stays in vegas

The Forum Shops, Las Vegas
Found in Translation

Barneys bridges the gap with Japan — the secret is 'wabi-sabi'

Ever since pop culture went global, it seems that some American brand phenoms only find their most ardent fan-base on foreign soil.

Barneys New York has always had its U.S. following, particularly among the fiercest-fashionistas-who-wear-black in its flagship cities (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles). Yet this third Tokyo location, in the Ginza district, seems to capture the Barneys bittersweet far better than its American personae.

Even more ironically, while this store was constructed with the full collaboration of its New York corporate, creative and architectural counter-partners, it is actually owned by Isetan, a major Japanese department store chain.

Barneys tapped architect Jeffrey Hutchison (of the New York-based Jeffrey Hutchison & Associates). It’s a small atelier, but Hutchison is familiar with Barneys projects. He worked with Peter Marino when Barneys was building its Madison Avenue store, and also worked on the Barneys Los Angeles store.

For Hutchison, the biggest problem was to channel Barneys’ few consistent design signatures — such as a sense of daylight and integrating the local urban vibrancy — into an environment that a predetermined shell had made all but impossible. The pre-existing façade featured upright, opaque, horizontally striated glass panels that produced a stunning effect, especially by night, but did not allow the sun or the city to enter a store interior.

Hutchison decided to make the store a sophisticated fun house. While murals, mosaics and other applied arts are in other Barneys stores, Hutchison wanted to imbue them with more prominence in this store, having them function as porous architectural dividers that could demarcate departments without visually chopping up the enormous interior. Nothing would be taken for granted — walls, lights and floors would be awe-striking as well.

While the poker-faced façade doesn’t give away any of the delightful secrets, the interior generates its own “you’ve-got-to-see-this!” buzz. As Hutchison says, “With some brands, the layers of luxury are in the minimalism, in the stripping away to singular elements. With Barneys, the luxury is found in layers of sensual wit.”

Throughout Barneys’ new Tokyo store, John-Paul Philippé created artworks that functioned architecturally, indicating category divisions, but were visually porous. He created this particular hanging artwork in his Manhattan studio, coating aluminum sculptural wire with plaster.
"With Barneys, the luxury is found in layers of sensual wit."

The most striking element, created by John-Paul Philippe, Barneys' de facto artist laureate, is an Alexander Calder-esque steel sculpture rising approximately 45 feet from the basement level through the ground and then second floor, culminating to a grille in the same style across a faux skylight of silver leaf. Surrounded by rosewood railguards and limestone treads and risers, it literally raises the roof and raises the bar on what all are calling "the next level" of Barneys' retail evolution. Made in Hokkaido (the region famous for constructing samurai armor), the sculpture has elongated peephole voids with detachable wire squiggles (several feet tall) that could be altered, say, for panels of seasonal color. A staircase snakes around it so that the shopper experiences it fully in the round.

"One visual trick that Simon Doonan (Barneys' creative director) taught me years ago was to use eye images: concentric circles, abstracted eye motifs, targets, flowers," says Philippe. "They always command attention." And they wink cleverly everywhere in Philippe's work, be they the 3-story sculpture; the 25-foot panel of American-Indian-dreamcatcher-inspired macramé-embellished rings; the stylized, geometric flowers in the cosmetics department; or the shoe department mural of pinwheels of pumps.

Philippe credits influence for his wildly varied organic aesthetic to Leonard Koren, the American architect and Japanophile author of "Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers." Koren defines wabi-sabi as "a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent and incomplete... a beauty of things unconventional," a sensibility central to the appreciation of hand-crafted items used in traditional Japanese tea ceremonies and everywhere in evidence in this Ginza store.

Hutchison’s abundance of architectural details and unusual finishes also commands attention. He used unconventional wall treatments and lighting to simulate that desired daylight brightness and also to communicate Tokyo's zany energy. In the basement men’s department, the air conditioning vents are narrow lines arranged decoratively with the lights to create a Mondrian-like pattern. On the main floor, wide coffers are uplifted to create the illusion of strips of skylights. Other walls appear to be origami-faceted or have back-lit jagged earthquake “cracks” or back-lit panels, looking as if they were casually placed adjacent screens.

In other areas, hanging collections are picture-framed by such distorted oversized black cerused wood that they appear to be shape-shifting. In the men's suit department, where all the merchandise is predominantly sober and solid, Hutchison chose an extravagantly striped zebra wood veneer and crazily quilted it floor-to-ceiling, complementing it with a carpet of graphic hexagons.

a The stair sculpture peaks on the second floor women’s department, sheltered by what Philippe likes to think of as an abstracted “canopy of leaves.” The faux “skylight” effect was created by using silver leaf. b Hutchison jazzed up the sober-suited men’s department with a crazy quilt of zebra wood veneers and a bold geometric carpet. Lighting cracks in the ceiling frame suggest daylight penetrating from above.
With a dash of black humor, Hutchison jokes, "The beauty of my approach is that they probably wouldn't look any worse after an earthquake." The good news is that the store has already survived one—Tokyo had a significant tremor only two days after the stairwell sculpture was installed.

Though Barneys is capitalizing on importing a New York sensibility, it also aims at the sophisticated Ginza shopper's taste. The whole culture is very gift-oriented; it's the norm that practically every purchase is gift-wrapped. The bridal department is not centered on the bride, as in America, but on what the bride's family will give to the guests. Having a florist was essential, a department absent in Barneys' American stores.

The Japanese also have thousands of years of cultural history that makes them value artistry in their daily lives and environments in a way that Americans don't. Which is why, says David New, Barneys USA executive vp for creative services, the retailer was so willing to invest in such a wealth of costly permanent artwork for this store.

But Barneys' particular culture seems to have contributed to the project camaraderie, in which designers, architects and artists were given freedom to do what they do best, without a lot of interference or hassle. In the fickle world of fashion, where few people last in jobs longer than a hemline trend, Barneys has used the same team of artists, with stake invested in the result.

As the public becomes increasingly fatigued by cookie-cutter chain stores, other retailers could learn much from this savvy zen management approach, cultivating and being loyal to brilliant creative talent.

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PROJECT SUPPLIERS

CLIENT
Barneys New York, New York

DESIGN
Jeffrey Hutchison & Associates, New York

ARCHITECT, GENERAL CONTRACTOR
Gard Co. Ltd., Tokyo

OUTSIDE DESIGN CONSULTANTS
John-Paul Philippa, New York (decorative, sculpture wall, hanging screens and sprinted)
Johnson Schneidhammer Lighting Consultants Inc., New York Lighting
Marc Albrecht, Long Island City, N.Y. (sculpture wall consultant)

ACRYLICS
3form, Salt Lake City

FLOORING
Studium, New York

LADDER
Putnam Roller Ladder Co., Inc., New York

LIGHTING
ISEPC, Tokyo

MANNEQUINS AND FORMS
Goldsmith, New York

WALLCOVERINGS
Philip Jeffries Ltd., West Caldwell, N.J.

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