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The Timelessness and Textures of Space

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To borrow Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic magic," a fashion designer's label possesses the auratic potency to conjure the mystique of distinction, authenticity, and exclusivity which in turn engenders a fervent dedication (verging on the religious) on the part of faithful costumers. The aura surrounding the name of the designer transforms objects of no real value to objects of luxury, preciousness, and desire. However, the label itself is not enough; it requires to be housed in a space equally endowed with the potential to elicit reverence and pleasure, a coveted destination. Boutiques offer up affective spatial attenuation of the auratic nature of the designer's label through the preferred pathways of engagement with the space and merchandise. In his discussion of retail design Otto Riewoldt contends that "[w]ith the same care and professionalism as in the theatre, the sequence of events [of shopping] must be worked out in detail, including everything from props to stage directions, in order to transform the sale of merchandise into an experience-intensive act—one in which the potential customers are actors rather than passive spectators" (Riewoldt 9). To best achieve this, a designer must create spaces which communicate his brand, as distinct from all other designer and public spaces. As a designer attempts to make his mark, therefore, so too must he employ an architect whose own unmistakable material signature will assist in the proposition and perpetuation of an authentic designer material and visual identity. The boutique itself must be equally as visually effective and materially auratic as the discreet label sewn into an Armani garment. Through space, the brand must not only articulate a "distinctive message" but also an "emotional identity" (Reitwoldt 10). Robert Triefus, executive vice-president of worldwide communications for Giorgio Armani in Milan, makes a similar claim when he states that "[s]tores are the face of a brand. . . . It is the entire image as we want it to be seen. Architecture is a very important part of brand communication. When you arrive [at a store] it should conform to your expectations of the brand" (Triefus in Turngate 77).

Perhaps it might be instructive to elucidate how Armani sews together the aura of both his name and space in the actual label used for every *prêt-à-porter* high-end garment. The black label reads "Giorgio Armani A Milano—Borgonuovo 21." The label says it all: the designer's name, the city

of his humble origins and meteoric success, and finally the address of both his home and design headquarters. Unlike with most designers, for Armani location and identity are endemic to each other. The mystique surrounding Armani is made palpable in the rarefied minimalist spaces of his boutiques around the world. His auratic presence made tangible through absences of objects, a subtle reminder of control and power over his imperial domain.

In order for Armani to successfully achieve a potent impact on the cultural landscape of fashion and design, he must make his presence felt in key outposts around the world by way of consistent spaces. Developed in the designer's Milan headquarters and created by way of his flagship boutique in Sant' Andrea, global image (through repetition) is tantamount not simply to the identity of the designer but also, and perhaps more significantly, for the consumer. For his new Beijing boutique, located in the Palace Hotel, which opened its doors in October 1998, the designer wanted to create "something that will last, not too retro, not too avant-garde, not too classic and not too futuristic" (Armani in *WWD* 9/10/1998). Originally designed by Italian architect Giancarlo Piretti, the boutique featured black granite floors, rice-colored walls, and fitting rooms with red doors with each area divided into different categories of merchandise. For Armani, the boutique achieved an important balance.

A few short years later, the boutique was refitted no longer to reflect a putative indigenous design, but rather to mirror more exactly the "authentic" Armani aesthetic showcased in the original Milan boutique. Clearly the Chinese customer desired something unique and typically Armani, rather than a quotidian aesthetic endemic to their cultural milieu effectively staging the designer's boutique as separate and removed from the everyday. Perhaps a helpful way to think through the significance of the aura of a boutique's space is through Michel Foucault's notion of the heterotopia. While Foucault outlined numerous definitions for the term, most useful is how a heterotopia marks out a space of difference, and through the rituals associated with that space occupies a position "outside of all [other ordinary] places" (Foucault 24). Boutiques are viewed at once as "mythic and real, imbued with elements of fictional space and material space. . . . Heterotopias do not exist in isolation, but become visible through their differences with other sites as they upset spatial relations or provide alternative representations of them" (Quinn 28). As a space of luxury and by default exclusivity, Armani's boutiques operate as an aesthetic destination of calm and beauty while also serving as countersites to what Armani has argued as the aggression of most design in the world at large. In this light, the aura of the boutique and hence the label itself is maintained by way of its separateness. The footprint of the boutique and its marked difference from the streets' culture outside force complete immersion, imagination, and transformation. Through the rituals of consumption and hence belonging performed within what is staged as a temple-like space, what occurs is a sort of transubstantiation whereby the visual image of fashion object (seen through the spectacle of advertising and runway presentations)

is mythically and materially transformed into reality through the embodied fashioned subject. The final touch which adds to the auratic is how through absences and presences the boutique accommodates and spatially translates “the magical timeless quality of an Armani collection with the equally timeless quality of a distinguished . . . building” (“Alluring Armani” 25). The simplicity and unadorned “timeless” architecture Armani always commissions acts as antidote to and defiant critique of the fashion system and its endless, fast-paced cycles.

Armani opened his first Giorgio Armani flagship boutique in 1981 in Milan, less than one year before the designer was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. Both events made clear Armani himself had arrived on both the cultural and fashion maps. Over the past thirty years, the Milan-based designer has collaborated with no less than ten design firms, which have included the late Naomi Leff, Giancarlo Piretti, London restaurateur Michael Chow, S. Russell Groves, Thomas O’Brien, Peter Marino, Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas, Thane Roberts, Tadao Ando, and more recently Claudio Silvestrin to design some of the most beautiful and sophisticated retail environments in the world. Given his association with Hollywood and his pervasive influence in the worlds of cinema, design, and fashion, Giorgio Armani flagship stores have also featured prominently in a number of films as backdrops, usually as sites for personal, social, financial, and, of course, sartorial transformation. However, the idea that Armani boutiques are sites of transformation is not strictly confined to the cinema. In real life, we constantly witness the transformation of people like 50 Cent, rappers who shed their urban street clothes for dark, slick, and sophisticated Armani suits to designate they too have “arrived.” Armani’s most recent collaboration with London-based architect Claudio Silvestrin has seen the total redesign and rebuilding of most of his *prêt-à-porter* Borgonuovo (commonly referred to as Black Label) boutiques and in-shop outlets in department stores around the world. Seen through the metaphor of transformation, this chapter examines the Giorgio Armani boutiques in New York redesigned by Peter Marino, the global renovation scheme designed by Silvestrin, and the most recent permutations and adaptations of Silvestrin’s blueprint which have incorporated fabric walls to expose the ways in which Armani has gradually adapted the vocabulary of minimalism and the semantics of architecture itself to evolve a boutique culture wherein the dematerialization of architecture is made possible and echoes the current ascendancy of fashion within the cultural landscape.

THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF MODERNISM

In 1996, Armani commissioned architect and interior designer Peter Marino to design a new and significantly larger boutique at 760 Madison Avenue, a few blocks south of where the original store stood since 1984 (Figure 15.1). Marino has gained a reputation as a retail architect who has acquired an

impressive roster of clients within and beyond the fashion industry. Marino was also responsible for the 1988 renovation of the designer's Milan seventeenth-century palazzo in Via Borgonuovo; the designer's choice is significant, not only because Marino's spare aesthetic is in keeping with Armani's own minimalist rigor, but also because the designer wanted the boutique to hold "a familiar atmosphere similar to that of a friend's home" (translation mine, "Boutiques de Luxe et de Mode" 107). However, despite Armani's best efforts to conjure a homely space, the reception of the boutique was less than friendly.

The proposed building designs were presented to Manhattan's Community Board 8 for approval which in turn voted fourteen to twelve to send the proposal back for changes. The Board members who voted against the project felt it was ill-suited for its Upper East Side historical surrounding. However, Shelley S. Friedman, a lawyer for Armani, stated that the "minimalist building reflects the artistic values of Giorgio Armani" ("Neighbourhood Report" 19 March 1995: 136). Although minor adjustments were suggested and concessions were made, the final plan kept within Marino's and Armani's minimalist vision. In the end, Marino deferred to the strict codes established by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission by keeping the boutique's height at 61 feet, flush with those of its neighboring brownstones. To add some architectural detail or slight decorative flourish, the architect also incorporated a recessed bay and centrally placed terrace on the third of the four floors.

Ned Cramer claimed that Marino attempted to "echo the Italian designer's sophisticated clothes through a minimalist wrapper for his new store. But other than adhering to Adolf Loos's axiom that ornament is crime, his rectilinear architecture turns its back on Modernism's basic tenets." He continues: "To mask the building's awkwardness, and to relieve his clear discomfort



Figure 15.1 Giorgio Armani New York boutique in Madison Avenue. Author's own.

with unadorned surfaces, Marino employs an extravagant material palette on the interior” (Cramer 45). Although Cramer spares barely enough ink to criticize the boutique’s interior as well as its furnishings, like many detractors he saves his hostility for the outside, that is, the façade. Critics such as Cramer suffer from a sort of superficial physiognomic reading of architecture, ignoring the spatial dimension within and beyond the space created by the designer and what it might suggest about the development of minimalist architecture and its relationship to consumption and display. As a method of ascertaining meaning through surfaces, a physiognomic reading, I wish to suggest, is not dissimilar to the minimalist *geist* itself.

Minimalist space and architecture allow for the brand’s identity to be clearly articulated, ensuring the consumer-viewer is neither distracted nor dissuaded from the goal, that is, the purchase of a lifestyle. In the New York boutique, boundaries are created—both perceived and material. The solidity of the cream-colored repetitive panels of French limestone used for the facade is counterposed with the purported transparency of the glass panels featured in the central portion of the building. Yet, the glass panels, including those on the ground floor, forbid the viewer’s visual access to the boutique’s interior spaces. Thick scrims divide the outside from the inside, allowing some light to pour in, while obstructing the view. The only visibility given to the pedestrian is through the central glass doors. While the scrims function as curtains, they remain uncompromising backdrops to the mannequins and simple displays featured in windows on the ground level (Figure 15.2). By way of the seemingly intrusive minimalist architecture as well as the scrims, the Armani boutique clearly sets itself apart from the neighborhood and outside world and is beholden only to its own rules, rituals, and regulations. Shop minimalism, with its spare display of objects, is not unlike the minimalism of a modern art gallery; it stands to represent importance through the creation of an aura of originality and exclusivity. Within a minimalist landscape, as a sort of immediate experience, the embodied subject enters the rarefied realm of fashion and is impelled to create its own narrative, its own sensorial perceptions of the spaces of fashion. The minimalist “aesthetic of emptiness initially attracts the gaze of passers-by and, as the naked walls offer no further distraction, attracts them magnetically to the strategically placed goods” (Ruby 21–22). Armani himself wrote of the importance of the space of the boutique and how it should communicate to the customer:

Furnishings must reflect the soul of the product, the brand, as well as create what I call a thousand and one complicities—the subtle temptations which lure a consumer into the store for a quick look. If he or she is then captivated by a friendly space, by easy-to-look-at displays and pleasant lighting, the store will be successful. It will be even more successful if the second element of atmosphere is there. I’m talking about the salespeople (Armani 9).



Figure 15.2 Giorgio Armani New York boutique in Madison Avenue. Author's own.

Once inside the boutique, luxury, while restrained, is subtly perceived in the ebonized French wood floors which are partially covered with thick and soft custom-made gray or espresso woven linen carpets that help to mark out unique spaces of consumption, each suggesting its own narrative. The individual sales rooms, which flank either side of each

floor's central sales areas, have walls of either French limestone, bleached cerused curly hickory, or bleached anigre against whose surfaces pegs feature complete outfits, hung equidistant from each other. Not unlike the manner in which the critics viewed the design of the building, Armani invites his visitors to participate in a form of surface readings by way of the garments' textiles.

TIMELESSNESS AND THE LUXURY OF MINIMALISM

In 1999, Armani commissioned London-based architect Claudio Silvestrin to create a new design concept for the renovation of his boutiques around the world. The first to be refitted was not his Milan flagship, but the Paris boutique, the purported capital of high fashion. Over the course of six years, Silvestrin would renovate over twenty Giorgio Armani boutiques around the world in cities like Tokyo, Dusseldorf, Atlanta, Sao Paulo, and Costa Mesa (see Figures 15.3–15.5). These many boutiques share in common an absolute and uncompromisingly similar use of materials, design, space, and textures.



Figure 15.3 Giorgio Armani Costa Mesa boutique. Photography by Michael Weschler. Courtesy of Michael Weschler Photography.



Figure 15.4 Giorgio Armani Atlanta boutique. Photography by Michael Weschler. Courtesy of Michael Weschler Photography.



Figure 15.5 Giorgio Armani Atlanta boutique. Photography by Michael Weschler. Courtesy of Michael Weschler Photography.

Originally inaugurated in 1987, with the Paris boutique in Place Vendôme Armani purposefully removed it from the fashion sector and commercial areas and opted for a location traditionally known for its exclusive jewelers. Place Vendôme, according to Armani, defied the logic of the fashion system. Referring to the streets made famous for their high-end designer boutiques, Armani claimed that “[t]hose areas are like fashion. They’re always changing. Place Vendôme will always be Place Vendôme.” By locating his boutique in this time-honored square not only implies a spatial removal from the quotidian or typical, once again, but also and perhaps more suggestively a desire on the part of the designer to deploy the historically rich and architecturally significant neighborhood to make his own claims for longevity, a classic style at once outside of and removed from the relentless system of fashion itself. For this boutique, Armani wanted something “elegant, luxurious that work[ed] with the surrounding environment” and yet at the same time something that was undeniably his style once again marking his undeniable presence (*WWD* 1/26/1987). Originally designed by Giancarlo Piretti, the boutique, in keeping with Armani’s fascination with the 1920s and 1930s, offered customers segmented intimate salons for the womenswear on the first floor. The second floor, which housed the menswear, displayed the garments along the circumference and featured at the center the staircase which connected the two floors allowing for a perfect, unabashed panoptic purview of the comings and goings of the first floor.

While Silvestrin’s redesign of the Place Vendôme boutique in 1999 places greater emphasis on the luxury of space, he also controls the manner in which the visitor immerses him or herself into the boutique, contriving a gradual and segmented approach to the inner sanctum. According to Silvestrin, “the entrance becomes a poetic pause between the exterior and the display area for Armani’s collections” (Serrats 112). Once inside the entrance, a limestone wall obstructs a complete gaze into the interior space. “One then enters a second space of transition defined by a sculptural vase of the same stone as the walls and floors. This creates the effect of continuity and sobriety that so characterises the work of Armani” (Mostadi 92). While water is not a feature of the vase, it nonetheless conjures the baptismal fonts displayed prominently in the entrance of Roman Catholic churches. Mirrors not only operate in a typical way, extending and expanding the sensation of space, but also mark transitional points as the customer moves through the boutique. The lighting also helps to articulate and define the space. As has always been the tradition in a Giorgio Armani boutique, special, soft lighting hidden in the ceiling and embedded in the walls add a calming and luxurious tone, focusing solely on the garments displayed at exact intervals, a lighting and spatial effect which mimics the runway in his Milan studio in via Borgonuovo. Referring specifically to the new prototype created by Silvestrin, Armani states: “I’m always looking to create an environment where the store architecture supports the presentation of the collections in a way that is modern and accessible for our customers” (Armani

Press Release 22 September 2000). Although Paris might have served as the initial prototype for the global retail face of Armani, and while each store might feature a special distinctive and often soothing element such as a water fountain (London) or even a glass water fall (Milan), the materials and spaces conjured are consistent with a clearly defined global image so that no matter where the modern customer may find him or herself, there is comfort in knowing what can be expected in a Giorgio Armani retail space. The exquisitely rare and precious St. Maximin, a soft compact cream-colored stone, is prominently featured throughout the boutiques both for the walls and flooring and is contrasted with the deep Macassar ebony and oxidized brass selected for the furniture and the fixtures designed by Silvestrin. The exclusive and limited use of one type of stone and one type of wood removes any complications or distractions; here architecture is stripped bare of itself, only to reveal the essential of Armani, his textiles hanging on the walls or folded on the display cabinets.

Modern, pure, timeless, and sleek are adjectives used to describe this new boutique design which is more often than not likened to a temple. Referring to Silvestrin's redesign of the boutique, Arian Mostadi claims that "[o]ne could say that time stood still at the precise moment when Place Vendôme was created" (92). The Paris boutique forms a natural continuity with its outside environment as it extends the stone facades of Place Vendôme and the solemnity of the square, which once housed a monastery. Silvestrin has interpreted Armani's classical and modern ethos to create a minimalist space without a hard edge. According to the architect, minimalism should be at once "[s]trong but not intimidating," "[e]legant but not ostentatious" (Bertoni 226), and he speaks of architecture in terms of the "thickness of space and depth of the world" (Bertoni 204). "Mediterranean Minimal" has been used to describe Silvestrin's own subcategory of minimalist architecture, as it evokes warmth, sun-baked stone, and perhaps maybe even Italy itself.

In a world of increasing fast-fashion, where customers are called upon more and more to serve themselves (and do all the work, such as rehang garments), minimalist designer boutiques stand out more as spaces of exclusivity marked by reverential service rituals. These spaces are antidotes to the rapidity by which we conceive of the world changing around us. Speaking of the sense of the sacred with which Silvestrin imbues his spaces, Massimo Vignelli states that

[m]inimalism is not a style, it is an attitude. It is a fundamental reaction against noise, visual noise, disorder, vulgarity. Minimalism is the pursuit of the essence, not the appearance. It is the persistent search for purity, as an expression of unconditional being, the search for serenity, for silence as a presence, for the thickness of spaces, for space as immensity. Minimalism is beyond time—it is timeless, it is noble and

simple materials, it is the stillness of perfection, it has to be the being itself, uncovered by useless crusts, not naked by completely defined by itself, by its being (Bertoni 226).

In actuality, things move relatively slowly, and these Silvestrin walls remind us of the solidity of time and Armani's own earnest desire "to provide a modern, timeless, but at the same time accessible environment" (Armani Press Release 22 September 2000). Minimalism, according to James Meyer, "removes any trace of emotion or intuitive decision-making. . . . Minimal does not allude to anything beyond its literal presence, or its existence in the physical world" (Meyer 15). While it never alludes to a past moment, a historical point of reference is never enabled, the boutique appears as though it has always occupied the location and, like the monastery before it, the rituals of the space seemingly appear as though the vagaries and impact of time have no place here. It is the silhouettes and textiles, however, which define the sequence of time as seen through the cycles of fashion.

DISAPPEARING WALLS/DISAPPEARING ARCHITECTS

After five successful years of collaboration with Silvestrin, Armani, for whom the architect renovated and rebuilt no less than twenty-four boutiques around the globe, collaborated once again with the architect to refashion and renew his retail space concept with the inauguration of his Shanghai boutique in April 2004. Located in the Bund immediately adjoining his cheekier and younger Emporio Armani label, the Borgonuovo boutique incorporated small spaces for his fledging Armani/Fiori (flowers) and Armani/Dolci (sweets) enterprises and a total of 560 square meters for his women's, men's, and accessories collections. Both the location and updated style of the boutique at once reveal the designer's affinity for a city's historically rich building sites, while at the same time imposing his distinct modern vision on the landscape of public architecture. According to an Armani press release, the boutique deployed "[u]nique designs that reflect and respect the intrinsic materials used in the building's architecture, while providing pure and simple backdrops for the products on display" (Armani Press Release 17 April 2004). Rather than locating his boutique in the much busier retail districts of Pudong or Nanking Road, the designer opted to "focus on the value of urban history and architectural heritage" and was the first designer to open shop on the strip (Vercelloni 36). Boasting some of the city's grandest and most sophisticated architecture and located along the Huangpu River, the Bund is the heart of the historic foreign presence in Shanghai; specifically its coordinates mark out the British Concession which began in 1846. Built in the 1920s, the building perfectly reflects Armani's continued aesthetic interest in the interwar period.

For the Shanghai boutique, the now “traditional” Armani trademark St. Maximin stone has been replaced with a natural cotton canvas, horizontally pleated over panels which span the five meter high walls of the space. The natural, soft, and textured effect this has is juxtaposed with the verticality of the stainless steel plated columns which double as mirrors. Along with the Macassar ebony wood storage and display cabinets (17 meters in length), these columns are the only architectural features which attempt any division of what is functionally one large expansive room. The mirrored columns at once block a complete purview of the space, while at the same time, through its reflective surface, prolong and expand parts of the space; in this way, at any given time, certain fashions’ presence is repeated while others are occluded. Simple black steel clothing racks are used to display the clothing and are located either along the walls or between the columns. Like the display boxes used to showcase accessories affixed to the walls with horizontal and vertical black steel rods, the garment racks reiterate the vertical and horizontal axes while also emphasizing the constant play between spaces of void and the places of objects: between each garment spaced evenly; between each garment rack; between each mirrored column; and between each display case resting along the floor. The places of fashion and the spaces in between continue the playful choreography marking out absences and presences. Without succumbing to a modernist structural grid, the boutique precariously balances verticality with horizontality, natural materials with futuristic effects, dark hues with reflective surfaces.

Much has been made of designers hiring celebrated—or celebrity—architects to design or reinvigorate their retail spaces. In turn, architects themselves have recognized the power, potential, and potency of fashion in society and within their own praxis in particular. After all, the architecture of today, produced for the fashion and clothing industry, is an architecture of display and consumption and not that of production. However, within this ongoing and renewed dialogue, one thing stands out as a definitive cultural turn: the supremacy of fashion within the arena of high culture, even to the point of looming larger than architecture itself. No longer are fashion designers the feeble little sisters to international bankers, Internet barons and industrial giants, but global powerhouses in their own right with sales, staff, and influence no longer easy to measure in strictly monetary terms. I suggest that, with the opening of the Shanghai boutique, a new chapter was penned in the story of Armani retail and architecture, which at the same time neatly folds into the larger global cultural trend alluded to above. The material culture of the fabric walls is a result of Armani’s introduction one year earlier of his now staple handbag, the plisse, despite the bag’s original vertical folds. The bag, introduced as emblematic of summer itself, was initially made with *plongée* plisse nappa leather and featured a round tubular handle. The tacit influence of a (female) accessory (the quintessential emblem of the fast-past fashion system) and the move toward textiled walls serve as a metaphor for the dematerialization of architecture in favor of the softness of textiles and

the ephemerality of fashion. With boutiques like this, I posit that what we are witnessing is the ascendancy of fashion or in the very least a more clearly articulated symbiosis.

The metamorphosis from architectural space to fashioned space iterated in the move from architectural object to clothed subject and the interplay between surface and depth returns us to the nineteenth century, to the influential writings of Gottfried Semper. According to Semper, “[i]n all Germanic languages the word *Wand* [wall], which has the same root and basic meaning as *Gewand* [garment], directly alludes to the ancient origin and type of the *visible* spatial enclosure” (Semper 248). By exploring the etymological origins and overlaps of wall and garment, Semper makes a claim for the body and space as synonymous ways to engender spatial division. Walls clothe and give shape to space as much as garments clothe and define the contours of the body. This clothing, this shelter, also visibly marks out space itself within and around the body and the space within the frame of architecture. As Semper himself clearly states: “[t]he wall is the architectural element that formally represents and makes visible *enclosed space as such*” (Semper 247). In this way, then, the fabric walls of the Shanghai boutique give shape and meaning to the now layered body. Armani wants to ensure that the body of his customer is not simply clothed, but is clothed in the fabric of space. Both clothing and architecture mark out spatial, territorial, and conceptual boundaries, while at the same time providing shelter, safety, and comfort for the body. Space is literally, figuratively, and materially fashioned. In his reading of Semper, architectural historian Mark Wigley asserts that, as part of the construction of space, textiles are the “mask that dissimulates rather than represents the structure. . . . As its origin in dissimulation, its essence is no longer construction but the masking of construction. . . . Buildings are worn rather than simply occupied” (Wigley 12). Armani’s new retail ethos is one predicated on fashion’s new cultural agency.

Despite being labeled as “unsuccessful” by Silvestrin’s public relations representative in a brief interview I had with him in May 2006, Armani has elected to continue his use of textiled walls for his Paris (2007) boutique. Moving his store from Place Vendôme, the new Paris boutique is located in the prestigious Avenue Montaigne, a street known for housing the fashion capital’s haute couture salons (Figure 15.6). With the inauguration of his own haute couture atelier, Armani Privé (2005), whose showroom is located at 2 Avenue Montaigne and by moving his boutique from Place Vendôme to a few feet away from his atelier, Armani definitively makes his claim to the highest order of fashion (haute couture) and makes his presence felt on the cultural map of fashion’s elite global clientele who descend on Paris twice a year for the collections’ runway presentations. Covering slightly more than 400 square meters on three floors, “[t]he new concept,” according to a press release, was “especially conceived for this Paris boutique [and] was designed by Giorgio Armani himself in collaboration with a team of in-house architects and the Silvestrin studio” (Armani Press Release 19 December 2006).



Figure 15.6 Giorgio Armani Paris boutique in Avenue Montaigne. Author's own.

Recognizing the ebb and flow of a city's fashionable places of consumption and display, the designer opted to open on the street because, according to him,

Avenue Montaigne has reassumed its place among the world's most prestigious high fashion retail destinations. The street also represents a great symbol of historic European architecture which creates an atmosphere of classic sophistication and elegance. In the design solution for my new boutique I therefore wanted to provide a modern rendition of what is now a by-gone era with the sense of a personal and intimate space where the collections are presented in wardrobes and trunks. The result is intimate and luxurious, a truly personalised experience that perfectly matches the history and grandure of this world renowned avenue (Armani Press Release 19 December 2006).

Armani opted to furnish this boutique with pieces from his Armani/Casa collection of homewares. With a slight Oriental flair, while retaining the classic minimalist Armani aesthetic, the furniture replaces Silvestrin's specially designed chairs and display cabinets made in Macassar wood. The newly unveiled translucent resin mannequins force the eye to focus on the clothing. Like in Shangahi, in his Paris boutique Armani literally

dresses the architecture, softens it, making it a space of texture and textiles. The space is at once atmospheric, dark, and intimate in an attempt to carve out personal space within the very public realm of consumption. Wardrobes and trunks showcase the collections. For the walls, two luxurious and distinctive materials play off each other and mark out the gendered use of space to create similar yet subtly distinct environments. Devoted to menswear, on the first level, the walls are covered by gray horizontally pleated brushed silk, picked up in the tops of the black lacquered display tables, which creates a sensually smooth yet variegated feel and look. On the second floor, devoted to Armani's womenswear and ever-expanding accessories collections, the sense of luxury displayed on the first floor is matched by onyx. Clearly marked as the inner sanctum of the boutique, the room furthest away from the main door and street level showcases women's evening wear. Seen all over the world at red carpet events, the glamorous evening wear is presented in a dark and intimate salon. Here the walls are once again pleated brushed silk, but in black, lending a distinctly night time atmosphere to the room ideally suited for ball gowns and cocktail dresses. Continuity between the two levels of retail space is achieved through the onyx flooring and the furniture. Typical of all Armani retail spaces, luminescent backlights and recessed lamps help to softly spotlight each individual garment and displayed object, but in this instance adds warmth to the onyx flooring and brings life to the resin mannequins.

As Riewoldt points out: “[o]nly through real-life experiences, through an unmediated encounter with the tangible attractions of beautiful things, can it [retail space] hope to win through against the convenience and efficiency of e-commerce” (9). Ultimately, I believe Riewoldt is advocating a defense of the phenomenology of shopping which extends visual pleasure into a broader sensory realm. Armani's use of Silvestrin as his architect of choice for the past seven years is significant and speaks to the phenomenological investments Armani places in both his fashion and spatial designs. The writings of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty have resonated strongly with Silvestrin in the way the philosopher “attributed more importance to perception” (in Bertoni 174–75). “Space,” “orientation,” and “depth” vital to his architectural praxis were quickly redeveloped to think about meaning through perception (Bertoni 174–75). For Silvestrin, working through Merleau-Ponty and influenced by Italian minimalist architects like A. G. Fronzoni, perception through feeling supercedes thinking which is ideally suited to the experience of consumption.

Recently it appears that designer boutiques have more to do with the business of museums, while museums are redefining themselves as shops. Yet, unlike museums which privilege sight and condemn touch, the ethos of Armani textiles and spatial programs compel, force even, the customer to touch and enjoy the haptic experience of being in space. Armani, I posit, reinvigorates modernist space by attracting the visitor-consumer by controlling the sensory experience: sound: quiet or specially selected music;

scent: the smell of Acqua di Gio from the menswear cologne collection; taste: any beverage is brought to the consumer during the process of selection and fitting; touch: one stone, one wood, myriad fabrics; and finally sight: the displayed garments and objects and the bodies of the sales staff and other costumers.

“The rejection of decoration in favor of the cultivated eye is explicitly understood as a form of purification” (Wigley 3). As Wigley points out rather convincingly, modern architecture, seen through the aesthetic lens of whitewashed walls and espoused by architectural giants like Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, was not so much a renouncing of clothing and its system, but rather very much a part of it; the erratic logic of clothing is projected onto these white walls and the architecture which props fashion up. Patina, as Riewoldt discloses, “is a vital ingredient of timelessness” (22). As the term suggests, a patina is characterized as a build up over time, the sediments of longevity, the thickness of the haptic. Armani reinvests the sensuality lost in the modernist white wall interiors, by using a stone whose surfaces are porous, soft, sensual, and textured. Minimalism in the context of an Armani boutique marks out a space in which textiles come alive, provides meaning through haptic discernment, and elicits desire. As I have outlined elsewhere, an Armani boutique is ideally suited for those who wish to recreate their own Armani-inspired garments at home (see Potvin). In a series of articles published in *Threads* magazine, devoted to “home sewers,” Anne Hyde, one of the articles’ author, argues for the necessity of a visit to an Armani boutique, for it provides “the best way to experience Armani’s exquisite fabric judgement” (Hyde 27). Hyde’s suggestion to visit the boutique is simply to “feel the fabrics.” The simple, yet revealing, act of touching provides the truth to material sought after by modernists like Armani, but, perhaps more importantly, the truth of space itself.

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