

HOSOYA SCHAEFER ARCHITECTS

AG Zürich

Reinhardstrasse 19, 8008 Zürich, Switzerland
T: +41(0)43.243.6313 F: +41(0)43.243.6315
office@hosoyaschaefer.com

Newness

In July of this year, Prada will open the second store built by OMA in Beverly Hills, the third epicenter store for Prada after New York Soho by OMA and Tokyo Aoyama designed by Herzog & de Meuron. When starting the collaboration with Prada almost five years ago, OMA did not expect the amount and range of ideas and additional projects that would be created during that time. The Prada projects accompanied a transformation of OMA, in part prompted the foundation of AMO and resulted in a way of thinking about architecture far beyond typology and the traditional limitations of the profession.

The collaboration of Prada and OMA is a fortuitous match. Miuccia Prada reviewed stacks of architectural books in the search of an architect with whom she would want to work. Rem's mix of retro-modernity and existentialist commitment to the contemporary, the beauty of OMA's architecture and the narratives reverberating in its wake seemed irresistible. Both Prada and OMA share that simultaneous commitment to modernity and the contemporary. Modernity is not the institutionalized dream of Space, Time and Architecture but rather the ongoing project of liberating creativity from the containment of traditions and the straightjacket of ideologies, searching for newness wherever it occurs. Newness was meant to emerge from the montage of activities in the proposal for La Villette that maximized the friction and fertility between programs, or from the intertwining of the controlled institution and the uncontrollable forces of urbanity shaped like an encounter of Sol Lewitt and Hugo Ball in the proposal for the Très Grand Library in Paris. It was researched in the dumps of Lagos, the result of the crash landing of a Modernist experiment and the consequent resettlement of this botched Modernist plane by the pioneer plants of self-organization. And it is carefully fostered in the office with staff from all over the world and their competing views and ambitions replicating the continuous hybridization of cultures in the course of modernization. In the case of Prada, OMA for the first time was faced with the search of newness on the scale of an entire company, at once a testimony to the pressures for change inherent in the fashion system and to the personal curiosity and courage of the owners.

'Content', OMA's exhibition in Berlin that is now traveling around the globe, is an acknowledgement that the speed of cultural development far exceeds the suppleness of architecture. The exhibition is like a tsunami of content washing over the more stable coral reef of architecture with the hope that in the ensuing fertile froth newness evolves.

Machine dreams

The Beverly Hills store consists of a large aluminum box in seeming suspension between the two neighboring buildings. Devoid of any logo and open over its entire width to Rodeo

HOSOYA SCHAEFER ARCHITECTS

AG Zürich

Drive, the building juxtaposes the esthetics of a sleek machine to the travertine-veneer clad retail classicism of the neighboring Gucci and Brioni stores. Shopwindows are inserted into the floor with elliptic openings ending in large fiberglass display cones. A wide central stair, a kind of inversion of the Soho store's wave, leads into the interior of the aluminum box. Below the stair a mirror clad alcove offers a faint echo of Prada's original store in Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. The interior of the aluminum box will have a continuously changing spatial effect. The entire circumference of the interior is lined by sponge panels, a new material developed by OMA from modeling foam. Surrounding the stairs and containing the dressing rooms is a smaller box made of Privalite glass panels that can be smoothly dimmed from transparent to translucent. Triggered by visitors or controlled by algorithms the Privalite box will continuously change the size and shape of the perceived space. On top of the aluminum box a light filled, spacious penthouse contains a VIP area in the back and a large scenario space towards Rodeo Drive.

The Beverly Hills store is much more domestic in scale than Soho or Aoyama. Its spaces are intimate and introverted except for the large openings towards Rodeo Drive. The media elements inserted between the products, much like in New York, are meant to be tactile and offer interaction. The elevator contains many small displays that 'scan' an imaginary inside of the elevator shaft when the cabin is in motion increasing the effect of a 'Wunderkammer' where nothing quite is what it seems. The content strategy blends the narcissism of fashion and the current political paranoia with a series of real time content engines continuously accessing the Internet for new bounty.

Digital media are used to enhance aura and to provide service. The goal is to create an environment that adds the fluidity, eloquence and convenience of the digital domain to the architecture. The store is like a large, three-dimensional browser where in points information aligns with the physical environment – a convergence of bits and spaces, abstract potential and individual reality.

Beginnings

When Prada came to OMA almost five years ago, they wanted to launch a process of architectural experimentation. The green stores were a perfected, standardized system that almost militaristically supported the rapid expansion of the company. The new stores they envisioned were to be diverse and varied, and above all changeable so that visiting them had nothing of the predictability of retail. The new stores should also create better relationships with their clients, as Prada was concerned about losing precisely those customers that turned the small traditional company in that fashion was not disconnected from the world but rather was created from (and worn for) a constant engagement with it.

HOSOYA SCHAEFER ARCHITECTS

AG Zürich

The Soho epicentre store, opened in New York in December 2001, was a first attempt at finding answers to all these questions. It was meant to be one large laboratory where ideas were tried, developed and refined. The term 'epicenter' was chosen to offer an alternative to the 'flagship stores'. Instead of stabilizing an identity, these stores were meant to destabilize it. A constant source of probing tremors, they were to be at once echographs discovering local fault lines and launching pads for new experiments.

Change was planned to occur on many levels: The store's visual display is rethought every season, a change supported by the large wallpaper on the ground floor that gives the store each time a radically new appearance. With participation of the Prada Fondazione cultural events are regularly scheduled. For these occasions all the display units in the ground floor, flexibly mounted on industrial tracks in the ceiling, were moved together into one inert block - a momentary ceasefire on Soho's battleground of brands.

Placed among garments on hang bars, inserted into display tables and into mirrors the store contains a series of media displays. AMO called them ubiquitous displays due to the flexible manner they could be placed in the space. Like a contemporary version of ornamental wall paintings, they juxtapose to merchandise alternative stories and ways of seeing. Content was drawn from Prada and anything related to its sensibility in the widest sense, less interested in coherence than in a particular way of looking at the world. Rather than achieving the smoothness and linearity of a 'brand narrative', AMO was interested in using Prada as an engine for content creation and proclaiming its permanent shifting of interests as program and identity.

Ubiquitous information

Implementing a third store allows not only implementing an updated and improved version of the concept. It is also the beginning of a network of digital presence consisting of the Broadway, Tokyo and Beverly Hills epicenter stores and eventually the web site.

Beverly Hills will open with media elements that enhance the space and generate aura. In a second step, the technology is upgraded to also improve service. From the testing ground of the stores, the service strategy is currently being improved and reverse integrated into the entirety of the company aiming at a global approach to information, service and content.

Products in the Beverly Hills store will be identified with RFID tags like in the Soho store. The potential of RFID tags in replacing barcodes has been known already for several years. With Walmart, Tesco and other big retailers adopting them as a standard there seems to be enough critical mass to make that technology ubiquitous.

HOSOYA SCHAEFER ARCHITECTS

AG Zürich

Beyond their benefits for logistics, the tags also support environments. Each tag is like an umbilical cord connecting a thing in reality to its digital counterpart. Furnished with RFID antennas and readers, spaces or furniture items are able to recognize tagged products and can react accordingly. The design of environments merges with the design of interfaces. A stock room for example could be looked at as a real world database where each physical item is a database entry with the RFID tag containing its digital address.

It will be the task of a new generation of designers to make this interaction a fruitful rather than a jarring one, negotiating a new set of issues regarding the public, privacy, perception and interaction.

Lessons learned

Not all concepts worked as expected in the reality of the Soho store. In addition, the very success of the store meant that it was visited by numbers of visitors more like a public space than the space of a luxury retailer. At the same time, Prada developed expertise in new areas. For the first time all the style sketches, material and color swatches were assembled in one central database and made accessible to store staff. The project of a global customer database was started. Prada gained a lot of very early experience with RFID technology. And most importantly Prada started to experiment with media content on a regular basis not only in the store, but also in the fashion show at events and openings.

From form to performance

Years earlier, while I was working with Rem Koolhaas and my student colleagues on the Harvard Guide to Shopping, we realized how little influence architects had on retail, yet how important architecture in the widest sense was. Shopping is at once straightforward architectural program and the embodiment of the demands of financial returns on space. While architects were busy accommodating the former with their traditional tools, they either indignantly recoiled from or heedlessly supported the later during its inevitable invasion of all urban spaces and activities.

When we were researching the convenience stores in Tokyo, now already last years yellowed leaves on the evolutionary tree of retail concepts, we looked at them as the successors of the large department stores, the tiny mammals running between the feet of dying dinosaurs. The convenience store chains achieved on a similar total floor area similar revenues as the department stores. Yet they follow an entirely different logic. While the department stores were the retail microcosms of the emerging consuming middle class that showcased everything the world had to offer in one large building, the convenience stores specialize in providing daily necessities in close proximity to the consumer. While

HOSOYA SCHAEFER ARCHITECTS

AG Zürich

the department stores define the railroad terminals and city centers, the convenience stores punctuate the city's neighborhoods like oversized refrigerators. While the department stores rely on architecture to contain goods and people, the convenience stores achieve a coherent identity by means of their brand image and coherent organization by means of the data networks for logistics and business intelligence that connects them. Brand and data replace typology. The convenience stores are like the brightly glowing ends of a network infrastructure of fiber optic cables permeating the city, a Metabolist's wet dream, yet invisible to his conscious professional eye.

Towards a manifesto

OMA famously never predicted, but only interpreted. Manifestos are retroactive and observations analytic. Nevertheless, while OMA once was obsessed with inventing new typologies, a self-aware post-modernist spin on the generative forces of modernization, OMA-AMO might be, true to the iconoclastic character of its founder, leaving a much more unexpected legacy.

OMA-AMO plots a new spectrum of methods, each with a rhythm and a flexibility of its own. The ethereality of content, the metabolism of digital data and interactions and the relative solidity of architecture at best combine like the laminar flows around an airplane wing resulting in maximum lift.

Architectural thinking and imagination is free to define areas of relevance beyond the traditional boundaries of the discipline and discover surprising moments of coherence. Faced with a technological, globalized and increasingly politicized culture this broadened awareness might allow a next generation of architects to find new sparks in the glowing amber of junkspace.

Markus Schaefer, May 2004