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interior design

The driving forces of today's luxury retail market: Bigger..better..best

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Bigger stores . . . better goods and services . . . in the best possible environment—these are the driving forces in today's luxury retail. Major luxury brands are expanding at an ever-accelerating rate in key markets, including New York, London, Milan, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. The big names that we take for granted here are huge international players. As such, they are putting their best foot for-

ward, particularly in the far east, to develop retail environments that are exciting, provocative, and have major implications for real estate and store design here at home.

Luxury shoppers have become more discriminating and are more savvy and sophisticated than in the past. These consumers are increasingly polarized in their shopping, frequenting the two extremes of the market—discounters (big box or e-tailers) or luxury—and opting out of the traditional middle ground of department stores.

Recent trends show that shoppers who are willing to spend the time and money on luxury purchases are demanding more from their shopping experience and the environment that goes with it. They want a unique and exciting experience, one that is

as much about the entertainment as the purchase. The right store environment is of critical importance to a retailer's bottom line.

This "right" store environment is an extension of the branded image of the retailer, creating the atmosphere that allows the shopper to experience the lifestyle image of the brand. In our work with clients such as Salvatore Ferragamo, Lancôme, and Wolford, we look to create luxury retail environments that reflect the brand. Retail design is an ever changing specialty; but at its core, it should promote the marketing and design goals of the retail client in a way that sparks the imagination and the appetites of the customer.

One of the most significant changes in recent years is the de-

velopment of the luxury megastore. In the 1980s, luxury boutiques were typically 2,000 to 5,000 s/f. In the '90s, that size increased to 10,000 to 12,000 s/f. When my firm worked on the Calvin Klein flagship on Madison Avenue, which is 22,000 s/f, it was one of the largest stores constructed at the time. Since then, stores have continued to dramatically increase in size. Just a few examples: the Armani store on Via Manzoni in Milan is over 100,000 s/f, occupying a full city block; Salvatore Ferragamo on Fifth Avenue is 30,000 s/f; Gucci on Fifth Ave. is 36,000 s/f.

Fueling the development of these megastores is the fact that luxury retailers are including a greater variety of services than ever before. It's no longer just about sell-

ing apparel, accessories, or shoes. Luxury retail stores such as Prada, Chanel, and Armani now include art installations, flower shops, cafés, restaurants (often operated by four or five-star chefs of international acclaim), and more.

As designers of these environments, we are constantly looking for new and innovative solutions that are evocative of the brand and that create memorable experiences for the customer. State-of-the-art technology is employed to realize the design and differentiate the brand from its competitors.

Until recently, the extensive use of LED and plasma screen monitors were relatively rare in luxury stores. A few years back, you'd find them mostly in mid-level shopping environments, but now they are quite common at this level.

State-of-the-art lighting and custom-designed lighting fixtures to create unique special effects and a special ambience are a given. Stock lighting simply is not capable of producing the quality lighting needed in these stores.

Interactive technology has become increasingly present in luxury retail. Rather than the shopper just entering the store and browsing, brands like Prada are using interactive devices to provide customers with direct access to their product database. It's no longer about shopping as a touchy-feely experience; there is now a technological component to it.

The design of a flagship store is an opportunity to explore and to develop new and innovative materials that are uniquely representative of the brand, which for an interior/architectural designer like myself is an ideal project. And as these companies begin to build free-standing buildings that house their flagship stores, and often their corporate headquarters, they are also commissioning internationally renowned architects to design them. It's not enough to just build a building—it's a building designed by a star architect that is innovative in terms of design and technology and often receives international critical acclaim.

As retail designers, our goal is to create an environment that is a lifestyle statement of the brand. Regardless of your original purpose, upon entering the store, you are seduced into the world of the fashion house and the lifestyle it has created . . . a world where you can experience the brand, meet your friends, have lunch or coffee, go to a gallery, even learn about the history of the company. The intention, of course, is to keep you there as long as possible . . . and to entice you to come back to shop . . . again and again.

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A full service design firm specializing in high-end retail interiors.

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