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**Prada Architecture. OMA's Work in the
Omni-Channel Retail Ecosystem**

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**Prada Architecture.
OMA's Work in the Omni-Channel Retail Ecosystem**

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Abstract

The relationship between Architecture, Arts and Fashion exists from the birth of these disciplines and has increased exponentially with the advent of the consumer society in the middle of the last century. Recently, this relationship has strengthened and intensified due to the frantic pace of the industry and the many open channels. Under these circumstances, the incorporation of the architect Rem Koolhaas to Prada in 2000 and his growing responsibility in the firm could be understood as a sign of the times.

Rem Koolhaas was commissioned to produce Prada's architecture and identity but he was not alone in the task. He joined a multidisciplinary group picked among the most renowned figures in every field. The cast included film directors such as Wes Anderson or Roman Polanski, graphic designers as James Jean, interior designers as Petra Blaisse or artists as distinguished as Damien Hirst or Marcela Gutierrez, to name just a few.

As it was expected, Koolhaas and OMA designed a new concept for Prada stores. But enlarging their field of action they also handled catwalk designs, showrooms and spaces for all kinds of events, even to produce promotional videos —called Real Fantasies— that harness the potential of the digital environment and redefine the face of Prada. It can be said without any doubt that the incorporation of the Dutch architect has sparked a revolution in the Italian brand. And this success has been possible because Koolhaas feel comfortable in border areas where disciplinary boundaries are blurred or directly disappear. He is closer to an ideologist, able to solve any kind of problem, than to a traditional architect dealing strictly with formal questions.

However, the case is even more interesting if we attend to the theoretical research that Rem Koolhaas has developed over the past decades. In fact, his writings have explored the contemporary city, the consumer society and the shopping space itself. Prada's stores are, generate and frame content abandoning the idea of a coherent story telling. This article will focus on how OMA's architecture responds to the omni-channel retail ecosystem and how the other cultural products of the brand affect these proposals.

Keywords: Architecture, Multidisciplinary, OMA, Omni-channel, Prada, Rem Koolhaas, Retail.

The relationship between Architecture, Arts and Fashion exists from the birth of these disciplines and has increased exponentially with the advent of the consumer society in the middle of the last century. Recently, this relationship has strengthened and intensified due to the frantic pace of the industry and the many open channels. Under these circumstances, the incorporation of the architect Rem Koolhaas to Prada in 2000 and his growing responsibility in the firm could be understood as a sign of the times. This article is focused on how OMA's architecture responds to the omni-channel retail ecosystem and how the other cultural products of the brand affect these proposals.

Fifteen years later, the collaboration between Prada and Koolhaas is not just active or constrained to architecture. In fact, it is generating products more unexpected over time. Although it began as a quest for a new Prada space, this enterprise has led both of them —the architect and the firm— to ambiguous products that are attending to a brand new context. On the one hand, Koolhaas and his office have designed shops in New York and Los Angeles, mutant architectures devoted to the culture of spectacle like 'The transformer' in Seoul, ephemeral fashion shows in Via Fogazzaro (Milano), and the brand new Fondazione Prada, also in the Italian capital. But on the other hand, Rem Koolhaas has also shaped the new Prada digital experience. He is also responsible for the website design demonstrating that architectural principles such as figure-background or framing can be applied to the digital environment as well. OMA has even dared to create audiovisual material (short films called Real Fantasies), which is distributed in the Prada Youtube channel, through Instagram or the Epicenter stores indistinctly.

Over the past decade, the retail ecosystem has spread from the physical to the digital world. Consequently, the new retail space confronts the so-called omni-channel ecosystem. The overwhelming presence of Koolhaas and OMA in the Prada multi-platform habitat is a sign of the times. It represents the way a brilliant architect is evolving to adapt his understanding and design processes to a new structure. But the production of the brand's identity is not a lonely task. The way fashion brands work now is very close to Renaissance's patronage. They trust on a small group of designers, artists and architects, the image of their brand. Therefore, the content they produce is a single mix, something in between the traditional boundaries of the disciplines, stating that this digital-physical context needs a redefinition of the disciplines themselves. We could say this context claims their obsolescence.

The contact between Koolhaas and Prada was established when the architect had already achieved international recognition. Perhaps it was the Pritzker Prize award (2000) what attracted the attention of the 'capi' of the Italian brand, Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli. But it could also have been his theoretical work —as prolix as strange in the world of architects— what earned him Prada's commission. For example, in 'Delirious New York' (1978) a very young Rem Koolhaas astonished the world with a fresh look on unusual architectural subjects. Reality and its contradictions were the objects of his admiration and criticism. The culture of congestion he detected in Manhattan

and the naturalness with which interior and exterior responded to different requirements occupied the center his speech gravitated around. Koolhaas's fascination for the American metropolis and its complexity is felt earlier here and it will also be present in their commercial spaces for Prada too. Somehow, his theoretical approach to shopping entitled him to run Prada's business.

Years later, in 1996, Koolhaas led a research group at Harvard University under the name of *Project on the city*. They intended to specify and understand the forces operating on the contemporary city and how they shape it. In *Mutations* —the first book they published— 'shopping' was already identified as the key element in the configuration of cities in the late twentieth century. In fact, the second collective essay they published, the *Harvard Design Guide to Shopping*, was focused exclusively on this phenomenon: shopping. Rem Koolhaas opened it with a categorical and provocative statement, "*shopping is arguably the last remaining form of public activity*"¹. In the following pages the commodification of architecture and urbanism was illustrated by numerous case studies. On a different level, attention was also paid to some seemingly innocent items that have marked the history of commercial space itself. The researchers pointed to escalators and air conditioning as the technology responsible of the production of this almost infinite amount of space.

The *Harvard Design Guide to Shopping* also stopped at the historical evolution of this typology and explained what happened in the last century. They explained this reality attending to both, high architecture and low architecture. Probably because low architecture itself, ignored as it frequently is in the histories of architecture, is responsible of the 99% of the world outside and should be taken into consideration. This book provoked a strong reaction among critics and theorists with unconditional adhesions and angry detractors. However, it should be noted that, far from issuing a judgment, Koolhaas limited his writings to an analysis of the *statu quo*. The architect did not capitulate to reality. While it is true that a fascination with reality can be perceived in the poetics of his work; so it is that there is not an uncritical surrender but a lucid observation of the problems of this reality. Fortunately for this communication, the work of OMA for Prada didn't escape his theoretical task or editorial fever and has been registered in numerous publications and a monograph entitled *Projects for Prada part I*².

The Dutch entered Prada when the firm was going through a crisis caused, paradoxically, by its commercial success and the consequent sustained expansion. According to Koolhaas, this growth demanded a diversification of strategies and a multiplication of contents. As a result, the identity of the brand evolved. Different facets emerged to target different market niches. The size of the brand and the amount of stores were beginning to pinch the creativity and to question the business model. OMA's diagnosis pointed this and their first suggestion was the creation of the Epicenter Stores:

¹ Rem Koolhaas et al., *Project on the City 2, Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (Köln: Taschen, 2001), hardcover back.

² Rem Koolhaas, *Projects for Prada part 1*, (Milano: Fondazione Prada Edizioni, 2001).

Expansion can be measured on two levels: quantity and quality.

On the level of numbers, there are simply more and more Prada stores; on the level of scale, Prada is about to launch a number of special epicenter stores.

The danger of the large number is repetition: each additional store reduces the aura of the brand and contributes to a sense of familiarity. The danger of the larger scale is the Flagship syndrome: a megalomaniac accumulation of the obvious that eliminates the last elements of surprise and mystery that cling to the brand, imprisoning it to a 'definitive' identity.

But expansion can also be used for a strategy of permanent redefinition of the brand. By introducing two types of stores—the typical and the unique—the epicenter store becomes a device that renews the brand by counteracting and destabilizing any received notion of what Prada is, does or will become. The epicenter store functions as a conceptual window: a medium to broadcast future directions that positively charges the larger mass of typical stores.³

Therefore, the mission of this new kind of store was to constantly refresh the core of the business. In other words, their mission was to attach new images and concepts to Prada's identity and to give it a growing complexity. To achieve that purpose, the epicenter stores must have had a new program and, consequently, a new design processes.

Koolhaas chose a theoretical path and, first of all, he redefined luxury. This new understanding of luxury served as a guideline to materialize the epicenter stores and to elaborate their program. The new concept of store could not be related to the traditional shopping space and, in the same way, it should not offer the customers a conventional experience. For the Dutch architect luxury should be based on five principles: attention, roughness, intelligence, waste and stability. In the world of massive stimulus George Simmel predicted, to capture the audience's attention is crucial. Roughness—as opposite of bluntness, easy or kind—approached luxury to art and relegated elegance or beauty to a secondary level of preferences. Intelligence was used as a synonym of constant innovation. But maybe, the key point is waste. It could be interpreted as a non-productive space, a space that allows contemplation and privacy. Unlike other brands' flagship strategy, where every square meter is dedicated to profit, luxury should manifest a certain disregard for production. In fact, epicenter stores are mainly unproductive spaces from a sales point of view. They are devoted to create content, that is, to foster Prada's identity.

After the conceptual redefinition, OMA undertook a study of the Prada classic store to, once analyzed the bigger part of Prada's business, propose an original and coherent program for Prada epicenters. Meanwhile Prada classics are stable spaces with a recognizable design, with fixed criteria; the epicenter

³ Rem Koolhaas, *Projects for Prada part 1*, (Milano: Fondazione Prada Edizioni, 2001), introduction.

stores should be whatever but a classic store. Probably, luxury for an architect is precisely the possibility of designing the exception of a group of hundreds of stores. Somehow, Prada epicenters are what we would now call storytellers. Maybe this interpretation shows why OMA's projects have adapted so well to the digital environment. This idea promoted Prada to a new category of company.

Therefore, the solution of the epicenters could not simply be an accumulation of square meters. It could not be an enlarged version of the Prada classic store (Figure 1). The Epicenter program should provide attractive sub-spaces. Then, Koolhaas followed what Andy Warhol once said: "*Someday, all department stores will become museums, and all museums will become department stores*". If shopping space, as predicted by the American artist and confirmed by Koolhaas, had devoured all kinds of programs—from museums to airports and terminals through libraries—, it seems right that a new concept sales area offered an experience far from the typical consumer commercial space. Consequently, the luxury of Prada epicenters should bring users to alternative interiors where consumers can forget their condition and where they are treated as if they were students, patients, researchers or museum visitors. This theoretical path crystallized in the following types: The gallery, the street, the stage, the floors, the generic Prada, the wallpaper, the library, the gallery of prototypes, the showroom, the archive, the laboratory, the clinic and the pharmacy (Figure 2).

Figure 1. OMA's Diagram about the Idea of Epicenter Stores

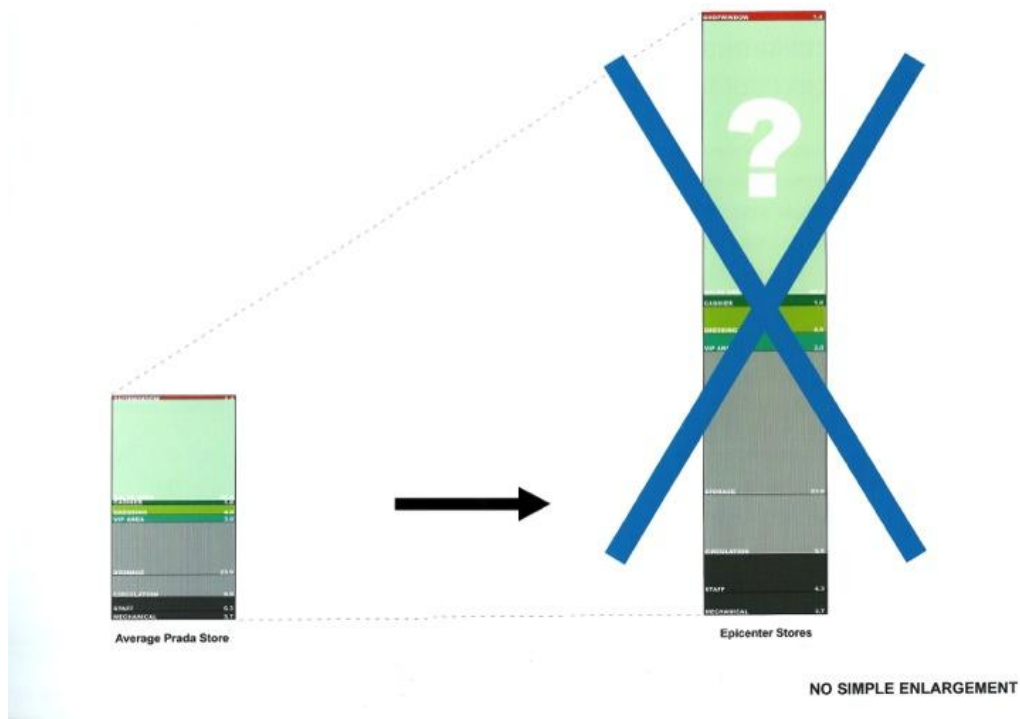
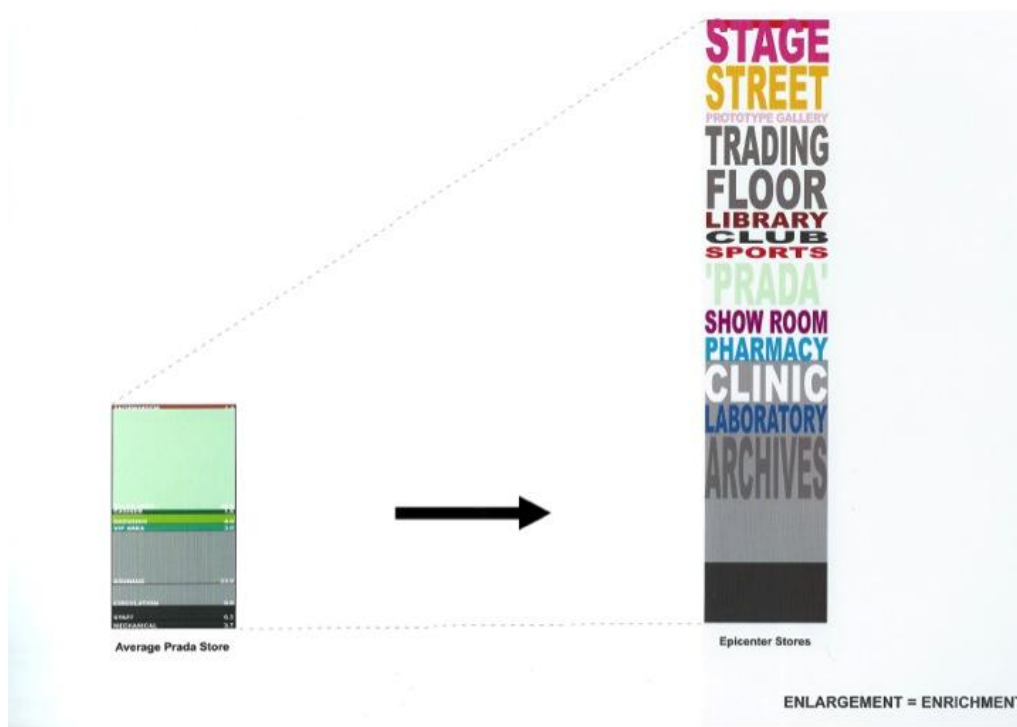


Figure 2. OMA's Diagram about Difference of Contents between Prada Classic and Epicenter Stores



Visitor's experience would leave the purely commercial sphere and would embrace the cultural concerns of a museum. In addition to that, it would expand from the physical to the digital environment. Content would jump from the stores, to the screens surrounding it and then to the Internet. Koolhaas created a deliberately ambiguous experience that hybridizes commercial space on the line advocated by Warhol. But, despite the cultural references of the discourse, some critics appeared on scene showing their disagreement and defending that Koolhaas' ideas meant a capitulation to market forces and a degradation of culture. The American professor Joan Ockman expressed her reservations about it on these terms:

But if commodification is inescapable and cultural public institutions are devolving into shopping and entertainment, does it follow that the inverse is possible? The ingenious transformation of commercial into cultural space on which Koolhaas has persuaded his client to bank here is fraught with risks. Aside from the not inconsequential PR value of an epicenter store in New York, the democratizing impulse could have the unintended effect of taking some luster off the brand.⁴

⁴ Joan Ockman, "El hombre del ¥€\$. De Harvard a Prada, Koolhaas en clave de consumo" *Arquitectura Viva* 83 (marzo-abril 2002): 68. (*The man of ¥€\$. From Harvard to Prada, Koolhaas in key consumer*).

At this point, the development of Epicenter stores transcended the mere design and the conceptual proposal occupied a central position. Prada strategy promoted seasonal change and needed the intervention of different designers because there exists a link that shuns formal aspects. As its name suggests, the epicenter store had, and still have, to generate movement to be transmitted to the Prada community. For that reason, the new headquarters could be considered content generators. They are essential nodes in the extensive Prada network that reach the public through multiple channels. Content, as it refers to formal aspects, varies quickly. Seen from a different perspective, epicenters can be considered versatile scenarios for professionals from different disciplines and products are in the margins of this endless play. The frame and the incredible amount of starring actors generate an interesting, complex, intricate —and sometimes contradictory— universe. Therefore, Prada is incomprehensible. It is been designed to escape a single vision, to avoid any attempt of synthesis. Since epicenter stores act as emitters, artists act in a space where architecture has become a media. A meta-place designed to change continuously, to require new interventions to be framed.

Since the advent of the consumer society in the mid-twentieth century, stores have been a collaborative space. In the fifties of the last century this kind of spaces was the avant-garde of the integration of the arts. A Spanish editor and critic talked about stores in these terms:

*A shop, a store, is in a sense in rather committed crossing paths: there is some architecture, a bit of art restoration, a little decoration, a bit of industrial design and some design city; I mean, this is a very difficult problem.*⁵

However, over the past fifty years the world has changed dramatically and, as Warhol predicted and Koolhaas ratified, shopping has virtually invaded all kinds of spaces. Consequently, this division has become obsolete both in discipline categories and characteristic skills of those responsible for these tasks.

In fact, the key to success of Rem Koolhaas and OMA is precisely their ability to handle and coordinate realities, appearances and illusions. They are creating their work in an ambiguous space between disciplines. This ability is reflected in the structure of the company. OMA is integrated by all kinds of professionals guided by an ideologist more concerned with concepts and its contemporaneity than concrete forms. In his proposals, Koolhaas flees of the traditional profile of the architect and, collaterally, he questions its operability. On more than one occasion Koolhaas has referred to the obsolescence of the traditional profile of the architect. Although, at the same time, he claimed his validity conditioning it to its ability to adapt to the new context:

⁵ Juan Daniel Fullaondo, “El fenómeno de la tienda en el contexto de la ciudad”, *Arquitectura* 111 (marzo 1968): 21. Translated by the authors. (*The phenomenon of store in the city context*).

*And that means that I'm no particularly strict or pessimistic about a profession that, in fact, should understand the form of cities, their analysis and transformation. Though, at the same time, I'm convinced that urbanism, as we practiced it today, can't be maintained. Its inability is shown through many aspects. And the most important may be the difference that exists between the roles architects think they play and the current situation, with a opposed market logic which no longer let space for these kind of preoccupations.*⁶

OMA was founded with the purpose of integrating different disciplines to face the complexity of the game board with guarantees. Besides the architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis, the initial core of the company was completed with the artists Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis. In fact, OMA means Office for Metropolitan Architecture. A designation that avoids the corset of the traditional "studio" analogously to what Andy Warhol did in his famous New York *Factory*. If the proposal had blurred over the years and the abandonment of the rest of the founders, in 1998, shortly before the outbreak of Prada in his scene, Koolhaas founded AMO —the Architectural Media Office—. This second office was born as a counterpoint to OMA and wished to include different activities including the exhibition design, branding, advertising design or editorial work. In other words, the OMA/AMO duo was running early twenty-first century as a design company able to intervene at all levels of a complex market. OMA demanded transversal creators who can generate different kinds of products. The new architect should know how to intervene in this ecosystem and, maybe, the price to pay for it is the form and the reward is the idea. After this explanation about the business strategy of the Dutch architect, his election by Prada is better understood.

The Epicenter store of New York, opened the infamous September 2001, it was the first of its kind. Located at 575 Broadway, the store opens to the mythical avenue and occupies the entire side of the block to Prince Street. Its design reveals the typological reasoning explained previously and combined with a series of ideas present in all works of the Dutch architect. The New York Epicenter is composed by heterogeneous elements whose convertibility is maximized. It could be said that it is a spatial collage that does not pretend a formal coherence otherwise activating an episodic architecture that is revealed in its way, by the movement. The floor draws a wooden wave extending the public space to the basement while it generates a larger space with stands and a stage that serves as an exhibitor space (Figure 3). A hydraulic platform fitted out as a small glass showroom also connects the street level with the bottom. They are two different worlds that cause surprise to the visitor who get lost under the floor (Figure 4). Store exhibitors move on rails on the roof that allow

⁶ François Chaslin, "Frentes de ruptura. Entrevista de François Chaslin a Rem Koolhaas", *Arquitectura Viva* 83 (marzo-abril 2002): 25. (*Breaking fronts. Interview of François Chaslin to Rem Koolhaas*).

the release of space when looking for the maximum compactness of the part, or floating on space and fragmented dispersed throughout the store. Joan Ockman, skeptical about the work of Koolhaas, defined the space in these terms:

This and the rest of the high-end gadgetry archly placed throughout the store add techno-alienation to the game of exhibitionism and voyeurism: Flat-screen display shows Prada's lines, Prada's America's Cup yacht, Antonioni movie clips, and grainy skin-flick images, while aluminum light boxes loop interactive map of its worldwide marketing coverage and behind the scenes glimpses into Prada's showrooms and warehouses. Finally, there's a swath of wallpaper running the length of the store, one of the features designed to be changed regularly (though hardly appearing more ephemeral than the rest).⁷

Figures 3 and 4. *Interior of Epicenter Store Located at 575 Broadway, New York*



⁷ Joan Ockman, "El hombre del ¥€\$. De Harvard a Prada, Koolhaas en clave de consumo" *Arquitectura Viva* 83 (marzo-abril 2002): 68. (*The man of ¥€\$. From Harvard to Prada, Koolhaas in key consumer*).

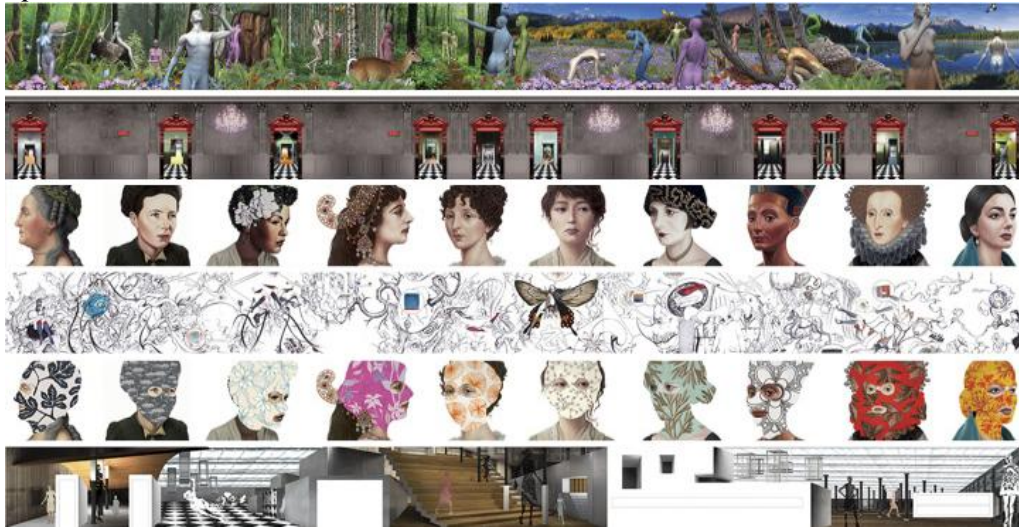


However, perhaps the ephemeral character is one of the greatest successes of OMA in this case. When a luxury brand works with an architect or a famous designer often the opposite happens. Javier Carvajal was the architect of Loewe during the sixties and, despite its success, the brand had to make a big transformation of the headquarters because of its desire for permanence. Years later, Enrique Loewe's son lucidly argued that "*change is the only constant*"⁸.

The Prada wallpaper does not only have the use of acclimate the store (Figure 5). It also generates valuable content that contributes to the complex identity of the brand. Since its opening until nowadays twenty two famous artists, photographers and illustrators have dealt with this very long wall: Damien Hirst, Marcela Gutiérrez or James Jean, among others. Moreover, the work of the interior design was made by Petra Blaisse, a regular contributor of Koolhaas, who designed a textile sculpture that hides the stereo next to the stage. In this game of mirrors between museums and stores it is difficult to settle what of these works could be art. Since the middle of the last century stores—at least the best stores—have become one of the greatest exponents of Wagner's concept of total work of art, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In this sense, Koolhaas's work moves freely in an interdisciplinary context.

⁸ Interview to Enrique Loewe Lynch by Jorge Losada and Javier Antón. Unpublished document, 10th February, 2009.

Figure 5. Six of Twenty-two Prada Wallpapers Displayed at New York Epicenter Store



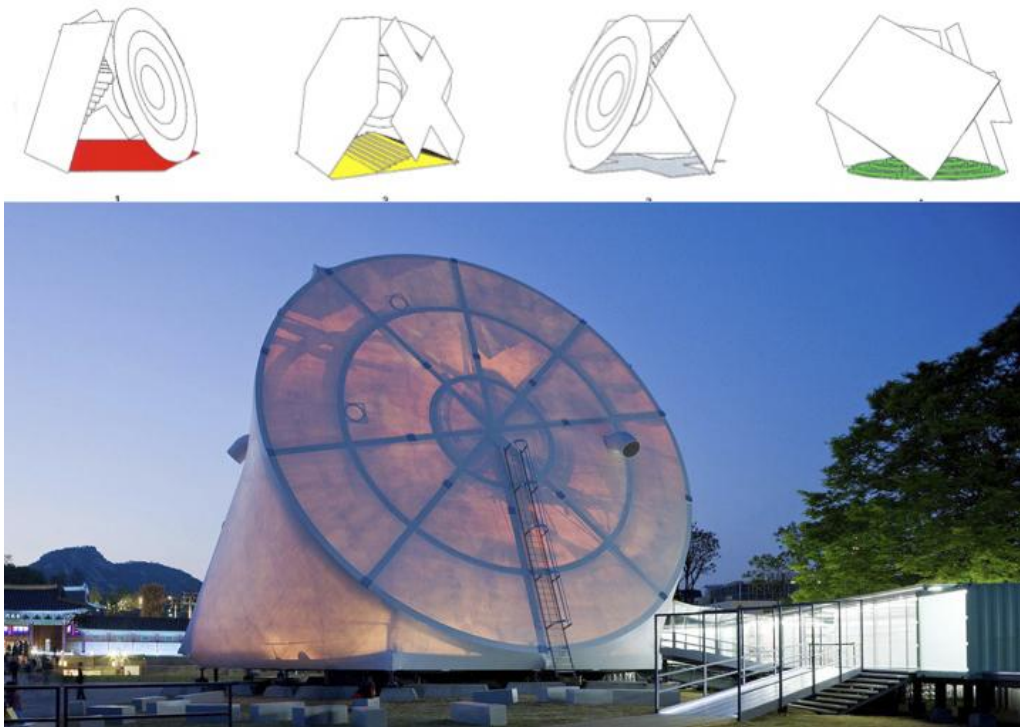
The Prada Transformer in Seoul (2008), for example, also is characterized by this versatility (Figure 6). The project combined four identities and four different programs —catwalk, showroom, cinema and museum— in one pavilion. Basically, the idea was a tetrahedron with four bases wrapped in translucent fabric allowing the activation of a different program by rotating. However, the idea of the project is the show, architecture can be viral too. The architect began the presentation of this project in this way:

As you know, there is a lot of interaction between art and fashion these days; between art and architecture and between fashion and architecture. We have been working for Prada since 2000, and I guess we are a symbol of that collaboration. Basically what is happening is that disciplines that used to be separate are all becoming a single mix. This project deals with all these different disciplines, but really from a strictly architectural point of view.⁹

These lines define Koolhaas's work and its place in the architecture scene. The critic and editor Luis Fernandez-Galiano qualified him as a "man band"; although it may be more specific called him as a good conductor, able to coordinate efforts and stimulus at different levels.

⁹ "Transformer Prada Presentation", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASRq2DKdQpI>. Translated by the authors.

Figure 6. *Prada Transformer in Seoul (2008)*



Another work of Koolhaas for Prada that has been particularly fruitful and unexpected is the catwalk design. The most significant are the catwalks installed in the warehouse that the company has in via Fogazzaro, Milano. This industrial space recovered acts as a great stage that can be configured again and again adding context, reference and meaning to collections. As in the Epicenter stores, catwalk design combines architecture, interior design, graphic design, lighting, audiovisual, illustration, music and, of course, Fashion. The main purpose consists in emphasizing the perception of the fashion show and contributing to understand the universe proposed to viewers. During the last years, OMA has played with the concept of the observer and, in some cases, has become directly into a voyeur looking from a small tear behind a wall. On another occasion, Koolhaas multiplied to the maximum the distance covered by the models creating the perception that everyone occupies the coveted front row (Figure 7). This is a symptom of his master of this language, able to break the rules in the Fashion universe.

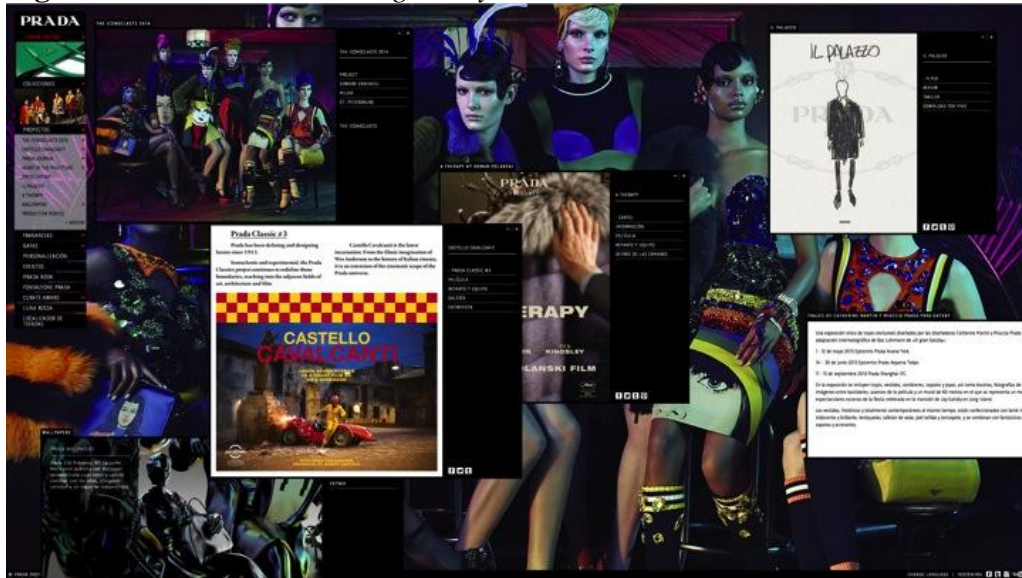
Figure 7. *Catwalk Designed by OMA at Via Fogazzaro Warehouse (s/s 2012 Menswear)*



OMA has played with the coexistence between the existing and the new structure, creating harmony or disharmony between them. His formal vocabulary has been introduced in an almost imperceptible way to win the heart of Prada. In the fashion show of men's spring-summer 2012, the industrial space located in via Fogazzaro was colonized by blue foam benches organized in a rigorous grid. This material was used in reference to the popular architecture models of work that proliferate in OMA's office in Rotterdam.

However, Koolhaas's work not only extends to shops, exhibitions or catwalks that move on the same keys. In addition, his office has also taken charge of the design of the website of Prada since 2000, the technology In Store of the stores, the headquarters of the Fondazione Prada in Milan, the exhibition curator for this institution and, the most surprising, AMO has produced audiovisual material for the Italian empire (Figure 8). This point is particularly revealing to understand the strategy of Prada and the work performed by the architect. Prada diversifies its advertising effort in all areas and generates a multifaceted identity so complex that borders the contradictory. It could be said that it cultivates a sophisticated ambiguity. In this area are distinguished, on the one hand, traditional advertisements in which collections are highlighted with an aestheticized universe and where fashion models appear in a decoration which is not far from the traditional photo shoot.

Figure 8. Prada Website Designed by AMO



On the other hand, Prada has also produced short films in which the sale of the product is secondary but reinforces the aura of the company. In this sense, it could be distinguished that the short Roman Polanski's film titled "A therapy" —starring by Ben Kingsley and Helena Bonham Carter— and Wes Anderson movies like "Candy"—with Léa Seydoux— and "Castello Cavalcanti".

At this landscape, which complexity can be proven in the Youtube channel of the brand, must be added the work of Koolhaas and AMO which has been called 'Real Fantasies'. The name is a declaration of intentions. The Real Fantasies suggest that the real fascination of "Delirious New York", rely on the culture of congestion, in a world of superimpositions whose order is not ambioned. "Real Fantasies" are a discursive contribution where each artist fills the void of the firm with a philosophy of work. Koolhaas is perhaps the most prolific architect or designer in this point. The videos show the search for inspiration in a stark reality, fleeing romanticism and reveal how Koolhaas's attitude towards architecture has been serving Prada. In Real Fantasies there are many architectural references: the works of Le Corbusier, Alison and Peter Smithson or their own works. These references act as a background to an intriguing show, which does not need a narrative, it needs an evocative ambiguity. It completes a set of ideas with its own formal universe that is cropped and superimposed. Maybe 'Real Fantasies' is where the emergence of Koolhaas imaginary is perceived in Prada universe, which allows and welcomes in its multifaceted, contradictory and voluntarily ambiguous nature.

The idea that the thought of Rem Koolhaas is diluted in the Prada world is the cornerstone of this communication and is intended to ratify it through different projects in common. In 2000 the Italian brand needed a firm to design their spaces and not only found a new formal universe, but also a conceptual aspect that has allowed them to deal with a particularly brilliant way over time.

The ephemeral nature of Fashion has impregnated OMA/AMO's architectural proposals and, in the same way but in the opposite direction, the universe of Rem Koolhaas has enriched the physical space of the brand and its attractive identity. The incorporation of the Dutch architect has sparked a revolution in the Italian brand. And this success has been possible because Koolhaas feel comfortable in border areas where disciplinary boundaries are blurred or directly disappear. He is closer to an ideologist able to solve any kind of problem than to a traditional architect dealing strictly with formal questions.

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