French Dissing...

Does Jean Nouvel Deserve the Pritzker?

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It had to be only a matter of time before the arbiter of upscale fashion came to Sin City. Since January, ritzy sartorial department store Barneys has occupied a whopping 81,000sq ft in Las Vegas’ Palazzo Resort Hotel Casino, boldly announcing its presence on the Strip with a head-turning facade while also striking a harmonious chord with the art deco nature of the hotel. The force behind the brassiere outfit is none other than Jeffrey Hutchison & Associates, a New York-based retail architecture practice and firm of choice for Barneys’ last four new outlets.

Given its location, it’s easy to see why this edition of the famed retailer has its opulence turned on almost full blast. But gaudy and unduly busy it is not. Its luxury stems foremost from its sheer volume (spread over three stories), natural-material makeup, and meticulously crafted but measured embellishments. And this being Vegas, there is also room for some humor. The result effectively offers two very different ambiances simultaneously. On the one hand, there is the sense that one has entered a vast cathedral-like arena centred on an outsized sculptural “altar” and penetrated into an all-rose place of light streaming through generous glass panes. On the other, thanks especially to the outfit’s art deco-inspired geometric tile motif, one feels the visit has truly been a short journey back to Roaring Twenties America. So it’s no exaggeration to say that Barneys Las Vegas gives consumers a shopping experience they’ve never had before.

Guests approaching from the street are greeted by an infinity-edged fountain, behind which is the entrance tucked within a limestone portico. Comically, the French playing card suits are depicted by a laser-cut grillework running along the first storey facade, as well as by a fabulously etched motif on custom-fitted glass sheathing the second and third floors, courtesy of artist John-Paul Philippe. As daylight filters through the glass sheath, which is supported by fin-like bronze mullions, the pattern, made up of tiny sunbursts, is projected onto the entrance floor.
Once the visitor is inside, attention is drawn to a sunlit dome, below which is the salon sculptural altar, an oval staircase of plaster and stone that spirals all the way to the top. The entire space is washed in the muted desert tones of limestone and marble, and stunning decorative elements give the neutral colour palette dimension and zing. Ground floor portals boast bevelled frames for a rococo effect, while the mezzanine level flags a 20ft high relief ceiling with a kaleidoscopic arrangement of rosettes and a peppering of recessed lighting, plus a marble and limestone floor inlaid with a trompe l'oeil geometric pattern. The ceiling is also a point of distinction in the women's department on the second level; its 3D "honeycomb" pattern appears to peel away to reveal luminous silver-leaved hexagons. Innovative displays abound, not least the one designed for Lanvin, which consists of an entire relief wall incised with origami-like folds to mimic the folding techniques of the brand's wares. Other notables include a footwear display in the women's department in which the use of variegated acrylic shelving creates the illusion that the soles exhibited are aloft, and a men's shirt display on the top floor which features hexagons and diamonds wrought of steel, as well as the pleated glass inserts on which the merchandise stand.

Next to the men's section on the third level is a 3,000sq ft zone dedicated to 'personalising' the shopping experience. Containing three private suites, each with two fitting rooms, and a generous lounge area, this quarter might have even jaded VIPs looking up: its ceiling is decked in faceted wood "ribbons" that cascade down the walls. With this outfit, fortunes are definitely looking up for Barneys, JHA and those who like to bring the house down wearing shiny new threads.