



THE ART WORLD

FROCKS AND BLOCKS

Fashion meets architecture in Los Angeles.

BY JUDITH THURMAN

The fashion world is commonly accused of taking itself too seriously. An ambitious show that opened last week at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art suggests that it may not be taking itself seriously enough. “Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture” is the first exhibition of its scale and kind—more than three hundred contemporary works by forty-six mostly avant-garde architects and designers, chosen to represent what Brooke Hodge, MOCA’s curator of architecture and design, calls the “increasingly fruitful dialogue” between the two disciplines.

Calvin Tsao and Zack McKown, the architects who designed the installation, reconfigured MOCA’s cramped galleries as a spacious labyrinth. “Architecture supplies the gravitas, and fashion delivers the big bang, so that’s where we start,” Tsao told me. Mannequins, fashion videos, and a small stage set of Hussein Chalayan’s wearable living-room furniture (a telescoping wooden coffee table that becomes a skirt, and slipcovered chairs that convert into suitcases and dresses in case you have to leave town on short notice) introduce the general themes of “body,” “shelter,” and “identity.” Visitors then thread their way through exhibits of increasing complexity that compare the “tectonic strategies” (i.e. construction techniques) of both disciplines. “The clothes have a visceral impact that the buildings don’t,” Tsao acknowledged, “and only in part because they’re physically present, while the architecture is represented by models and graphics.”

An apparent likeness between human beings isn’t proof of an actual, or even mimetic, kinship, and the same is true of their creations. Do the “cables” that hoist the skirt of **Yeohlee Teng’s** poetic Suspension Dress relate, except semantically, to the structural engineering of Bernard Tschumi’s suspended walkways at the Parc de la Villette, in Paris? Do the pleated façade of Winka Dubbeldam’s Greenwich Street Project and a pleated day dress by Alber Elbaz have anything in common besides elegance? What about the lacy skin of Toyo Ito’s Mikimoto Tower, in Tokyo? Is it conversing with Tess Giberson’s abstract crochet work? The beauty and invention on display in “Skin + Bones” dispose one, perhaps too readily, to nodding in compliance at the alleged parallels between Martin Margiela’s disjointed patchworks and Frank Gehry’s anarchic jigsaw puzzles, or between the shard-like angles of Zaha Hadid’s Vitra fire station and the jaggedly cantilevered shirt collars by the Dutch partners Viktor & Rolf, and I was willing to suspend—or cantilever—my disbelief to perceive, in the arboreal spread of Yohji Yamamoto’s wedding gown, an effort to unite the party tent and the chuppah in one ensemble. But is one really looking at the skin and bones of a new hybrid species, or the anatomy of a metaphor?



Architecture critics have already started to grumble about the tenuous nature of the connections made in “Skin + Bones,” but the fashion world is well served by it. On the runway, inspired feats of virtuosity are all too often quickly forgotten by blasé audiences rushing to the next show. Here they are treated with informed reverence, beginning with the Russian Doll ensemble by Viktor & Rolf, which greets visitors in the first gallery. Eight mannequins on a round platform display the nesting layers, each a masterpiece of couture, that were originally fitted on a live model during Paris fashion week in 1999. In a video of the performance projected behind the clothes, the designers dress an immobile girl standing on a lazy Susan in successively heavier and more ornamental robes, transforming a nubile waif wearing the barest scrap of a jute shift into a royal mummy shrouded by a majestic cloak that seems molded of clay. It is an act of self-mockery and, perhaps, social criticism as much as an advertisement for the label: fashion as architecture entombing woman as it enshrines her.

The fashion retrospectives mounted by major art museums like the Guggenheim and the Met have typically been celebrations of a style, a period, or a couturier (often lavishly subsidized by its subject). The Frick examined the relations of costume to portraiture, and to changing standards of propriety, three years ago, in “Whistler, Women, and Fashion.” A number of specialized institutions here and abroad, including the Cooper-Hewitt and the Victoria & Albert, have entertained contemporary fashion in the context of other visual arts—and Hodge acknowledges her debt to “Intimate Architecture,” an exhibit of conceptual body-housing curated by Susan Sidlauskas, in 1982, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Hayden Gallery. But “Skin + Bones” stands to attract, if not reconcile, two camps that rarely converge in a gallery: the followers of fashion, who prefer their nests feathered, and the austere draftsmen in Bauhaus glasses, who may privately relish the charms of a scarlet woman such as fashion but balk at entertaining her in polite company. “Ten years ago, I couldn’t have organized a show like this,” Hodge told me. “Many architects would have been leery of lending their work to it. They didn’t know what avant-garde designers were doing, or assumed that it was frivolous. But the younger generation tends to know more about fashion than designers know about architecture. They’ve grown up with its influence, and the question of legitimacy doesn’t arise.”

“Skin + Bones” starts with the unexceptional premise that fashion and architecture are, if not equals, cognates—related languages with a common root. They both translate a two-dimensional pattern of abstract shapes into a seamed, three-dimensional volume. It is probable that birds’ nests and spiders’ webs inspired the first weavers and thatchers, and most of the garments ever made have been fabricated from some sort of loomed or knitted textile. Their archaic function was to provide a substitute for the scales that mammals left on the shore. The clothing of early humans (and of many contemporary nomads)—skins draped over a bony frame—was a trimmer version of their tents, though almost anything we wear could be construed, as it is in this show, as a “portable shelter.” Bikinis and burkas, in that respect, both mediate between the public and private zones of a body the way that a wall or a screen does—inviting or denying access to strangers.

Durable edifices are rarely, at least in the West, constructed of fragile materials, but “hard” and “soft” are no longer the defining properties of either architecture or fashion. The British designer Alexander McQueen is represented in the catalogue by a one-piece molded “carapace” with a metallic pony-hair fringe that resembles a yurt. Shigeru Ban’s Curtain Wall House is literally that: a Tokyo residence with a curtain wall of white drapery. Carbon Tower, a high-rise by Peter Testa and Devyn Weiser, gifted partners based in Los Angeles, is still in the planning stage, but they hope to construct it from a braided, carbon-fibre helix, which resembles a fish-net stocking. Theirs is a cityscape made sensuous by technology, rather than brutalized by it, although nothing may be more old-fashioned about visionary architecture than its utopianism.

In nearly every culture that covers its nudity and lives under a roof, fashion and architecture are vested with the power to confer status and encode identity—services that, of late, they have performed conspicuously for each other. It is almost de rigueur for a big luxury clothing brand to commission a flagship store or corporate headquarters from an architect with a museum, civic monument, or Pritzker Prize on his résumé, and the competition among the would-be Medicis of fashion to outclass one another architecturally has come to resemble a medieval joust. The French mogul Bernard Arnault reportedly enlisted Frank Gehry to design the Louis Vuitton Foundation for Creation’s contemporary-arts center after Karl Lagerfeld warned him that Tadao Ando, a knight high on Arnault’s list, had been tapped by an arch-rival, François Pinault, of P.P.R., which owns the Gucci Group. The Prada boutiques in SoHo and Beverly Hills were designed by OMA/Rem Koolhaas. But Prada, for its six-level emporium in Tokyo (don’t call it a department store; it’s an “epicenter”), jilted Koolhaas for the Swiss firm of Herzog & de Meuron. Their five-sided, diamond-faceted, nib-shaped edifice with “bubblewrap” windows has become a landmark in Tokyo’s Aoyama district, and Hodge includes it with two other starred attractions on a shopping tour of that city: Toyo Ito’s Mikimoto Tower and his retail space for Tod’s—a lyrical trellis of concrete and glass on Omotesando Avenue that mirrors the Japanese elms on the sidewalk. Architecture has bequeathed to fashion marketing the notion of an aesthetically coherent—though one might also say micromanaged—environment. It sometimes makes one nostalgic for the chaos of the souk.

The disparities between fashion and architecture are, if anything, heightened by proximity: one trades in ephemerality, the other in permanence; their cultural prestige is grossly unequal, but inversely proportional to the name recognition of their stars; a great building might take a decade to build, a great collection takes at most six months to make, and it isn’t paid for up front. Even the most cerebral garments in the show—Isabel Toledo’s ingenious, circular Packing Dress; the digitally designed origami Bellows dresses by Yoshiki Hishinuma; Junya Watanabe’s *Objet* collection; Ralph Rucci’s exquisite couture mosaics; the seamless sculptures by Miyake Issey and Nanni Strada (an undeservedly obscure Milanese industrial designer in her sixties who “loves fashion and hates the fashion world,” she told me)—are constructed by methods that a civilian can comprehend. But the distorted “oblique projections” that produced the elevations for Preston Scott Cohen’s dream-like Torus house, planned for Old Chatham, New York (“a doughnut shape generated by revolving a circle along a coplanar axis”), or the theory behind Peter Eisenman’s unbuilt Rebstockpark residential and commercial development in Frankfurt (based on “the idea of the ‘fold’ as set forth by the chaos-theorist René Thom and philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s examination of Gottfried Leibniz’s monad”), might as well be rocket science.

Revolutions in construction and fabric technology have made it possible for architects to incorporate techniques like folding, pleating, wrapping, printing, braiding, and draping, though none of these are new to fashion, and, with a few exceptions, the designers work with the traditional tools of tailoring and dressmaking, putting them to wildly playful or subversive use. Conventional high fashion appeals to a client who finds a designer’s style congenial to her body and her life. The clothing in “Skin + Bones” is perhaps most akin to architecture in its appropriation of the body as a site. On it or around it, the designer constructs a singular and demanding conceptual garment that attracts notice for its own unsettling distinction. You wear it less because it suits you than because you are proud to uphold—literally—its principles.

The architects and designers in the show represent twenty-four nationalities, though the Japanese are proportionally the largest contingent. Their prominence is not an accident. They are less beholden to Western canons of design, and their tradition doesn’t discriminate between the fine and the applied arts. Hodge began thinking about the parallels between the disciplines six years ago, when she organized an exhibition at Harvard of Rei Kawakubo’s radically warped and distressed work for *Comme des Garçons*. Kawakubo and the companion of her youth, Yohji Yamamoto, have never collaborated professionally, but they are the Eve and Adam from whose loins the contemporary fashion avant-garde was born. Their first shows in Paris, like Gehry’s buildings, changed the urban landscape—though in both cases you had to be in the right neighborhood to see them.

Most of the architects in “Skin + Bones” emerged at about the same time, the early nineteen-eighties—a period of experiments with “deconstruction.” Jacques Derrida coined the term in his writing on linguistics, and parallel essays in the show’s catalogue—on architecture, by Hodge, and on fashion, by Patricia Mears, of the Fashion Institute of Technology—treat that pliable theory as the show’s intellectual bridge. As Mears notes, references to “deconstructed” clothing appeared in fashion criticism in the early nineteen-nineties, to describe the next, and predominantly Belgian, wave of iconoclasm—in particular, Martin Margiela’s fusion of structure and ornament, and his mythical vestimentary of mutant garments. Like Kawakubo, and, indeed, most of the participants in “Skin + Bones,” he dismantled, ruptured, fractured, or fragmented, then reconfigured, not only clothing or buildings but the traditional logic behind them, which suddenly ceased to seem inevitable.

For anyone who can’t get to Los Angeles between now and March, when the show closes, the catalogue, “Skin + Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture” (Thames & Hudson; \$50) is worth the investment. Some graphic designers now call themselves “information architects,” though Tracey Shiffman, who laid out the catalogue, isn’t one of them. She deserves the title, however, if for nothing else than for giving such innovative thought to the ergonomics of reading. The text is set in parallel columns separated by a channel, where the footnotes and captions are printed in contrasting ink. It spares the eye tedious travel back and forth or up and down to fetch its references from a well. And the catalogue, like the show it documents, proposes a definition of shelter that includes a habitat for experiment where a family of ideas—unsimple and rivalrous, like all families—can dwell.