

Merging Culture and Commerce in Architecture

Two Recent Unveilings Blur The Distinction Elegantly; Mr. Koolhaas Does Prada

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

LOVE IT OR HATE IT, consumerism is us. From mall to museum, the same impulses and gratifications govern commerce and culture; it all depends on what you're shopping for. But even more important is the process itself—the commercial or cultural experience as entertainment, as social ritual, the sense they provide of being part of a scene. Consumerism is the last shared public activity.

With the emphasis on new buildings of drop-dead drama, cultural institutions have become destination points, and destination is a large part of what consumerism is about. From the art point of view, this blurring of boundaries between commerce and culture is close to original sin. From the design point of view, it's not all bad. It is seen as a reality, a fact of modern life, a process of creative hybridization transforming the art of design. Architects embrace this with a sophisticated mix of irony and pragmatism—a kind of existential cool—that allows them a respectable ambivalence while raising the ordinary and inescapable to new levels of experience, expediency and art.

Both the commercial and the cultural have hit a high note in New York recently with two conspicuous openings. The first was the December unveiling of the new Prada shop in SoHo, a super-hyped superboutique by the internationally celebrated Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture. The second was the inauguration in midtown last month of the Austrian Cultural Forum, a government center for cultural exchange designed by an Austrian architect, Raimund Abraham, who has lived and taught in New York for many years.

Architecture as destination is well understood by both Mr. Koolhaas and Mr. Abraham; beyond that, there are significant differences. The Austrian Cultural Forum celebrates a national culture rather than high-end clothing. Mr. Abraham expresses a far less controversial philosophy than Mr. Koolhaas's wonderfully outrageous pronouncements about the virtues of bigness and buying, placing his emphasis on gentler social and environmental aims.

The Austrian Cultural Forum packs a complex public and administrative program onto the site of a former townhouse on 52nd Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues. It is one of New York's best new buildings, all of which seem to come in small packages—a too-short list that includes the LVMH headquarters on East

57th Street by Christian de Portzamparc, and Williams and Tsien's American Folk Art Museum on West 53rd Street.

Operating without the publicity apparatus that seems to be a prime requisite of today's architectural profession, Mr. Abraham has delivered something right up there at the top with the high-decibel crowd. He does not lack bravura, and it is no mean feat to carry it off on so small a scale. His building is just 25 feet wide and barely 80 feet deep, but it rises 24 stories, a height permitted on a side street only in commercial midtown, or within 100 feet of a major avenue. It becomes a conjurer's trick to fit meeting and reception rooms, galleries, a small concert hall, library, "loft" spaces for studio or seminar use, offices and a director's apartment into a needle-thin structure requiring special engineering to brace its slender height.

This has all been miraculously inserted into a series of interlocking levels with free-floating stairs and open sight lines that suggest a spatial generosity beyond the building's actual size, enhanced by a magical infusion of daylight from a rear skylight and the front glass wall. The limited square footage has been freed by the intelligent device of a scissor stair placed at the rear to meet the emergency exit requirements of the building code.

The canted façade, with alternate sloping and setback planes, literally follows the zoning's slanted "sky plane" requirement meant to preserve daylight at street level. The dramatic steel cross-bracing over the glass wall is a secondary supporting structure that doubles symbolically as an image for Austrian modernity. (For nostalgia and schlag, you go uptown to the Neue Galerie.) The projecting box partway up steals a bit more space and affords spectacular side views to the river. Interior finishes are a cool white and gray, warmed by pale natural wood and accented with sleek brushed aluminum and stainless-steel details.

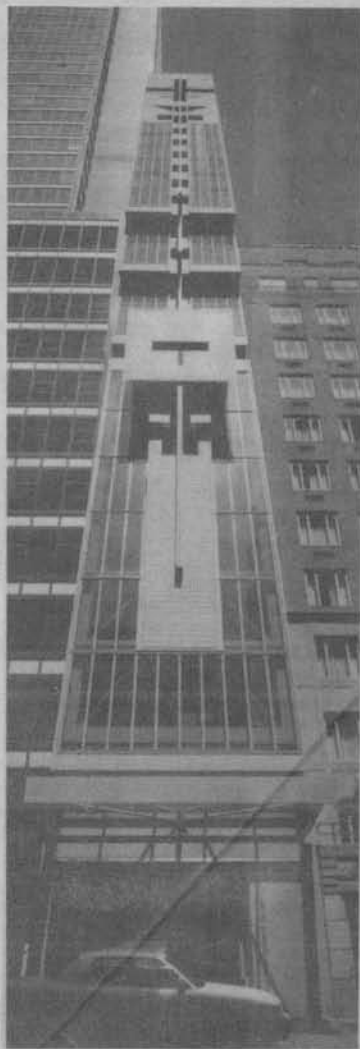
Mr. Koolhaas favors flair and attitude over understatement; he is the proselytizer, interpreter and most imaginative proponent of contemporary consumerism. His intriguingly offbeat and intensely perceptive observations, coupled with buildings of striking originality, have propelled him to guru status among theorists and practitioners. The bible of commercial consumerism is a Koolhaas product: the recently published "Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping," an 800-page compendium of history and ideas, produced with his students at Harvard. It won't help anyone locate the perfect pair of jeans or anything else, but it is full of provocative aperçus about the merchandising psychology of product and place.

The Prada shop is a \$40 million paean to publicity and an experimental theater

of ideas that is a stunning demonstration of Mr. Koolhaas's theories of shopping, extended and apotheosized. The design is awesomely clever and dramatically effective, with all the notable tricks of which its perversely brilliant architect is capable. How much will actually be sold there remains to be seen; probably most of the profits will be made in Prada's exclusive upper Madison Avenue venue. But this is where the action is, and it is drawing a large, mixed crowd, from design connoisseurs to shopping groupies pouring out of the SoHo subway stops like visitors from outer space. It leaves its tired, minimalist competitors in the architectural dust.

Everything about the Austrian Cultural Forum is calculatedly low-key. Compared to the Prada hoopla, it has arrived almost unheralded. Well, not quite. This intricate and elegant building has been 10 years in the making. Mr. Abraham's design won an international competition in 1982, but construction was held up while Austrian politicians debated whether it was too radical, or whether redundant rococo should be retired for more contemporary cultural exports. Modernity won, and the Forum's director, Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, has undertaken an ambitious program of contemporary exhibitions and performances that has started with visiting Austrian musicians and local attendees eyeing each other warily in studios meant for interactive communication.

Prada is all about interaction. The Koolhaas design screams communication. The long, narrow, through-block space at Prince and Broadway, formerly occupied by the downtown Guggenheim, is, in fact, a mall, a people-place, raised to the highest power, the platinum stan-



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The new Austrian Cultural Forum, with its façade of canted planes meant to preserve daylight at street level.

dard that shows how it should be done.

Merchandise is strategically accessible—expensive delicacies for anyone to examine, from tiny, petal-like gowns in the four figures to scattered flights of gorgeous shoes. Some things are displayed on mannequins in suspended, go-go metal mesh cages. (Bada Bing!) Glass-walled dressing rooms become opaque with the press of a floor button, when it works. (Techno-chic!) The ground floor and basement have been opened and joined by a large, undulating wooden platform known as the Wave, with facing steps. Culture and commerce meet where a section of the Wave flips open to form a stage for special events. (Cultural cross-dressing?)

At present, the steps are occupied by shoes and shoppers who require nothing more than to be part of the fashionable scene. Young sales assistants scurry up and down flanking stairs. Most of the goods are on the lower level, in an enfilade of businesslike small rooms. V.I.P.

quarters exist for the real buyers, but I never made it. There are places to sit everywhere—on stools and platforms shared with displays; in a round glass elevator ringed with seats surrounding a pricey pile of luggage. Some visitors are clearly on for the ride.

Both Prada and the Austrian Cultural Forum are flagship, promotional designs, flagrantly or subtly configured. Both have expert, radical plans. Mr. Koolhaas has rescued SoHo from Gap and Banana Republic, elevating the genre for one block, at least. Mr. Abraham has given New York a lesson in how to build beautifully, in an appropriately contemporary manner, in a city that seems to have forgotten how to do so with relevance and style.