

FOCUS ON: CEILINGS, PARTITIONS & RAISED FLOORS



LOUISE MELCHIOR

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1, 2 & 3. Recent examples of the integration of floor and wall elements: Boxfresh by Brinkworth (left) and the PH Showroom by Alessandro Esteri (above)

RETAIL INVENTION

By Sarah Brownlee

Retail design at its most dramatic has been likened to theatre. The phenomenon started in earnest in 2001 with the launch of the Prada store, New York by Rem Koolhaas' OMA. Never mind the merchandise – most of which was shoved down into the basement to make more room for the architecture – the onus was on creating an entertaining, awe-inspiring environment. Koolhaas even built in an auditorium to reinforce the point. The idea that stores should offer an 'experience' as well as a service has now become a bit of cliché, but what is interesting is the way in which designers and architects are flouting the conventions of the humble retail fit-out to achieve this. Using the very latest materials and technology, the elements that

make up a retail environment – ceilings, floors and partitions – are converging to create increasingly holistic environments.

Not everyone can afford to take risks, however. For example, one of the biggest retail stories of the year, the new Primark store on Oxford Street by Dalziel + Pow, while an accomplished piece of architecture, draws on some well-established themes. The ground floor has the familiar feel of a brightly lit white box, if an extremely sophisticated one, while upstairs the look is more raw and industrial. Nothing earth shattering, but with a low-cost retailer like Primark the emphasis has to be on filling the shop floor with as much merchandise as possible; ensuring that floors can cope with the phenomenal footfall

expected; and that the services, including air conditioning and lighting, operate efficiently overhead and are hidden, where necessary, behind suspended ceilings.

Ironically, smaller stores can offer more room to experiment. Brinkworth, which has worked on stores for a gamut of fashion brands including Whistles, All Saints, Firetrap and Karen Millen, demonstrates this with its most recent concept for Boxfresh in Covent Garden. Faced with the challenge of a three-day installation, Brinkworth came up with a 'fresh-to-market' theme, which centres around one unifying element – an unfolded box that appears in various incarnations throughout the store. Made using Dibond, an aluminium-faced plastic sheet, the flattened

box form is used as both a decorative motif, complete with graphics and branding, but doubles up as a display device, becoming everything from hanging rails to shelving or a table. Stretching across to the ceiling in some areas, it is also used to conceal lighting, acting as an origami-style alternative to the suspended ceiling.

The following case studies show just how far you can push the envelope, as it were, with materials, processes and products. Squint and you will struggle to see where one surface begins and another ends, but behind the maelstroms of merchandise and materials is some smart thinking. If you can't take risks in retail design, where can you?