

“It’s the Economy, Stupid!”

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Abstract

This paper revisits the principle of “Good Design is Good Business,” a concept often associated with industrial design, and explores its application within architectural practice. While examples such as Pruitt-Igoe and the Guggenheim Bilbao represent the pitfalls and triumphs of this idea in architecture, the Prada SOHO Epicenter suggests a more expansive interpretation. By intentionally delaying the design process, OMA and its research arm AMO undertook an in-depth investigation into shopping behavior and the evolving landscape of retail. This research-driven detour ensured that Prada SOHO did not become obsolete upon completion. To illustrate the uniqueness of OMA’s approach, the project is compared with three other flagship retail stores from the same era, including another Prada location. The comparison reveals that OMA’s method transcends conventional definitions of good design. Amid economic uncertainty and the predicted decline of brick-and-mortar retail, OMA/AMO collaborated with firms like IDEO and 2x4 to rethink the retail experience. Their effort to reduce purchase pressure while increasing cultural engagement positions Prada not just as a brand but as a curator of experience. This case study sheds new light on how architectural design can contribute meaningfully to business strategy and cultural relevance.

Keywords: “Good Design is Good Business”, from commerce to culture, de-escalating the pressure to buy, shopping, technology in retail business

Introduction

The recognition that design holds strategic business value is not a recent phenomenon. Early proponents of this idea laid the groundwork for our current understanding. Thomas Watson Jr., a chairman of the Executive Committee of International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), articulated this principle in his 1973 lecture titled "Good Design is Good Business". Watson's advocacy for corporate design programs and the company's collaboration with industrial designer Eliot Noyes and the Olivetti typewriter company underscored his belief in the positive impact of design on business (Watson, 1973). However, a closer examination of Watson's perspective suggests a nuanced understanding. While he recognized the strategic value of good design in shaping public perception and driving sales, it appears his focus was primarily on design as an added value, a means to enhance the company's image and market performance (Quito, 2018). This perspective implies that design, while important, might have been viewed as something layered onto the products rather than inherently integral to their very essence.

1. Good Design Is Good Business in industrial design

Moving beyond the initial recognition of design's importance, a more profound understanding emerged, emphasizing that effective design extends far beyond mere appearance. Steve Jobs, the visionary co-founder of Apple, famously articulated this deeper understanding, stating unequivocally, "Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works" (Walker, 2003). This definition underscores the critical role of functionality and usability as integral components of good design. According to Jobs, the common misconception is that design is simply about making a product look good, a superficial veneer applied by designers at the end of the development process. This perspective highlights the multifaceted impact of good design on various aspects of a business.

The tangible business impact of good design is vividly illustrated through the success of numerous iconic products across different eras. The Sony Walkman, launched in 1979, serves as an early and compelling example. Its design, which allowed individuals to listen to music on the go using headphones. The Walkman became a phenomenal success, selling between 385 and 400 million units by 2009 (Bell, 2019). Norio Ohga, former chairperson of Sony, points out, "At Sony, we assume that all products of our competitors have basically the same technology, price, performance, and features. Design is the only thing differentiating one product from another in the marketplace". (Pink, 2006: 78)

1.1 What Good Design is Good Business looks like in architecture

A widely praised housing complex inspired by Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse called Pruitt-Igoe was demolished in 1972. This incident was by no means a small event. Architecture critic, Charles Jencks boldly declared it was the end of modernism. Having won an award from the American Institute of Architects in 1951,

it was ironically crowned the tragic death of Modernism. How could so many architecture critics and magazines be so wrong about Pruitt-Igoe? According to Jencks, "Its purist style, its salubrious hospital metaphor, was meant to instill, by good example, corresponding virtues in the inhabitants. Good form was to lead to good content, or at least good conduct; the intelligent planning of abstract space was to promote healthy behavior" (Jencks, 1977: 9). In reality, the cold language of modernism deployed by architect, Minoru Yamazaki isolates rather than fosters a sense of community. There were no communal spaces where people could interact or bond. Neighbors remain strangers. There was no way to tell if a person belonged to the apartment complex or not. This is especially bad when more drug dealing activities take place in the complex. Without a strong community, everyone remains a stranger. That was the reason why self-policing did not occur. Ultimately, Pruitt-Igoe demonstrated the shortcomings of modern architecture, how it promised but failed to deliver improvement in the lives of the tenants.

1.2 The Bilbao Effect

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, designed by Frank O. Gehry and opened in 1997, stands as a prime illustration of how iconic architecture can revitalize a city, attract global attention, and drive significant economic growth. Prior to the museum's construction, Bilbao was an industrial city in decline, suffering from high unemployment and a tarnished image (Li, 2023). The decision to invest in a world-class museum with a striking and innovative design proved to be a catalyst for the city's renaissance. Since its opening, the Guggenheim Bilbao has welcomed over 20 million visitors, a significant proportion of whom were international tourists ("Guggenheim Museum Bilbao," (n.d.)). This influx of tourism has had a substantial economic impact on the Basque Country, contributing an estimated €4.3 billion to the GDP and generating €659 million in additional tax revenue by the end of the previous year ("Guggenheim Museum Bilbao," (n.d.)). The success of the Guggenheim Bilbao, often referred to as the "Bilbao Effect," has become a widely discussed phenomenon in urban development, demonstrating the powerful intersection of design, tourism, and economic transformation ("Guggenheim Museum Bilbao," (n.d.)). It highlights the potential of investing in high-quality, culturally significant design to act as a driver for urban regeneration and to significantly boost a region's economy and global profile. While the Guggenheim Museum was a pivotal element in Bilbao's transformation, it is important to note that its success was also underpinned by broader strategic efforts involving coordinated public and private investments in infrastructure, technology, and the redevelopment of the city's waterfront. The enduring appeal of the museum, attracting over 1.3 million visitors in the most recent year, underscores the long-term economic benefits of investing in landmark architectural design ("Guggenheim Museum Bilbao," (n.d.)).

2. Research Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative, case study approach to investigate how architectural design can contribute to business innovation and client bottom line beyond aesthetics and functional delivery. The research focuses on the Prada SOHO Epicenter as a primary case, examining the collaboration between OMA/AMO and Prada. Methods include a close reading of publications by OMA/AMO. Supplementary analysis draws from architectural history, business case studies, and secondary sources such as books and journal articles. The goal is to assess how research-driven design and interdisciplinary collaboration inform retail innovation through architectural interventions that leads to a new understanding of Good Design is Good Business.

3. Why Prada SOHO is a strong candidate for Good Design is Good Business

The focus of this paper, offers a new possibility as to how the idea of “Good Business” can be expanded upon. Prada SOHO is a great example of an interdisciplinary practice deploying design, business, and technology together for the greatest benefit of the client. But more importantly, this example of “Good Design” has morphed into a life-long relationship, a good business with the client where multiple subsequent collaborations continued from 2001 to the present day. In this sense, it’s also a good business for those who provide a good design service.

Sometime in the late 1990s, the management team from Prada approached Rem Koolhaas of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) to commission three Prada epicenters in New York (SOHO), Los Angeles, and San Francisco. One could speculate that their collaboration is based on similar intellectual interests. With Miuccia Prada’s own investigation into a possible substitution for luxury materials and Koolhaas’s conceptual approach to design makes this collaboration a perfect match. Their collaboration seems to echo Tim Brown’s description of the new approach and how to go beyond business as usual in his book:

“Today, rather than enlist designers to make an already developed idea more attractive, the most progressive companies are challenging them to create ideas at the outset of the development process. The former role is tactical; it builds on what exists and usually moves it one step further. The latter is strategic; it pulls “design” out of the studio and unleashes its disruptive, game-changing potential.” (Brown, 2009: 7)

In some textbooks, innovation lies at the intersection of design, technology, and business. Back in the year 2000s, projects that pay attention to all three are rare. What is more common, at least in architecture, is the focus on design and technology. The use of new materials, new construction methods, new CAD software, etc. are common practices. However, Prada SOHO offers a radical shift by incorporating business viability into

the project. Prada SOHO goes beyond the typical requirement of a brief where most architectural firms handle architecture and leave any business ideas with the clients.

3.1 Off to a good start: what is luxury (in relation to the given economy)?

In the Project for Prada, Koolhaas starts by questioning what luxury is. One of the answers he gave is that luxury is rough. He argues that mass-produced items are mostly smooth due to the machining process. Rarer items, perhaps handcrafted with unique quality usually embody imperfection and therefore, rough (Koolhaas, 2001a). This line of inquiry leads to a new aesthetic in the interior where unfinished drywalls flaunt spackle marks for all to see. Each spackle reflects roughness and uniqueness, a sign of luxury, according to Koolhaas. Entirely unprecedented, this brutal level of finish has never appeared inside any luxury stores where expensive stone and chrome or brass dominate the luxury design typology. The juxtaposition of seemingly disparate materials such as unfinished gypsum board walls, compact library storage systems repurposed as display shelving, plywood furniture, and translucent polycarbonate walls creates an environment that is simultaneously raw and refined, luxurious and un-precious. This deliberate tension challenges conventional notions of luxury, which often rely on overtly opulent materials. The use of "unfinished" materials alongside high-end fashion invites a more intellectual engagement with the brand, suggesting a focus beyond superficial extravagance. This unconventional material palette contributes significantly to the store's unique identity, setting it apart from more traditional luxury retail environments. As mentioned earlier, Koolhaas was not alone when it came to questioning what luxury is and what it could become. The origin story of Prada's nylon bag that disrupted the fashion world shared a similar intellectual curiosity. Unimpressed with existing materials by other luxury brands. Miuccia Prada also started to look for alternative materials for luxury products.

"Suddenly, nylon started to look more intriguing to me than couture fabrics. I decided to introduce it to the catwalk, and it challenged, even changed the traditional and conservative idea of luxury." (Steiger, 2024)

And what she found was no ordinary nylon. That special nylon is called Pocono, a rugged military-grade nylon used in tents and parachutes. (Steiger, 2024)

3.2 Let's take shopping seriously

The one constant in OMA's multi-faceted practice is its commitment to research. The success of the project begins with Koolhaas's obsession with research and his ability to pause before plunging into the typical design process. Research has provided tremendous value and has become such an integral part of OMA's approach to design that Koolhaas decided to set up a think tank operation called AMO.

“Liberated from the obligation to construct, [architecture] can become a way of thinking about anything-a discipline that represents relations, proportions, connections, effects, the diagram of everything.” (Koolhaas, 2004: 20)

The design of Prada SOHO was not solely the product of architectural intuition but was significantly informed by the research conducted by AMO, the think tank and research branch of OMA. AMO operates in areas beyond the traditional scope of architecture, delving into cultural, political, and social phenomena to inform design strategies. This research-driven approach is evident in Prada SOHO's conception and execution. There was a time when the word “research” can be seen in the name of many architecture offices. But none seems more committed to research than Koolhaas's AMO. Koolhaas was able to recruit his graduate students while teaching at Harvard to conduct massive research which resulted in a monumental 800-page book. The research encompasses a wide variety of areas such as the history of shopping, technologies accelerating acceptance of shopping such as air-conditioners and escalators, and where shopping is heading. For instance, the expansion of shopping into airports and cultural institutions such as museums. The research legitimizes shopping as a force to be reckoned with. But perhaps more importantly, the team included a section called crisis where they highlighted the alarming trend of dropping visits to malls and how “50 to 70 percent of present retail will be extinct within a decade.” (Koolhaas, 2001b: 75–76)

“In a recent survey...38% of respondents said they planned to shop at mall less often this year [1995] than they had in the past...Regional malls clearly have a life cycle, and a lot of them are in their last throes. By 2010, 55% of the nation's shopping [is predicted to] be conducted in nonstore venues - online services, direct mail, catalogues, 800 numbers, and the like.” (Koolhaas, 2001b: 78–79)

“If retail is bad now [1997] when the economy is rolling, what happens when a recession hits? It's the same old story: too many stores, outdated retailing concepts, obsolescent malls, changing consumer and demographic patterns, faltering suburban districts, and encroachment by new electronic formats.” (Koolhaas, 2001b: 84–85)

Needless to say, the crisis raises awareness and strategies to deal with it. Perhaps this awareness of the looming crisis fuels fresh approaches to the project. The effort to reimagine and reinvent shopping could be understood as an instinct to survive a possible storm. There is no room for business as usual. This cautionary approach echoed a story told by Tim Brown of IDEO of his own experience as a young industrial designer.

"The very first products I designed as a design professional were for a venerable English machinery manufacturer called Wadkin Bursgreen. The people there invited a young and untested industrial designer into their midst to help improve their professional woodworking machines. I spent a summer creating drawings and models of circular saws that were better looking and spindle molders that were easier to use. I think I did a pretty good job, and it's still possible to find my work in factories thirty years later. But you will no longer find the Wadkin Bursgreen company, which has long since gone out of business. As a designer, I didn't see that it was the future of the woodworking industry that was in question, not the design of its machines." (Brown, 2009: 5)

Perhaps one of the ways to survive the retail apocalyptic is to show how shoppers can perceive Prada in a new light. And Koolhaas did exactly that by elevating the client's status to another level, from commerce to culture. Most designs don't reach this level of service. Beyond ticking off all the requirements to get the project constructed, Prada SOHO is packed with new ideas.

3.3 From commerce to culture, how to celebrate your client

Koolhaas and his team concocted a plan to elevate Prada into the stratosphere of the art world. This is essentially an attempt to upgrade from commerce to culture. Because Prada SOHO sits on 575 Broadway, the land owned by the Guggenheim and literally sharing a wall with the satellite Guggenheim, Koolhaas took that as an invitation to further his commerce-to-culture agenda. His team proposed to collaborate with Guggenheim and allow activities from both sides to co-exist under special events. For example, if the museum has an exhibition, it could expand into Prada's space. If Prada is to launch a new collection, the catwalk for the fashion show could be set up at the Guggenheim side. This may seem practical at first glance since both spaces are fairly small. The ability to reach out to your neighbor on a special occasion is a practical win-win situation. But at a symbolic level, a fashion brand holding a fashion show inside a world-renowned museum is priceless. To engineer for such an event is going beyond a typical design brief. But what is extraordinary about this idea is the fact that OMA has imagined something the client would never have imagined. To equate the client's work as a work of art worthy of celebration inside a world-renowned museum is "Good Design". At a very fundamental level, shoppers get to enjoy a new shared experience. Who could imagine such a fluid experience between shopping and studying a painting on a wall?

Prada SOHO actively attempts to blur the lines between a retail space and a cultural institution. Although this specific partnership did not come to fruition due to the Guggenheim SoHo's permanent closure in 2002 (Ohta, 2018), the intention underscored Prada's strategy to redefine shopping as a form of cultural entertainment. In line with this vision, the store was designed to function as a venue for a variety of cultural activities, including film screenings, performances, and lectures. This integration of cultural programming within

a retail environment aimed to create a more enriching and engaging experience for visitors, fostering a connection with the brand that transcended a purely transactional relationship. By hosting such events, Prada SOHO sought to attract a different kind of audience, one interested in the intersection of fashion, art, and ideas, thereby positioning Prada as a patron of culture rather than simply a purveyor of luxury goods. If such cross-over exists, visitors would greatly benefit from temporary exhibitions by the museum and the announcement of seasonal-based collections by Prada. It will be a perpetual machine that runs by itself. The store will be brimmed with activities and fresh groups of people. To accommodate different cultural events, OMA proposes flexible layout with the help of a "hanging city" of movable metal cages suspended from the ceiling (figure 1). This flexible display system allows for constant reconfiguration of the store layout, enabling Prada to adapt the space quickly for different collections or thematic presentations. Several of these cages are equipped with integrated audio/visual equipment, providing technical support for the various events hosted within the store. In addition to elevating Prada's products into the art world with the ability to spill over to the Guggenheim space, a visit to a Prada SOHO also means a visit to the Guggenheim and vice versa. This increase in traffic is coupled with the idea of "de-escalating the pressure to buy" described by Koolhaas. He further expanded into the strategy to deploy "instability" against the predictability of what he called "the Flagship syndrome" (Moss, 2018). Stability or predictability is what kills retail. And that is how Fast Fashion obliterated traditional retail practice. Unlike Fast Fashion, Koolhaas introduces clever and unique programs unconventional to typical retail stores (and flagship stores for that matter), making the experience rich and less focused on the pressure to make a purchase. Many critics have used words like art gallery or museum to describe Prada SOHO because there is an archive area where people can study past collections from Prada's archive not dissimilar to a visit to a library. Moreover, the ubiquitous touch screens sometimes broadcast images of avant-garde Italian films. The multi-purpose central space, 'the Wave' (figure 2), functions as a display area for merchandise in default situation but can be transformed into a mini concert area to accommodate cultural events. A New York Times article at the time of its opening observed that what Prada was presenting in SoHo was "space itself," which had become "the ultimate luxury" (Muschamp, 2001). This de-emphasis on the sheer volume of products aimed to cultivate a less pressured and more exploratory shopping environment. The vastness of the store and the less concentrated product displays encourage customers to browse and experience the space at their own pace, rather than feeling compelled to make an immediate purchase.

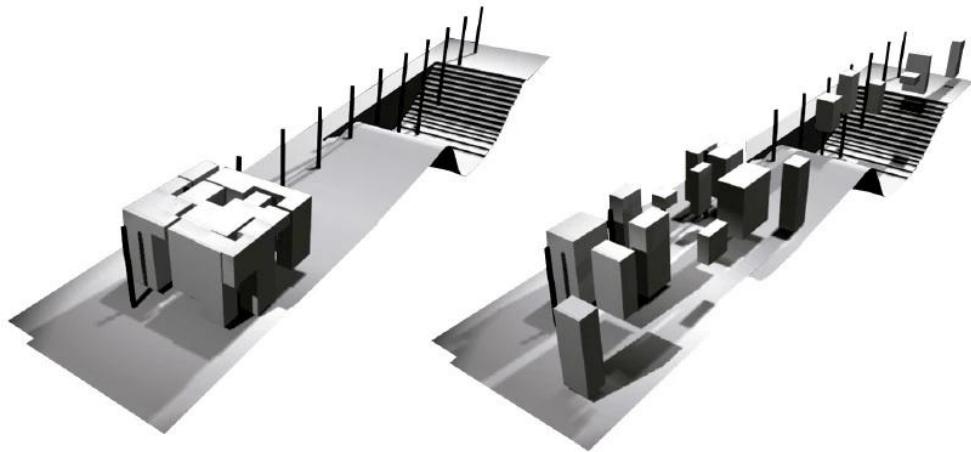


Figure 1 Hanging City (moving displays). The illustration on the right, demonstrates the default condition where the displays are distributed over the entire store. During a special (cultural) event, the displays move to the back. Source: Prada Epicenter, New York, 2025. (<https://arquitecturaviva.com/works/prada-epicenter-10>)

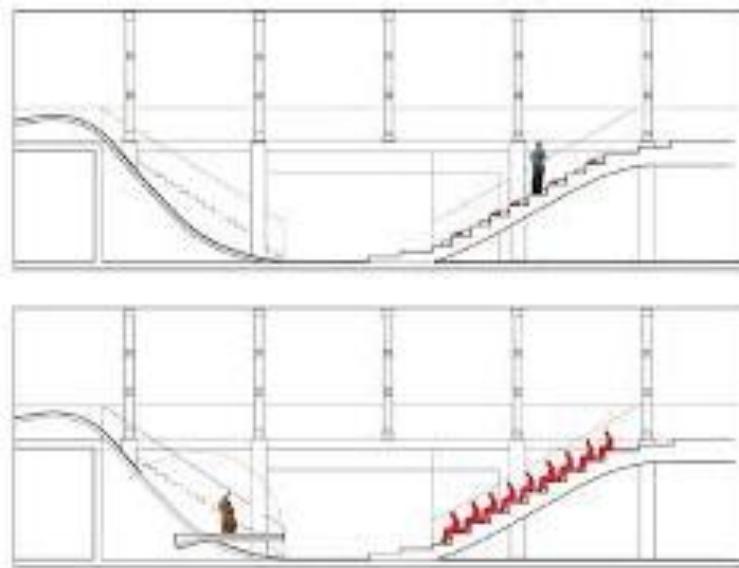


Figure 2 Section through “the Wave”. Displays merchandise in a default setting. Below, the same space becomes a venue for cultural event. Source: Prada Epicenter, New York, 2025. (<https://arquitecturaviva.com/works/prada-epicenter-10>)

3.4 The future of retail business

Not all architecture projects engage with technology. In the projects that involve technologies, they usually touch upon the area of energy, construction methods, and materials. Prada SOHO was notable for its early adoption of technology within a retail environment, with features designed to enhance the customer experience and reinforce the brand's forward-thinking image. Prada SOHO's technology is highly specific to the retail typology. The strategic aim for the deployment of technologies is to improve the business side of the store design. We are talking about tracking past purchases, real-time inventory tracking, etc. The plasma screens embedded in mirrors in the changing rooms addresses the pain point of seeing only either the front or the back, but not simultaneously, which offered different perspectives of the garments being tried on. This is technology designed to help make a better decision. Features like the liquid crystal glass dressing rooms (OMA, 2002), which could switch from clear to opaque at the touch of a button to provide instant privacy. At the time of the store's opening, these technological elements were not only suggesting the future of retail but also an alternative experience to emerging online shopping. Throughout the retail space, Prada SOHO incorporated video panels and projections. These installations, sometimes the size of large garment boxes and placed amongst the merchandise, contributed to the store's modern and experimental ambiance. By integrating dynamic visual elements especially at the north wall where 2x4, a design firm, is responsible for feeding new wallpapers, Prada SOHO is able to stay fresh for new collection launches (figure 3).

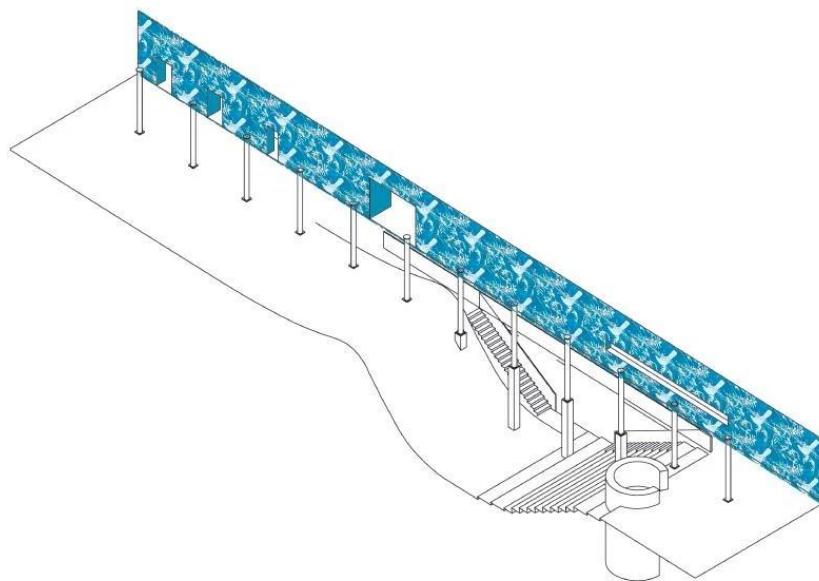


Figure 3 The Wallpaper (north wall) especially designed by 2X4 to change and accommodate special events.

Source: Prada Epicenter, New York, 2025. (<https://arquitecturaviva.com/works/prada-epicenter-10>)

4. Prada SOHO compared with its counterparts

To prove that OMA’s approach to Prada SOHO pays more attention to the client’s business, three cutting-edge retail stores of the same period will be used for comparison. In 2001, for the Issey Miyake store in Tribeca, New York, Frank O. Gehry proposed a series of pliable titanium skin, dubbed the “Tornado”, that extends from the basement to the ceiling of the ground floor (Zahner, 2001). The skin’s shininess emits a modern appearance and an aura of sophistication. The technology that augments design is the special technique is required to make the titanium skins workable. Unfortunately, the skin became the center and a dominant sculptural piece of the project (figure 4). In the end, Gehry’s approach is more overtly sculptural and material-focused, contrasting with Koolhaas’s emphasis on retail business innovation. Two years later, Hani Rashid and Lise Anne Couture, under the practice called Asymptote designed a flagship store for Carlos Miele Flagship Store in Manhattan using computer software to generate a fluid and undulating landscape accentuating different display areas (figure 5). The objective appears to be to create a spatial narrative that fuses art, fashion, and architecture. The design of the interior features elements like two-tone high-gloss epoxy flooring with embedded lighting, curved steel hanging displays, and a contoured ceiling made of stretched PVC material (Asymptote Architecture, 2003). While Asymptote focuses on digital aesthetics and a distinct cultural (Brazilian) narrative, OMA takes a more conceptual and business-focused approach for Prada SOHO. In both cases, the architects use formal language to make the space more exuberant and attractive, one using titanium sheets and heat-formed plastic the other. Yes, they both push the boundaries for design forward where more attention was given to the nascent fluid form and how to fabricate it in construction. While Gehry used CATIA for the plain surfaces, Asymptote used Alias Wavefront. These were the extent of design and technologies demonstrated. Given the proximity to AMO’s research into a looming retail crisis that will be discussed later in the paper, the design for Miyake and Miele seems oblivious to the headwinds. One would think the architects would prioritize their actions appropriately. Perhaps, even question how the client may weather the storm.



Figure 4 Issey Miyake Tribeca. Source: Issey Miyake Tribeca, in Titanium, (n.d.).

(<https://www.azahner.com/works/issey-miyake-tribeca/>)



Figure 5 Carlos Miele Flagship. Source: Miele Flagship, New York, USA, (n.d.).

(https://asymptote.net/carlos_miele_flagship_store)

A comparison to Prada AOYAMA by Herzog & de Meuron, commissioned in 2000 demonstrates a different approach to design practice for the same client but by a different architect (figure 6). For its practice, H&deM is known to produce the most beautiful projects with beautiful spaces and materials. Prada AOYAMA is also a clever design solution where the building is a negotiation between a complex site with complex zoning regulations. The result was an odd yet beautifully shaped building (Herzog & de Meuron, 2003). While both Prada SOHO and Prada AOYAMA were architecturally ambitious flagship stores for the same brand, their design priorities differed significantly. AOYAMA's unusual design centered on its striking and reflective exterior and its interaction with the urban environment, whereas SOHO's innovation was primarily focused on the interior spatial dynamics and the future of retail. AOYAMA's emphasis is on the building as an object within the city, while SOHO prioritizes the experience of the space within the building.



Figure 6 Prada AOYAMA Source: 178 Prada Aoyama, Tokyo, Japan, (n.d.). H&dM.
(<https://www.herzogdemeuron.com/projects/178-prada-aoyama/>)

Conclusion

While many high-profile projects strive to meet the traditional definitions of architectural practice, such as those outlined by the American Institute of Architects (AIA), here is an example from the state of New Jersey. “The “practice of architecture” consists of rendering services embracing the scientific, esthetic and orderly coordination of processes which enter into the production of a completed structure which has as its principal purpose human habitation or occupancy, or the utilization of space within and surrounding the structure, performed through the medium of plans, specifications, administration of construction, preliminary studies, consultations, evaluations, investigations, contract documents and advice and direction” (American Institute of Architects [AIA], 2016). They may fall short of addressing the evolving demands of contemporary business and cultural contexts. As the AIA (2016) states, the “practice of architecture” entails the scientific, aesthetic, and orderly coordination of processes leading to a completed structure intended for human occupancy. Although adhering to this framework can yield satisfactory results, it risks becoming obsolete and irrelevant without a sensitivity to shifting cultural, technological, and economic landscapes. Examples such as Issey Miyake Tribeca by Frank Gehry and Carlos Miele by Asymptote Architecture—once groundbreaking—now appear frozen in time. In contrast, the Prada SOHO Epicenter demonstrates a more adaptive model. Through its integration of hardware (architecture) and software (curation, media, changeable infrastructure), it exemplifies a forward-looking, research-driven design strategy. This collaboration between Prada and OMA/AMO, supported by IDEO’s influence, signals a potential evolution in architectural practice—one where good design aligns closely with business innovation. It suggests that “Good Design is Good Business” is not just a slogan but a call to rethink the scope and purpose of architecture today.

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