “We are always learning and adjusting our creative benchmarks and trying to keep a pulse of lifestyle trends.”

Closer to home, Gold Coast-based developer Ray Group admits that Aman is its benchmark. However, the economics of creating the same sort of resort in Australia do not add up – labour costs, in particular, would make it impossible. But at the level of design and aesthetic, Tony Cannon, the Ray Group’s director of development, says it’s the Aman group which sets the pace.

Cannon says design has become more important as yields have dropped. To this end he has commissioned Grounds Kent to design the Balé resort at Port Douglas, and Italian architect Giovanni D’Ambrosio for Balé at Mount Hotham, part of a bigger development Ray Group is undertaking with MFS, another Queensland development company.
Under the Moonlight, DP Village, Hotham

Grounds Kent and D’Ambrosio are also working on a new project in the same area – DP Village. The brief from Cannon was to produce something “jaw-dropping”.

The look at Mount Hotham and also at Mirvac’s Bunker Bay property is mountain lodge-style, using grey stone and timber finishes with glass and steel construction. The strongly modernist look is softened by the natural materials, but the feel is casual 21st-century chic, and very streamlined.

Cannon says the cost of such developments in Australia is enormous and the business model is to create resorts with apartment-style accommodation. The apartments are sold individually and can be leased through a central management that runs the resort with all the normal facilities.

Alternatively, owners can choose not to lease and simply pay a management fee. Ray Group has put this model in place at Salt Village in northern New South Wales, where a separate hotel is run by the Peppers Group.

Despite the costs, Cannon says he has observed that it is slightly easier to sell at the very top end of the market than at a more moderate price level. The challenge of making a five-star resort work in Australia is pricing the product for the market and attaining sufficient occupancy levels. Mirvac Hotels & Resorts chief executive officer Andrew Turner says it means attracting the conference business for the non-peak periods. The company has recently opened the first new high-end resort within easy reach of Sydney in many years. The Quay West Resort Magenta Shores on the Central Coast is banking on convenience and location being a winner in the Sydney-NSW market, where there is a woeful shortage of five-star coastal getaways.

Mirvac operates the Sebel chain of hotels, but its foray into luxury resorts is limited to Bunker Bay, Magenta Shores and the two Sea Temple resorts at Palm Cove and Port Douglas in Tropical North Queensland. More than half the guests in TNQ are Americans or Europeans, less price-sensitive than the local market. To target the latter, the challenge is to find properties within two hours of major cities, something Turner is constantly looking out for.

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designs of the times

Some designs are timeless, but today’s timepieces are far from designer-less.

WORDS BANI MCSPEDDEN

At the top end, no brand has been busier than Jaeger-LeCoultre, which at this year’s Geneva fair announced a raft of new models including one that needs no lubrication, a horological first. This flanked a range of Master Compressor watches, including a dramatic-looking 44mm titanium diving watch with an inbuilt mechanical depth gauge. Its mechanism was inspired by Jaeger’s Atmos docks, which use a membrane to measure changes in pressure.

“The challenge is to match the technical with the design,” says Magali Métrailler, the range’s young designer. “Watches are changing a lot. We now use titanium, carbon, materials that don’t need lubrication. Our inspiration comes from outside, too. We have people from the aeronautical and chemical industries involved: we are open to new technologies.”

Métrailler’s background is industrial design rather than clock-tinkering. She is also responsible for Jaeger-LeCoultre’s highly successful Aston Martin-linked Amvox collection and explained that the designer’s role doesn’t stop with the timepiece. “We work not only on the watches, but the boxes, photos and press kits,” she says. In other words, the entire presentation of the dream.

Another brand counting on clever design to claw its way to the fore is Maurice Lacroix, which in the space of months has not only sketched out a distinct look for its timepieces, but co-ordinated a team of six people perfecting the prototype. The point of difference is a “mechanical memory”, letting the wearer drift back and forth between the current time and a previously recorded one. This has been possible before, but only in quartz-driven models such as Tag Heuer’s Calibre 5 range, itself a handy piece of work. The product director for the Memorie 1, Sandro Reginelli, co-ordinated a team of six people perfecting the prototype.

“It’s the most complicated three-handed watch there is, but unlike most complications, easy for the consumer to use.” Its raison d’être? “We are a manufacturer, but it is not enough just to make movements. We have had the courage to say ‘let’s take a disruptive step’. It should be on sale next year.”

Should you not wish to wait that long for something with a fresh face, other brands have distinct offerings of their own. Ventura has brought together three designers – Hannes Weitzein, a product specialist; Adrian Peitger, a modern typography legend; and Paolo Fancelli, an industrial designer – to produce its digital-only pieces. There are no ordinary digital watches – some have automatic movements; some even scroll and all look like finely calibrated instruments.

Which leads us to Porsche Design’s new Worldtimer P’6750. The sculptured statement presents two time zones in a pared-back PVD-coated titanium case that could only have come from a contemporary designer’s hand. No surprise there; the brand’s mantra since its foundation in 1972 has been “functional, classical, puristic design”.

Resurgent Italian brand Panerai has been augmented with a range reflecting the design cues of Ferrari cars. To quote Panerai: “The appearance of the Ferrari watches is strongly influenced by the aesthetic lines of a Ferrari, in a continuous cross-reference between the watch and details of the engine and bodywork.” The evocative lines that made the cars so famous can presumably now do the same for your wrist. Again, don’t be surprised. After all, it’s totally by design.
Fantastic **furniture**, a spot of **wool-gathering** at the Powerhouse, an **eco-house** you can build in a day, a hot (as in hip) **fireplace**, and even an **egg** to lay in: the **future of design** is in good shape.

## Design news

### So tasteful

**Design Studio Jjuice Architecture & Design** and **Pasticceria Gertosio** (Turin) have combined to concoct **Lagrange 34** – a range of chocolate bars that “exploit the potential of chocolate as a design product”.

[www.lagrange34.com](http://www.lagrange34.com)

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### Wool on

**Fashion From Fleece** celebrates the 200th anniversary of the export of the first bale of wool from Australia. The exhibition, coinciding with Sydney Design Week, includes 20 historical, vintage and modern outfits and 10 newly commissioned ones. **Powerhouse Museum**, Sydney, until August 22, then London. [www.powerhousemuseum.com](http://www.powerhousemuseum.com)

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**Immerse yourself in literature with the Bibliochaise from Italy. From €3500 ($5553). [www.nobodyandco.it](http://www.nobodyandco.it)**


**Lama chaise longue by Zanotta. $11,810. [www.spacefurniture.com](http://www.spacefurniture.com)**
**Roll ova**

No yolk – the Lomme Bed by Lomme Design Platform mimics the shape of the eggshell. This high-tech sleep pod from Liechtenstein includes a light and sound therapy component to scramble outside disturbances and hopefully conquer common sleep problems whenever you lay down. POA. www.lomme.com

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**Up in a day**

EcoShelta space pods are sustainable, architect-designed, modular, prefabricated dwelling systems, designed to be erected in a single day. Materials, finishes and fabrication systems are carefully selected for minimal environmental impact. www.ecoshelta.com

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**Box seat**

Vertibral is a versatile timber product comprising four “boxes” that can be configured to various seating or storage uses. Designed by Joseph Keenan, it is a product of the Environmentally Sustainable Objects Group. $4879. www.esogroup.com.au

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**Flueless**

The EcoSmart Fire by Form + Design is an environmentally friendly mobile fireplace fuelled by denatured ethanol. It requires no utility connection for fuel supply and is suitable for flats and offices. Seven different models. From $6000. www.formanddesign.com.au

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**Resonance Centrepiece**

Bowl by Abi Alice for Alessi. $399. www.gcv.com.au

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**Corban & Blair Split Leather Accessories** range includes this tape measure, $15, in black, red, green and pink. (02) 9560 0122.
From South Africa to South Korea – and not forgetting familiar design stamping grounds such as the US and Europe – this is an overview of superior interiors of the past 25 years, showcasing the striking eclecticism so often evident in current interior design trends.

1000x EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE
(Verlagshaus Braun, $175)
Admire 1000 of the latest architectural projects in Europe, by 1000 different architects, on 1000 pages of this weighty tome. The result is a comprehensive snapshot of European architecture’s state of play, with the emphasis on photos and plans. Well, a picture is worth 1000 words.

CONTEMPORARY WORLD INTERIORS
Susan Yelavich
(Phaidon, $120)
From South Africa to South Korea – and not forgetting familiar design stamping grounds such as the US and Europe – this is an overview of superior interiors of the past 25 years, showcasing the striking eclecticism so often evident in current interior design trends.

& FORK
(Phaidon, $100)
This handy illustrated survey points out 100 product designers from 24 countries and their sharp work, chosen by a panel of 10 prominent international designers.

NEW ARCHITECTURE: AN INTERNATIONAL ATLAS
Francisco Asensio (Abbots, $65)
The lowdown on 85 of the planet’s most important architectural works from the 1990s onwards – analyses, photography and plans.

SMART WORKS: DESIGN AND THE HANDMADE
Grace Cochrane, editor
(Powerhouse Publishing, $40)
More than 40 Australasian designers combining trad skills with new tech in ceramics, furniture and other fields.

1000 YEARS OF WORLD ARCHITECTURE
Francesca Prina & Elena Demartini
(Thames & Hudson, $60)
Western architecture’s past millennium, with 180 key architect bios and an in-depth look at 36 masterpieces.