**Heritage and innovation in luxury brands’ flagship stores**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the contribution of heritage and innovation in the design of flagship stores, and their implications for luxury brands.

The Literature Review begins with an assessment of the concept of luxury and the role of flagship stores. It subsequently examines theories of history and heritage in branding. architecture and the built environment in the context of brand identity. Buildings generally have been understood to symbolise good taste, power, and status and can embody heritage. Corporate identity has provided an additional focus for many commercial architectural projects in which innovative designs have been an important point of distinction for luxury brands. The use of buildings as a selling and branding device has led to the appearance of the expressive, or iconic landmark .

The paper draws on two continuing strands of research undertaken on retail flagship stores and on re-use of buildings using interviews, photographs and case studies. It argues their contribution to brand value both in terms of heritage and innovation.

The findings demonstrate that luxury brands can develop and extend their identity through such innovative, iconic buildings and also from a heritage perspective, differentiate themselves by the meaning, reputation and patterns of usage developed in the past. While meaning and brand values change over time, through the use of distinctive buildings, firms can invoke consumers’ repertoires of memories.

Key words: Brand, Flagship stores, Iconicity, Identity, Marketing, Retail.

**Introduction**

It has become increasingly difficult to agree on a definition of luxury, as it has become more relative, subjective, dynamic and open to multiple conceptualisations (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). At an extreme it has been critically de-categorised, to represent the ultimate limit of design, manufacture, distribution and communication (Sicard 2006). Luxury goods have both tangible characteristics in their quality, design, lifetime value and performance, and also intangible ones, as status symbols conveying personality, prestige and superiority (van Dijk, 2009).

From an ownership perspective, exclusivity and limited availability of the product continue to define luxury brands; for Armani, luxury’s enduring quality is its uniqueness, for Pinault, the challenge lies in creating surprise not answering a need (Jackson 2007). From a marketing perspective, luxury goods are distinguished by “consistent and intensive branding and marketing strategies”(van Dyck 2009, p.14). Both positions demonstrate a concern with authenticity (Tungate, 2009), although here too, an objective definition of “authenticity as the original or the attribute of the original is too simple to capture its complexity” (Wang 1999, p. 354).

Part of the complexity lies in the democratisation of luxury fashion, which has permeated every aspect of consumer society (Silverstein and Fiske 2003; Okonkwo, 2007). Aspirations towards attaining luxury fashion brands have been heightened by the availability of luxury-style goods at lower prices, and advances in globalization, technologies and communications which have made fashion more accessible. Both personal indulgence and conspicuous consumption have become essential characteristics (Thomas 2007). Widespread availability of luxury has led to consumer fatigue for highly visible, branded luxury products and stimulated demand for personalisation. Experiences fit this new demand for subtler, tailored forms of luxury, which are difficult to recreate and their location, the retail store becomes significant.

**Literature Review**

Distribution has been shown to play a key role in luxury management (van Dijk 2009; Kapferer and Bastien 2009). Moore and Doherty (2006) define luxury fashion retailers as ‘those firms that distribute clothing, accessories and other lifestyle products’ (see Table 1). In the context of luxury fashion retailing in London and New York, Fernie *et al.* (1998) acknowledge that luxury fashion brands firms restrict their representation to one ‘flagship’ store and distribute product via in-store concessions and wholesale agreements. Their work demonstrates the importance of location of these flagships noting that in London, Bond Street and Sloane Street account for 85% of the total designer stores in the city, with Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue housing the majority of New York’s luxury retailers.

Increasing retail competition has led to a number of responses, including investment in design to offer customer experiences, and in fashion stores toward more luxurious environments. Customers for a Prada bag want to have a "Prada experience" which involves enjoying the luxury of a visit to the store (Design Week 2008). In Milan, Armani, Gucci and B&B Italia commission interiors for stores that turn brand and corporate ideas into imaginative architecture and design, as well as create perfect staging for products. Lesser known shops also function as “spatial logos” in a trend towards idea of luxury and priceless refinement (Klein 2005).

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| Exclusively designed and/or manufactured by/or for the retailer | Exclusively branded with a recognised insignia, design handwriting or some other identifying device |
| Perceived to be of a superior design, quality and craftsmanship | Priced significantly higher than the market norm; |
| Sold within prestigious retail settings |  |
| Table 1: Luxury flagship store characteristics (Source: Moore and Doherty, 2006) |

Heritage branding

The role of history and heritage in branding, and its application to luxury can be distinguished through different theoretical perspectives. Urde et al. (2007) distinguish between retro-branding, relating to a particular epoch and using nostalgia as a theme; iconic branding, emphasising mythmaking in the transformation of the brand into an iconic one, and heritage marketing. This latter perspective can be understood as a process by which things come into the self-conscious arena when a person wants to preserve or collect them (Ashworth and Howard, 1999). Moscardo (1996) views the visitor experience as a developmental process of their own understanding of the offered heritage constructed through a variety of experiences with different types of products, and through interactions with or participation in the interpretation of exhibit. McIntosh and Prentice are concerned with visitors’ affirmation of the authenticity of heritage attractions through three psychological processes: reinforced assimilations, perception and retroactive association. Ideal interpretation implies re-creation of the past and kinship with it (Tilden, 2007).

Historical studies of business and commerce, distinct from those of heritage, broadly demonstrate the importance of the past in shaping the future. Organisational histories serve a number of purposes: to assert and discover sources of organizational traditions and cultures, to seek glory, reputation and reliability and to break away from a negative past (Ooi 2002). The effective packaging of history entails a continuous series of activities that feed symbolic interpretations to people and letting and helping people interpret the past with their own backgrounds and experiences. The implication for luxury fashion brands is that “histories can be used strategically to mobilise strong and positive feelings and embed these feelings into people’s experiences of organizations” (Ooi 2002, p.617). Organisational identity can be explained as a sustainable story, and also history-telling, which is unique to the organisation (Carroll 2002). In summary, these theories point towards consumer interaction and a co-creative process of meaning-making.

Corporate and brand identity provide a further dimension to the relationship between heritage, luxury and the built environment of the flagship store. Where corporate visual identity is defined by corporate name, logotype or symbol, typography and colour (Melewar and Saunders, 1999), in corporate branding, visual identity is normally the crucial name and/or logo that play an important part in creating awareness and recognition (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). Architecture and location too have a role in this identity formation (Melewar and Jenkins 2002; Melewar and Akel 2005). Jorda-Albinana et al. (2009) cite AEG and Olivetti in Italy as the pioneers in identity design for the formal and coherent design for their buildings, advertising, products and sales outlets. In these cases architecture reflects the brand in the consistency of its design and visual appearance. In luxury retailing, such distinctions are particularly important, since retail identity is communicated in and experienced through their stores, both internally and externally (Din 2000).

Urde et al. (2007) believe that ‘heritage brands’ have distinct defining criteria and a specific approach for effective management and leadership with a primary focus on corporate heritage brands, with additional reference to product / service branding. These heritage perspectives demonstrate firstly the contribution of the physical environment to experiences and participation, and also in affirming the authenticity of a heritage.

**Brand Stewardship**

Core values

Use of symbols

History important to identity

Longevity

Track record

Figure 1 The elements of brand heritage (Source: Urde et al. 2007)

Heritage, innovation and architecture

Buildings generally have been understood to symbolise good taste, power, and status (Berg and Kreiner 1990). The corporate brand can also be communicated through the re-use of historic buildings and heritage of the built environment (Snodgrass and Coyne, 2006). In this way design should demonstrate a reassuringly familiar connection to the past while at the same time surprising users with its inventiveness (Liedtka and Mintzberg, 2006). The urban design literature provides additional dimensions to the contextualisation of the past; meaning is achieved through legibility, cultural associations, perceived functions, attractions, qualitative assessments (Carmona et al., 2003). In a rapidly changing environment, visual and tangible evidence of the past is valued for the sense of place and continuity, and the relative permanence of place helps establish meaningful qualities, it embodies a social memory (Rossi 1982; Carmona et al., 2003). Examples of this process are evident in both established and new centres for luxury consumption: in Shanghai the Bund attracts department stores and flagship stores including Armani at Three on the Bund and Bund 18, while the elegant former French concession area houses Dunhill and Vacheron Constantin have flagship stores. (Chevalier and Lu, 2010).

The review has to this point focussed on heritage, but now turns to the contrasting, and important contribution of innovative building design, specifically through Modernism that opened the way for overtly branded buildings. The rise of consumerism in the 1980s and 1990s combined commercial interests and architecture and for the first time “buildings began to be looked on purely as images or marketing objects” (Glendinning, 2004, p.10). The AT&T building completed in 1978 saw the start of a new type of architecture, “the expressive landmark” that came to challenge the previous tradition of architectural monument (Jencks, 2005). Rem Koolhaas’s commodification of design responses in the 1990s, resulted in architecture as a selling and branding device, typified by free-flowing three dimensional forms and metaphor laden ways of communicating. These iconic buildings were used not only in commercial location strategies but also urban regeneration and place marketing. Their success came to be defined by discourses drawing on three elements of distinctive design, celebrity (signature) architect and media engagement (Sklair, 2006).

The centrality of communication and the medium to iconic buildings, at the expense of the future or the building itself has been extensively criticised (Kulkarmi and Joseph-Lester 2004; Glendinning, 2004; Sudjic, 2005). Nevertheless, they have been defended for their heightened experience, where ultimate meaning is partially open but always consistent enough to provoke and to invite de-coding, and their endless and superfluous variety is achieved through the liberated imagination (Jencks, 2005).

The communicative value of the signature building and the re-use of distinctive buildings, has been clearly understood by the retail industry (Hiss 1987); for Rem Koolhaas, retailing is the “single most influential force on the shape of the modern city” (cited in Barrenche 2005, p.7). From the 1980s, fashion designers, including Armani, Comme des Garçons, and Gucci, hired architects to distinguish their brand, buildings, megastores and epicentres, extend their prestige and contribute to their internationalisation strategies (Manuelli, 2006). Epicentres and their restructured conceptual spaces, were themselves a competitive response by Koolhaas and Miuccia Prada to the fashion designers’ prevailing flagship store strategies (Glendenning, 2004).

The three dimensional, sensory microcosm of the retail store can represent the brand as a ‘brandscape’. Real locations enable the brand to be staged and encountered in its purest unusual and unique style (Riewoldt, 2002, p.8) and send out powerful signals, communicate images and promise new experiences. The brandscape forms a material and symbolic environment that consumers build with marketplace products, images and messages (Sherry 1998). The design of the retail environment merges with the brand image down to finest details to achieve expressiveness through the “purposeful use of characteristic forms and calculated elements of surprise” (Riewoldt, 2000, p.79). At its most extreme, brandscaping draws on entertainment to create multimedia-packed places of pilgrimage, where fantastic environments enable owners to add significance to their merchandise (Sherry and McGrath, 1989; Peñaloza, 1999).

Sklair’s conclusions on iconic architecture (2006: 1906) are that “the relationships between what buildings mean, how they look and how they make different categories of those who experience them feel, need to be explored”. The flagship store has a specific role to play in communicating and showcasing the brand through spatial design. However, ‘stores that tell stories’ to enable consumers to make meanings from such places are not necessarily the creation of branded store designers. In this context ‘brandscaping’has been used as a theoretical framework to define the co-created symbolic and physical environment that consumers build with marketplace.

**Research Methodology**

The research design draws on and synthesises two strands of extant research. The first project used mixed qualitative methods to define the ‘retail flagship’ and its function from a retail industry perspective and consequently it did not engage specifically with luxury or fashion businesses. Drawing from Kozinets et al. (2002) interviews, photographic evidence, and content analysis of media references were used. Content analysis was undertaken from all references to flagship stores in the UK news, using online databases and physical resources. Fourteen respondents were interviewed from the analysis, in order to explore the flagship concept and to gain insights into the retailers’ knowledge of and intentions for flagship stores. These were undertaken with designers, managers and media commentators on the retail industry. 225 photographs of the exteriors and interiors of stores were taken or drawn from the researchers’ archives, and supplemented by retailers’ own visual material in commercially sensitive environments. Photographs have been used as evidence in anthropology, and more recently in ethnographic approaches to consumer research (Pink, 2005). The purpose of the photographs was to analyse the visual appearance of flagship stores identified by respondents and from the content analysis and to triangulate with the interviews and text based materials. The focus was on close analysis of locational context, architectural form, external and internal design features, use of space and layouts of product, corporate communications (including logos and symbols), form and colour. The research was cross-referenced with a case study analysis of Regent Street, London to provide a detailed area study. This street is owned by one landlord, the Crown Estate, who are currently implementing a strategy flagship stores largely in fashion clothing. Therefore it provides an opportunity to examine a distinctive grouping of self-styled flagship stores in a central shopping location.

The second strand of research was undertaken with UK retailers and the architectural design of the brand leaders’, Sainsbury and Tesco stores over the period 1998- 2005. In order to investigate the process of architectural design, four stores in England were purposively sampled from these two companies whose design and development appear to have particular significance. Each store highlighted a specific design issue that demonstrated a change in architectural direction, in effect each became a flagship store for the company to assess its design policy. These formed case studies, with each store differing in age, design, and purpose and representing a specific generic type in centre, edge of centre and out of town locational contexts.

The cases were developed through interviews, observation and documentary sources. Using a snowballing technique, contacts were established and relationships developed with informants, including architects, designers, town planners, historians, senior managers, executives and department heads in architectural practices and retailers. Observations were made during site visits beginning with brief scoping visits, followed by close examination and photographic recording, and in-depth guided visits with architects or planners.These proved most useful in highlighting important design features and less obvious, successes or failures in the development construction.

**Findings and Discussion**

The findings demonstrate the use of the flagship, across all cases, as having a branding function. Retail flagships are more than stores: they are positioned to communicate corporate and brand values to customers and employees, competitors and communities. Respondents used the terms “beacon” and “lighthouse” to describe this aspect. In their bricks-and-mortar embodiment, they can be considered as constituting, in addition to a retailing sales function, a spatial form of advertising and promotion. The function of a flagship can be understood within a marketing communications strategy, the benefits of which transcend that of the store itself. It gives the brand exposure to different audiences, demonstrates confidence and expresses interest, and at a more emotional extreme, excitement; it raises the tempo. The flagship can be understood as the 'purest expression of brand' to internal and external stakeholders.

Closely related to this theme is that of the “ideal”. The flagship, at the very least it is the best example of the retail brand. Products, service and environment combine to provide leadership and best practice, as a prototype for the store group. Flagship stores are where customers and visitors “see the diversity of the product and the background as well” and stores are differentiated from others through the quality of their staff and services. However, the “ideal” takes on different meanings in different retail sectors. In the clothing sector, the flagship is defined by their function to showcase their best profile, effectively to catch the eye, and where cost may not be a prime consideration. Clothing retailers’ flagships are clearly determined by 'style' and interactivity, both with products, and socially with other people, in which interior design plays a significant part in the experience.

In a retail environment characterized by the consistency and sameness of multiple retailers, these stores typically offer a greater choice of products and services. Flagships provide the opportunity to experience these within distinctive, often memorable and in places unique, physical environments. It is an ideal store for the latest manifestation of the brand, embracing a holistic approach to showcase distinctive experiences. The content of the showcase varies by sector. Clothing sector stores demonstrate a complex mix of product and service experiences, enhanced by investment into a comprehensively designed store environment, to endure over a longer timescale.

“Designed space” forms the third theme. Location can define, and be defined by the flagship store. Harrods in London and Jenners in Edinburgh, typify distinctive local positions. In London but more especially in Birmingham, Selfridges plays an important role in defining Oxford Street and the Bullring shopping area. Selfridges creates a distinctive, monumental presence to define the start of an experience of shopping on Oxford St: it is the first building to stand out from the western end of the street’s post war development. As well a defining the street, Selfridges is also defined by the street, in that it can never aspire to Knightsbridge, or the select and smaller scale of Bond St. It occupies the more mixed and accessible world of the non-exclusive retail chains’ flagships, of M&S, John Lewis and HMV.

Regent Street’s central location and architectural integrity create an environment for memorable experiences before entering the distinctive worlds of Libertys, Hamleys, and more recently Apple. The street is deliberately planned to create a differentiated environment from the competition created by neighbouring Oxford Street and nearby Bond Street. However store size is not always a critical factor. While it is often synonymous with prestige, proximity to other similar stores can provide a comparable halo for smaller stores.

Avoidance of internal structure is evident in flagship store design. The Apple flagship store has succeeded in a two floor open-planned space of 20000 square feet behind a stone faced façade. London’s Regent Street will create larger store spaces to replace the small sites designed in the 1910s-20s. Zara in the first wave of new flagship development, introduced its first standalone store in the UK and some nine other retailers have followed suit. Habitat offers a parallel to Apple, with the same use of a central staircase leading to a mezzanine floor, cafe overlooking the street, product display designed for interaction and a pedagogic element in its presentations and talks about interior design.

Size often distinguishes flagships, where extravagance is part of the experience, and historical reputation may be a significant part of the experience. The authoritative design and layouts communicate to the customer, but the purchase may then be made online or at a warehouse location. However, the flagship is not necessarily the largest store; some flagships can be smaller and quirky, being distinctively different from the surrounding environment.. Some locations can accommodate smaller, more specialist retailers; Covent Garden and its fringes provide opportunities for fashion retailers seeking a flagship store defined by its proximity to a large target market and compatible competition.

Market research and strategic marketing form the fourth significant theme arising from the research. Flagship stores provide feedback from customers and staff about the “ideal” retail brand. They can be defined by their relationship to other stores, to transmit new ideas to other stores in the multiple group as part of an organic process of internal communication. Respondents identified the stores’ role in setting standards of service to staff as well as products and layout. These are locations where new products, services and concepts are trialled and if successful, adapted for other stores.

A measure of success of the communicative power of buildings is their ability to command media attention. Innovative luxury stores can follow Sklair’s (2006) analysis of iconic buildings relating design, signature architect and media discourse. The distinctive design of the building itself and its communicative power can engage the viewers’ imagination and generate ongoing discourses and multiple metaphors amongst its stakeholders and the media. The potential for generating these types of communication and the degree of building distinctiveness are summarised in Table 1 (below).

* A single landmark or iconic building. The organisation uses a single iconic building to create discourses in the media and other stakeholders. Its enigmatic form can inspire many metaphors to build relationships with the brand, and it becomes highly visible as a ‘beacon’ to both internal and external stakeholders. These buildings demonstrate power and prestige, and are characterised by their free-flowing form, in which there is an enigmatic relationship between the parts of the building and the whole.
* Multiple iconic buildings. The multiple retailer, or multi-site organisation, employs signature architects whose individual designs create a number of distinctive buildings. Individually and cumulatively they create discourses and stakeholder engagement with the brand at a local level and build local relationships. Collectively the discourses of iconic architecture will also define the brand identity.
* Store architecture draws on the heritage of the ‘locale’. New buildings demonstrate the sensitivity of the architecture to the environment using architectural features. Where buildings are re-used, they draw on and amplify the heritage and history of the site and its neighbourhood. They build on the local relationships of stakeholders with the existing building.
* Stores share one or more design elements of a successful building. Some distinctive elements of a landmark store are applied to other stores as a design feature. In other words, a formula that attracts approval of multiple stakeholders, through its more or less modest dimensions.

**Table 2 A typology of architectural identities**

**Conclusion**

The findings hold a number of implications for luxury brands. The flagship store can make a significant contribution to the visibility of UK retail brands and are valuable as showcases for products, and practices as media for communication to internal and external stakeholders. They provide opportunities to demonstrate leadership with new designs, products and experiences. Interactivity and change, the need to offer new experiences, “a grand day out” for sensory consumers, are features of the most successful environments.

More broadly, architecture is not well understood as a medium for communicating a consistent retail brand identity. However buildings present opportunities to create a distinctive visual style for designers and architects and retail brand strategists. Meaning and the value of the brand changes over time, and through the use of distinctive buildings, firms can invoke a sense of continuity and connection to the past. Further research could examine building’s relationship with, and contribution to, the history and heritage of the location and extend for example Urde et al.’s (2007) work on corporate brand heritage.

The sense of permanence in architecture contributes to its visual communicative power, and engages with stakeholders in the open-ended co-creation of the brand. Public interest can enable some buildings to become a brand in their own right, for example, with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Such buildings have an ability to inspire visitors through their ambiguity that could be used as a part of a communications strategy by the brand owner. In this context Jencks (2005) discusses the iconic building’s ability to liberate the imagination; the implication for retailers is to create a more memorable and enjoyable experience through its interpretation.

This paper demonstrates the ways in which the flagship concepts have become a significant part of the language of branding and promotion.

In its exploration of flagships both in their luxurious and iconic forms and in their expressions as places for everyday shopping, the research findings point to a diversity in branding that frequently does not match the intended marketing aims. This is indicative of the experiential and evolutionary nature of the flagship. As such this paper charts a phenomenon that is in transition and that has yet to establish rules of behaviour and orthodoxy on how things “ought to be done.”

Luxury brands can develop and extend their identity through such innovative, iconic buildings and also from a heritage perspective, differentiate themselves by the meaning, reputation and patterns of usage developed in the past. While meaning and brand values change over time, through the use of distinctive buildings, firms “can invoke consumers’ repertoires of memories through their brand communication to imbue their consumption with a sense of continuity and connection to the past” (Arnould et al. 2006:98).

The research implies that retail innovation in the future will look to the integration of marketing strategies with design strategies and of operational cultures, especially in the food sector. These will be directed towards deeper empathy with the customer and to demonstrate greater interactivity.

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