

The Evolution of the Flagship Store. Re-Defining the Design of Commercial Spaces for Fashion

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Abstract

The research analyses the evolution of commercial spaces for luxury fashion in the last decades, describing how store design has changed since the beginning of the new millennium and suggesting potential future developments. At the turn of the 20th century, the role of the physical store switched radically from being a container of goods to a much more complex space where consumers' attention is shifted away from the product towards an immaterial offer originated by interweaving entertainment, culture, and brand promotion. The flagship store, which began to spread mostly among luxury fashion retailers, can be considered as the trailblazer in the creation of experiential environments, that, with certain differences, are increasingly at the centre of today's retail design practice. This research aims to understand if what is intended as a flagship store today is still the same type of architecture as 20 years ago and, if not, what has changed and why. Through the redefinition of this term, the work will highlight the differences between the past and the present fashion store and contribute to tracing its evolution and describe the multifaceted relationship between fashion and architecture.

Keywords: Flagship Store; Retail Design; Retail Architecture; Fashion and Architecture; Store of the Future.

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Introduction

According to a Bain and Company estimate, by 2025 one fifth of all luxury purchases will be online and almost half of global buyers will be members of Gen Z and Gen Y.¹ For the fashion system which, within the new urban platforms of post-modernity, “plays the role of interpreting the flow of changes and transformations,”² this data indicates the obligation to respond to new consumption processes and consumers’ necessities, imposing also a reconfiguration of its retail sector. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic compromised the already fragile retail environment of most of the global economies,³ while, on the other side, the post-pandemic recovery demonstrated that consumers are still interested in bricks-and-mortar shopping.⁴ Within this context, a profound re-evaluation of the purpose and conformation of physical retail sites appears to be quite urgent.

Defining a single store typology referable to the contemporary social, cultural and economic panorama is difficult because of the numerous contaminations that this space is experiencing on a physical and conceptual level. Nevertheless, the flagship store, which begun to spread during the 1990s, can be considered as the trailblazer in the creation of experiential environments, that, with certain differences, are still at the centre of today’s retail design practice. The study of flagship stores could therefore represent a valid mean to tackle the constantly transforming sector of contemporary fashion retailing. Whereas its most distinguishing elements are often scaled and translated in a wider fleet of “normal” stores or, in more general terms, implemented in other construction fields, flagship stores constitute interesting occasions for architectural experimentation and exemplifications of the ongoing tendencies in the use and design of space.⁵ Although it could be argued that the flagship store is an outdated typology,⁶ this denomination is still quite used,⁷ and flagship stores continue to increase in number and strategic significance in the fashion sector.⁸ This research suggests that flagship stores’ exceptionality in comparison to the other stores of the brand and, as of today, also to virtual purchase platforms, is the key characteristics not only to their survival, but to make them the most representative retail format of the current period. This poses a question over the present interpretation of the term *flagship* and the necessity to re-define its meaning within the context of today’s economy, culture, and urban environment. Through this re-definition, it will be possible to highlight the differences between the past and the present fashion store and describe a new step of its evolution. Furthermore, while virtual shopping platforms are redefining consumers relationship with the physical domain, it is important to understand if and how physical stores may act as a lever for urban regeneration and, vice versa, how urban and social fluctuations are influencing the retail architectural practice.

The analysis of case studies and the review of books, monographies, publications on academic journals and specialized magazines, newspaper articles, fashion brands’ and fashion magazines’ websites, allowed to make informed considerations on this phenomenon and hypothesize its future developments.

1. “NEW LUXURY. A changing mindset of a new generation,” Liganova, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://liganova.com/new-luxury-a-changing-mindset-of-a-new-generation>.
2. Vittorio Linfante, Valeria M. Iannilli, “New Architectural Paradigms for Fashion. Between Permanency and Ephemeral, Between Real and Virtual.” In *AMPS PROCEEDINGS SERIES 19.2. The City and Complexity — Life, Design and Commerce in the Built Environment*, ed. Robert Lastman (London: City, University of London, 17-19 June 2020), 262.
3. Bethan Alexander, Anthony Kent, “Tracking Technology Diffusion In-Store: A Fashion Retail Perspective,” *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 49, no. 10: 1369–90, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRDM-05-2020-0191>.
4. Cathaleen Chen, “Tapping into the Future of Physical Retail,” *The Business of Fashion*, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/case-studies/retail/case-study-physical-retail-future-stores-ecommerce>.
5. Ines Tolic, “Negozzi italiani moderni. Merce e architettura commercio e città ai tempi dell’adorabile crisi,” *Città e Storia* XI, (2017/1): 59–87.
6. Francesca Murialdo, *Practice of consumption and spaces for goods* (London: Francesca Murialdo, 2013), 174.
7. See, just as examples: <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/luxury/louis-vuitton-and-gucci-to-open-first-montreal-flagships/>, <https://www.voguebusiness.com/consumers/balenciaga-new-london-store-is-demnas-version-of-modern-luxury>.
8. Marta Blazquez, Rosy Boardman and Luyu Xu, “International flagship stores: an exploration of store atmospherics and their influence on purchase behaviour,” *International Journal of Business and Globalisation*, 22, no.1 (2019): 110–126. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijbg.2019.10009408>.

Flagship

Since their introduction, flagship stores have been adopted at all levels of the fashion retail industry, from high-street retailers to low-cost ones. However, due to the high cost of construction and maintenance, they have mainly developed within the luxury field.⁹

After decades in which sparks of innovation were preparing the ground, on the verge of the 21st century the role of the physical store went under a drastic change. The growing fashion industry found its place within the new globally competitive market perfecting branding and identification strategies through the increase of design, creativity, and experience as its defining elements.¹⁰ In this period, luxury brands began opening new stores and expanding into new international markets, outsourcing production, and broadening their offer to different product categories to keep up with the growing demand of a wide consumer base. In this climate of luxury democratization and increased competition, the consolidation of brands' popularity among the mass market challenged their notion of "exclusivity," causing the need for brands to reaffirm their identity and reinforce authenticity in respect to the perceived quality and overall value of their products.¹¹ The aesthetic of luxury stores became a key element for the storytelling of the brands' value system: concept stores¹² and flagship stores represented the place where the brand found full expression and, above all, the place for creating emotional, narrative, and experiential relationships linked to the brand image. Through it, architecture and interior design became marketing media, tools to recreate the symbolic universe devised by the brand inside a physical space where the product evolved to include services and experiences as an economic value.¹³

The flagship store fits in the expansive, globalised and mediatic period of the turn between the 20th and the 21st centuries and marks the beginning of an era in which stores are not designed just to be places for purchase anymore: "the economics of experience derives from the necessity of companies of distinguishing themselves and from the realization that this is no longer possible through the product."¹⁴ With the diffusion of this typology, academic literature on the topic also began to spread. To find the term *flagship* in an academic publication, researchers shall fall back on the Macmillan Dictionary of Retailing, published in 1991, where a definition of this typology is provided.¹⁵ A couple of decades later, the work of Nobbs et al. synthesizes some prominent definitions published on previous researches and add their own one.¹⁶ According to the authors, the luxury flagship store is "a larger than average speciality retail format in a prominent geographical location, offering the widest and deepest product range within the highest level of store environment and serving to showcase the brand's position, image and values."¹⁷ This definition and the others provided in the article, allow to identify the key architectural characteristics of a flagship store, that are:

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9. Blazquez, Boardman and Xu.
 10. Valeria M. Iannilli and Alessandra Spagnoli, "Phygital Retailing in Fashion. Experiences, Opportunities and Innovation Trajectories," *ZoneModa Journal*, Vol. 11 (January 2021): 43–69, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/13120>.
 11. Howard Watson and Eleanor Curtis, *Fashion Retail* (Chichester: Wiley, 2007); Veronica Manlow and Karinna Nobbs, "Form and Function of Luxury Flagships," *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 17, no.1 (2013): 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13612021311305137>.
 12. A concept store is a retail model organized around selling a carefully curated selection of multicategory, multibrand products and/or services that connect to an overarching theme. They often evoke a lifestyle that appeals to a specific target audience. Prominent examples of concept stores in the fashion industry are 10 Corso Como in Milan and Colette in Paris (closed in 2017). See Eddie Miles, *Contemporary Retail Design. A Store Planner's Handbook* (Marlborough: The Crowood Press, 2021).
 13. Claudio Marengo Mores, *From Fiorucci to the Guerrilla Stores* (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 2006).
 14. Murialdo, 59.
 15. Bill Webb, "A classification approach to flagship stores," in *Flagship Marketing: Concepts and places*, ed. Tony Kent and Reva Brown (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 20–31. Steve Baron, Barry Davies, and David Swindley, *The Macmillan Dictionary of Retailing* (London: Macmillan, 1991).
 16. Nobbs, Moore and Sheridan. "The Flagship Format within the Luxury Fashion Market". *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, Vol. 40, no.12 (2012): 920–34.
 17. Nobbs, Moore and Sheridan, 922.

- Location: prominent area (streets dedicated to luxury commerce) of a major fashion city.
- Dimension: usually bigger than conventional stores, to allocate a wider product assortment.
- Design: extremely curated and often spectacular, carried out by world-renowned architects.

These concepts outline a physical definition, distinguishing flagship stores from other store typologies. Nevertheless, different reasons and implications in the design of a flagship store emerge also analysing the relationship between fashion, architecture, economy, and culture, and their intersections on multiple, deeper, levels.

Cultural Legitimacy: Mediatic Architecture as a Strategy

Among its many symbolic and pragmatic values, architecture served for centuries as an instrument to represent power, employed from Ancient Egypt's Pharaohs to 20th century regimes.¹⁸ Throughout the centuries, its ability to convey meanings legitimised this discipline as a communication medium, "a primary site of image-making and space-shaping in our cultural economy."¹⁹ At the turn of the new century, the intersection between fashion and architecture became a matter of narrative with major brands, especially in the high fashion field, adopting the design of space and the architecture of their stores as a differentiating and (cultural) legitimising factor. After a phase of industrial consolidation, fashion brands affirmed themselves as economic powerhouses, and architecture became indispensable to redeem them from being considered frivolous.²⁰ Thus, between the end of 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, big-name architects like Rem Koolhaas or Herzog & De Meuron were called to take part in the cobranding of fashion houses whose aura was enhanced by the "added cultural capital that stemmed from [their] creative reputation."²¹ Exceptional architecture, as we might call it due to its aesthetic characteristics and the reputation of its architects, created intangible value for companies wishing to leave their mark on history — and the history of art — with urban-scale, branded sculptures. According to Jess Berry, flagship stores blend commerce and entertainment in a combination that worked because it employed "the cultural capital of art, architecture, and museum frameworks to create increasingly fantastical and immersive spaces for fashion consumption."²² With the spread of *starchitecture*²³ at the end of the 90s, architects started being considered celebrities and their production was discussed widely through mass media. Architecture became part of pop culture.²⁴ Following the success of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, not only municipalities and regional authorities but also private companies, promoted the construction of mediatic architecture, intended as alluring buildings that could hit the first page of magazines, in the attempt of generating positive transformations injecting architectural — and therefore cultural — value into the cities and attract capital. Within this context, fashion brands rode the wave of architectural possibilities using the flagship building as a privileged medium of positioning and communication.²⁵

18. Silvano Mendes, "Fashion and architecture: Beyond the paradigm of the envelope," in *Textiles, Identity And Innovation: In Touch*, eds. Gianni Montagna et al. (London: Taylor&Francis Group, 2020), 141–47. Regarding the relationship between architecture and power, see Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex: The architecture of power* (London: Penguin Books, 2011).

19. Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), VII.

20. Dario Scodeller, *Negozi. L'architetto nello spazio della merce* (Milano: Electa, 2007).

21. Adam Sharr, "Libeskind in Las Vegas: Reflections on Architecture as a Luxury Commodity," in *Critical Luxury Studies: Art, Design, Media*, eds. John Armitage et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 172.

22. Jess Berry, *House of Fashion: Haute Couture and the Modern Interior* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 27.

23. Among many texts available on the topic, a recent and exhaustive one is *About Star Architecture: Reflecting on Cities in Europe* eds. Nadia Alaily-Mattar, Davide Ponzini, Alain Thierstei. (Cham: Springer, 2020).

24. Apple's "Think Different" ad campaign, launched Fall 1997, featured a wide variety of individuals including Frank Gehry, who also appears in the episode "The Seven-Beer Snitch" of the animated television series *The Simpsons* (April 3, 2005).

25. Dario Scodeller, "Paesaggi dello Shopping," in *Design della comunicazione ed esperienze di acquisto*, ed. Bucchetti (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2004), 60–73.

Hyper-Architecture as a Field for Innovation

The alliance between the disciplines of fashion and architecture hasn't always been well received by the architecture critic.²⁶ Nevertheless, putting aside the worry for the “higher art” to be contaminated with the triviality of commerce, it must be recognised that luxury fashion brands gave architects the opportunity to express themselves, experimenting with materials, technologies, and spatial concepts without almost any limit in terms of design choices and budget.²⁷ Architects took advantage of luxury brands' economic possibilities to explore new tools (i.e., computer programs for rendering, calculating and designing projects), innovative materials and construction techniques in a creative way that wouldn't have been possible in other fields.²⁸ Professionals such as Renzo Piano, Toyo Ito or Kazuyo Sejima leveraged on their allegiance with fashion brands to address issues related to the project, pushing architectural research each time a little bit further and contributing in this way to its development. The goal was not just to find aesthetic solutions for the representative needs of fashion brands but to use architectural tools to find answers to more pressing matters such as the relationship with urban context and local culture, the understanding of contemporary lifestyles, the use of space, and the concept of permanence and evanescence.²⁹ With flagship stores, the challenge of building the identity of a global luxury fashion brand also went through the construction of hyper-designed buildings, where “architects ... recognized the value of fashion in their quest for innovative ways to approach a built environment with constantly changing needs and concerns.”³⁰

Hybrid Space

The turn to the 21st century brought a wind of change in the global economy with the progression of economic values shifting from a *service economy* to an *experience economy*.³¹ The recognition of store design as capable of producing emotional effects on customers and influencing purchase probability³² brought the physical store to the fore as the emotional stage where to add value to the shopping experience. Value translated into a space that allowed visitors — not just clients anymore — to enjoy their permanence within the store and thus develop loyalty to the brand.

The necessity to offer an engaging experience beyond purchase was not a novelty, as demonstrated by examples such as the Olivetti stores, which provided art exhibitions and courses within their spaces, or the Fiorucci ones, authentic meeting places for the younger generations. Nevertheless, what decades earlier was still part of the product promotion, assumed in the flagship store a much more central position intending to emphasize the cognitive and perceptive dimension of shopping, which is increasingly becoming a communicative process, rather than just an economic one.³³ In the book *Projects for PRADA*, Rem Koolhaas affirmed: “In a world where everything is shopping... and shopping is everything... what

26. In Italy, for example, opponents could be found both of the “starchitect” phenomenon and of the flagship store phenomenon. For the first theme, see: Franco La Cecla, *Contro l'Architettura*, 2008; Nikos Salingaros, *No alle Archistar*, 2009. For the second, see: Giacomo Borella, “Prada: un monumento griffato OMA, Herzog & De Meuron,” *Corriere della Sera* (March 8, 2001): 59; Vittorio Gregotti, “Quando la filosofia dello shopping contamina l'architettura,” *Corriere della Sera* (March 16, 2001):35.

27. Giammarresi, *La moda*.

28. Ines Tolic, *Maison Hermès: A House Built on Balance* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2020).

29. Giammarresi, *La moda*.

30. Potvin, *Places and Spaces*, 4.

31. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 1999).

32. From Kotler (“Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool,” 1974) onwards, this topic has been investigated thoroughly within the last decades. See also Lou W. Turley and Ronald E Milliman, “Atmospheric Effects on Shopping Behavior,” *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 49 (2/2000): 193–211, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963\(99\)00010-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(99)00010-7); Paul Ballantine, Richard Jack and Andrew Parsons, “Atmospheric Cues and Their Effect on the Hedonic Retail Experience,” *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, Vol. 38 (2010): 641–653, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09590551011057453>.

33. Marcello Sansone and Francesco Scafarto, “I Luoghi del commercio moderno come ‘contenitori’ di esperienze: L'evoluzione del punto vendita nella comunicazione della brand identity,” in *La moda e l'architettura*, ed. Gisella Giammarresi (Milano: Electa, 2008), 37–47.

is luxury? luxury is NOT shopping.”³⁴ Expanding this statement, he made some associations such as “Luxury=Waste: In a real estate context where every square meter counts, the ultimate luxury is wasted space. Space that is not productive — not shopping — affords contemplation, privacy, mobility, and luxury.”³⁵ As an almost logical consequence of this claim, when designing the innovative New York Epicenter for PRADA, Koolhaas introduced non-commerce-related spaces within the store, reconfiguring it into a polyvalent public space. The opening of the Prada store significantly contributed to blurring the retail shop building type. The Epicenter, together with other flagship stores of the same period, became the beacon for a new generation of stores that respond to the evolution of product value, offering visitors a hybrid place where time and space dilute, and buying is just one of the many activities that it is possible to perform inside.

Flagship Evolution

Amongst many events that have marked the last few years, including a global economy recession, the worldwide spread of the Internet and social media is for sure one of the most significant for the retail industry.³⁶ Daily routines are today dominated by social networks, digital technologies and “connected” objects that are defining new on- and off- line behaviours. Technology has rapidly created a new system of values that is gaining importance in the formulation of alternative consumption patterns and purchase methods,³⁷ also affecting the retail architecture environment. At such a high point of complexity, the retail industry, which by nature requires the implementation of continuous innovation processes, demands for an increasingly higher level of design. Physical space is blurring: what before was a definite entity, enclosed by physical architectural elements, is today liquid, less defined. Digitalization has changed the mental conception, imagination, and dimension of space and understanding recent transformations will help tracing a path for future ones.

Customer (and) Experience

A growing number of consumers belongs today to generations that, also because of the pandemic-induced e-commerce boom, are increasingly confident with online shopping. This puts pressure on physical stores as customers have higher expectations around their services and, with an increasing number of competitors, customer loyalty in such a fast-moving environment is constantly at risk.

According to Murialdo,

Any consideration of the role of the new space for shopping must place the consumer-user at the centre of the process, not in a passive manner, as protagonist in a pre-arranged scenario, but in an active role capable of exerting a profound influence on the economic system.³⁸

Providing an engaging shopping experience and arousing emotions through store design is now an established practice. Today though, in-store experiences are more creative and collaborative across fields and, above all, allow customers to take an active role over more personalised interactions. The customers can be co-creators of their shopping journey through a customer-centred and hyper-designed experience that contributes to establishing a stronger connection with the brand. For stores like Canada Goose’s

34. Rem Koolhaas and OMA, *Projects for Prada: Part 1* (Milano: Fondazione Prada Edizioni, 2001), 58.

35. Rem Koolhaas and OMA.

36. Bethan Alexander and Marta Blazquez Cano, “Store of the Future: Towards a (Re)Invention and (Re)Imagination of Physical Store Space in an Omnichannel Context,” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Vol. 55 (August 2019): 101913, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.101913>.

37. Patsy Perry, Anthony Kent, and Francesca Bonetti, “The Use of Mobile Technologies in Physical Stores: The Case of Fashion Retailing,” in *Exploring Omnichannel Retailing*, eds. Wojciech Piotrowicz et al. (Springer Cham, 2018), 169–95, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98273-1_8.

38. Murialdo, *Practice of Consumption*, 171.

The Journey³⁹ or Jacquemus' pop-ups,⁴⁰ the objective is less to provide in-store transactions or display products (things that can easily be fulfilled online) and more to provide experiences, create a connection with consumers. Using a combination of unique displays, immersive settings and interactive spaces, the aim of physical store design is to create an in-store journey that can attract customers despite the heightened convenience of virtual platforms. The new generation of stores is configured as a transformable, hyperphysical, curated space that focuses on placemaking, establishing as venues rather than just places for shopping. Today consumers almost don't buy products anymore. Instead, they buy into the consequences of their experiences and this tendency will continue to grow. Digital technologies solved most of consumers' purchasing issues to the extent that in the future, whenever people come together in a physical place, it will be about something that they cannot get online. For retailers, this means creating compelling brand, product, and service experiences, and rethink the measurements of a business success. Where now we talk about sales density per square meter, it might be time to move towards the notion of experience per square meter.⁴¹

Phygital Stores

As the importance of shopping experience is reaffirmed once again, it is fundamental to constantly update its definition, looking into those factors that might affect it. What does "experience" mean today, considering the diffusion of online shopping and m-commerce? An engaging and satisfying shopping experience cannot ignore the existence of a digital realm, in which empowered customers are increasingly active, and must accomplish a virtual-physical integration that is not just about logistics and in-store digital tools. The mutual exchange between the digital and the physical domains implies to start from the conceptual level, with the design of spaces able to generate the feeling of an in-between experience.

Augmented space represents an important challenge for contemporary retail architecture and an opportunity for its future. Fashion retailers are creating innovative spaces in which the digital and physical dimensions have different possibilities to intersect and influence each other. The Burberry store in Shenzhen,⁴² resulting from the collaboration between the luxury brand and the tech giant TenCent, or the Zero10 x Crosby Studio physical pop-up store for digital clothes that opened in New York in September 2022,⁴³ reveal how a new multifaceted retail realm is emerging where neither the digital nor the physical platform compete to prevail over one another but instead create a synergy that expands their single possibilities, giving shape to new omnichannel architectures. The virtual and the three-dimensional spaces increasingly resonate with one into the other, defining a multiplicity of hybrid, phygital landscapes in continuous expansion. "Digitally mediated fashion is not simply a new transactional opportunity but is an additional space for the production of desire, a storehouse of signs, images, connections, and significations for consumers, producers, and intermediaries to work through and with,"⁴⁴ a resource that must be seized to keep the pace with future transformations.

39. Sandrine Rastello and Paula Sambo, "e-Shoppers Walk on Fake Ice, Real Snow in New 'Store'," *Bloomberg Business Week*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-04/canada-goose-store-has-snow-fake-ice-and-no-inventory?leadSource=uverify%20wall>.

40. Domus, "Il pop-up store 24h/24 di Jacquemus arriva a Milano," *Domus Web*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.domusweb.it/it/design/2022/02/25/il-pop-up-store-24h24-di-jacquemus-arriva-a-milano.html>; James Parkes, "Jacquemus creates surrealist interpretation of his own bathroom for Selfridges pop-up," *Dezeen*, May 11, 2022: <https://www.dezeen.com/2022/05/11/jacquemus-le-bleu-selfridges-retail-interiors/>.

41. "Five takeaways for the future of physical retail," Liganova, accessed January 28, 2021, <https://medium.com/businessbites/5-takeaways-for-the-future-of-physical-retail-357db320d3bb>.

42. "Burberry presenta Open Spaces," Burberry, accessed May 28, 2023, <https://it.burberry.com/c/burberry-open-spaces-shenzhen/>.

43. "ZERO10 x Crosby Studios," Crosby.zero, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://crosby.zero10.app/>.

44. Louise Crewe, *The Geographies of Fashion: Consumption, Space, and Value* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 137.

Communicative Spaces for Branded Communities

Through different approaches, fashion brands are transforming their stores into their three-dimensional beacons, in the attempt of gathering consumers around a strong identity, a recognizable image and shared values. One approach is to establish corporate heritage museums, spaces that relate to the brand's history or a particular culture to which the brand is connected. Through this feature, brands can narrate their origins, recount their evolution, and display their aesthetic leveraging on a community of aficionados — as in the case of the Galerie Dior in Paris⁴⁵ or the Gucci Garden in Florence,⁴⁶ both created in the city where the brands were born as to emphasize the connection between the fashion house and its location. A different way to foster identification is through stores designed as branded social clubs. In the Gucci Circolo pop-ups,⁴⁷ the purchase activity fades into the background in a space designed to provide a brand experience revolving around aggregation, dedicated to people coming together as in a community centre and sharing the same cultural codes. Other brands are communicating specific values that stand at the core of their identity through “manifesto stores.” Trying to reposition themselves as new reference points within the current socio-cultural panorama, fashion brands are increasingly assuming a leading role in addressing and challenging present issues such as gender, equality, or global warming.⁴⁸ They started using their commercial realm as a space for social and political discourse, contributing to reshaping the civic landscape. By recognising the power of these actions, brands can embed relevant value into their spaces making them an instrument for a much more powerful communication. Brands like Stella McCartney,⁴⁹ for example, convey their commitment to certain causes through the design of their stores, transmitting this information to their clients through a tangible, physical, and impactful medium. This also helps to reach a wider base of possible future consumers that are concerned with the same problems and appreciate finding them addressed by a powerful voice.

As Quinn affirmed:

Today fashion is establishing itself as a space for both speaking and listening, as an open forum where individual expression can connect with the broadest political issues. It is establishing itself as a vehicle for collective reflecting and a site for protest. ... As the consumption of fashion begins to find new audiences and forge new identities, we can no longer draw a demarcation line around fashion's space.”⁵⁰

As they increasingly present themselves as cultural and social reference points for consumers and society in general, fashion brands are continuously blurring the demarcation between what was intended as a commercial space, what was considered an event venue and what was defined as a public place. With all this in mind, the points that constituted the previous definition of flagship store must be updated with new observations:

- From the high street to anywhere: With digitalization carried to the extreme, fashion brands are starting to expand into the digital universe (Metaverse, gaming, Augmented Reality...), creating their own virtual worlds and overcoming the concept of location. Furthermore, in an increasingly globalised context, the established world's fashion capitals (Paris, Milan, London, New York, and

45. “La Galerie Dior,” Galerie Dior, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.galeriedior.com/en>

46. “Gucci Garden,” Gucci Garden, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://guccigarden.gucci.com/>

47. In 2021, Gucci opened a series of pop-ups in Milan, London and Berlin. Cf. Italo Pantano, “Il Gucci Circolo Milano amplifica la community del brand,” *Vogue*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.vogue.it/moda/article/gucci-circolo-milano-amplifica-la-community-del-brand>; Katie O'Mallei, “Gucci's New London Pop-Up Is The Perfect Way To Celebrate The Brand's 100th Birthday,” *Elle*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/a37892642/gucci-circolo-shoreditch/>; Von Dennis Braatz, “Gucci Circolo Berlin: Mitten in der deutschen Hauptstadt hat der temporäre Erlebnisraum eröffnet,” *Vogue Germany*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.vogue.de/mode/artikel/gucci-circolo-berlin>.

48. Fredi Fischli, Niels Olsen, Janina Gosseye, Adam Jasper and Mark Lee, “Retail Apocalypse,” exhibition by ETH Zurich in collaboration Harvard University Graduate School of Design, held at ETH Zurich between February, 26 2020 and May, 15 2020, <https://retailapocalypse.gta.arch.ethz.ch/>.

49. “Discover 23 old bond street,” Stella McCartney, accessed May 28, 2023, <https://www.stellamccartney.com/us/en/stellas-world/discover-23-old-bond-street.html>.

50. Bradley Quinn, *The Fashion of Architecture* (New York: Berg, 2003), 38.

Tokyo) are flanked by a growing number of cities that are becoming relevant as financial and/or fashion markets.

- From “bigness” to ephemerality: With the improvements of online shopping services (payments, shipping, returns...), brands can now rely on virtual platforms to finalize the purchase phase. This allows physical stores to avoid “bigness” in favour of a more curated consumption, providing a limited selection of products,⁵¹ and concentrating on staging a more engaging experience within spaces that are not necessarily huge — or permanent — anymore.
- From the architectural masterpiece to the experiential environment: As the store aesthetic is still of primary importance for brands to promote themselves, they now have acquired their own prestige and the support of the “starchitect” as brand ambassador is today less necessary.⁵² Brands are investing more in the content rather than the container, creating experiential places designed to host different activities and convey a multiplicity of messages aimed at presenting them as interlocutors of the new consumer not only in the commercial landscape, but also in the socio-cultural one.

Flagships are an efficacious form of branding. The brand’s power, values and identity embedded in this cutting-edge type of store are difficult to replicate on virtual platforms. For this reason, despite the spread of online retailing, the flagship store remains an important medium for communicating brand messages and maintaining auratic power in an ever-increasing virtual retailscape.⁵³ With online touchpoints allowing for easy and smooth purchase processes, it is possible that brands will increasingly approach physical retailing with flagship-like stores rather than “normal” ones. The value of the flagship store as a testing ground for commercial ideas and spatial solutions, a space for experience and entertainment, and a platform to communicate ideas is a constant throughout its existence, and it is the characteristic that is most likely to persist in the future. “Flagship stores remain vital, although not necessarily for shopping per se. ... Their semiotic function as signifiers feeds into ever increasing differentiation.”⁵⁴ What it is inevitably going to change — and the transformation is already visible — is the architectural language with which brands will express themselves each time. Today more than ever we can affirm that

the shop ... cannot be simply reduced to its physical appearance but its form is the result of a combination of economic, social and material factors, and the task of the designer is to act as a mediator and interpreter of an increasingly complex set of needs.⁵⁵

Conclusions

As many digital-first brands demonstrate by opening physical touchpoints,⁵⁶ the bricks-and-mortar store is not outdated, but its survival depends on its adaptability. While marketing scholars and design practitioners are already dealing with the most recent transformations of commercial spaces, the amount of field-specific academic literature remains scarce from an architectural perspective.⁵⁷ It is urgent then to reflect on these evolutions from the point of view of “space-makers,” to understand how architects and retail designers should approach this topic in the future, and what position they

51. Marcus Morrell and Lynne Goulding, “Future of Retail,” Arup Foresight, Research and Innovation, accessed July, 09 2021, <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/research/section/the-future-of-retail-2017>.

52. Recently, Valentino unveiled a new global store concept designed by the in-house architectural team, surpassing the one signed by the famous architect David Chipperfield. See <https://cpp-luxury.com/valentino-unveils-new-global-store-concept/>.

53. Crewe, *The Geographies of Fashion*, 102.

54. Fischli, Olsen, Gosseye, Jasper and Lee, “Retail Apocalypse.”

55. Murialdo, *Practice of Consumption*, 19.

56. Few examples of a widespread trend are: Warby Parker, Bonobo, Glossier and also Amazon. See <https://luxe.digital/business/digital-luxury-reports/digital-luxury-ecommerce-brands-open-physical-stores/>.

57. Elisa Servais, Katelijn Quartier and Jan Vanrie, “‘Experiential Retail Environments’ in the Fashion Sector,” *Fashion Practice* 14, no. 3 (2022): 449–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17569370.2022.2124639>.

will occupy among the many competencies that are required to design a space for fashion (commerce). Drawing from Koolhaas's provocative claim,⁵⁸ shopping has become a social activity that occupies a considerable part of our leisure time and urban space. From their first introduction as architecture for shopping, flagships expanded in recent years as a concept that goes beyond the idea of a commercial space as fashion is increasingly becoming a driving force of cultural practices. As the brand's physical presence within a certain territory, new *flagship places* are conceived to provide services, promote art, and foster exchange representing new points of reference for the whole city. Through its interventions within the urban environment, fashion is defining itself as a system capable of generating architectural, urban, cultural and social value. The architectural project becomes in this context not only an instrument of self-assertion for fashion brands but also an engine of urban development, creating new synergies between the ephemeral and the permanent.⁵⁹ Understanding the processes of urban creation, re-semantisation and re-functionalisation fostered by the fashion system through its branded architecture is therefore extremely important for its repercussions on how people will live and experience cities in the future. The fashion space has

the critical potential to address key concerns of contemporary geographic enquiry -sight, temporality, day, night, sustainability. Fashion space has both cultural and economic power and potential. This is geographically critical in furthering our understanding of the economic, social, and political dimensions, possibilities and tensions of creative practices.⁶⁰

58. In the first paragraph of his book, Barreneche affirms: "In his Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping, [...] Rem Koolhaas posits that retail is the single most influential force on the shape of the modern city," cf. Raul A. Barreneche, *New Retail* (New York: Phaidon Inc., 2008), 7.

59. Linfante and Iannilli, "New Architectural Paradigms," 262–70.

60. Crewe, *Geographies*, 112.

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