

Are You *Being* Served?



Fuelled by robotics, department store AU PONT ROUGE rethinks the role of the physical retail space to make it a social catalyst again.

Words
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STEPPING THROUGH THE Art Nouveau doors of Au Pont Rouge in Saint Petersburg, you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd walked into a contemporary-art gallery instead of a department store. The expanse of gleaming glass, white stone and natural light is punctuated only occasionally by merchandise, such as perfume bottles displayed on gently swaying metal fronds. Behind this calm exterior lies almost 14 tonnes of robotics, however, churning away to deliver inventory along 22 m of conveyor belts to designated check-out points.

This is perhaps the most radical transformation in the building's already tumultuous 110-year history. Completed in 1907 during the golden age of European retail, which produced the likes of Selfridges in London and Galleries Lafayette in Paris, the original edifice soon fell victim to 20th-century misfortune. Following the Russian Revolution of 1919, it was seized by the state and renamed V. Volodarsky Sewing Factory. The grand cupola was destroyed, and the building fell into disrepair.

It wasn't until 2012 that a plan emerged to return the building to its former glory. From a short list of over 200 designers, Hong Kong-based Cheungvogl was asked to reimagine the role of a retail establishment for Russia's second-largest city. 'Au Pont Rouge is culturally too significant to be just a common retail project,' says Judy Cheung, cofounder of the design studio. 'We wanted something that people could relate to, something that would be a Saint Petersburg institution. If people could feel its significance, they could come to love the meaning of the old structure for the city.'

Old meets new

A major challenge lay in how to devise an innovative retail space that would respect the unique heritage of the building. Having existed while the Romanovs were still tsars of all Russia, Au Pont Rouge carried the imprints of a turbulent century, including heavy damage to staircase, balustrades and windows during its years as a Bolshevik factory.

Although the Cheungvogl redesign would introduce new technological elements, Cheung says their main inspiration came from the history of the department store. 'In the 19th century, department stores became social catalysts,' she says. 'They defined

city life, with their restaurants, bars and cigar rooms, encouraging people of different classes and backgrounds to spend time together, to socialize, to see and to be seen. We wanted Au Pont Rouge to become a social catalyst again, rather than just another place of consumption.'

To achieve this goal, the building has been opened to the city as much as possible. White resin, metal-mesh ceilings and expanses of glass flood the central eight-floor atrium with light, while translucent sliding panels control privacy and access to views across the Moika River. A state-of-the-art robotic inventory system leaves the shop floor free of excess stock, thus allowing minimalist displays to take on an almost museum-like quality, and 100-m-long galleries stretching between the façade and the interior of the building act as 'salons' where shoppers can pause, meet and interact.

'Interestingly, the development of the classic department store followed the Second Industrial Revolution, when more people moved to the cities to find work in the factories,' says cofounder Christoph Vogl. 'Today, we are experiencing the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, in which digital information is being linked to automated processes. Our design for Au Pont Rouge, with its robotic system and the connection between online and offline experiences, mirrors the heritage of the classic department store and continues its historical role in Saint Petersburg.'

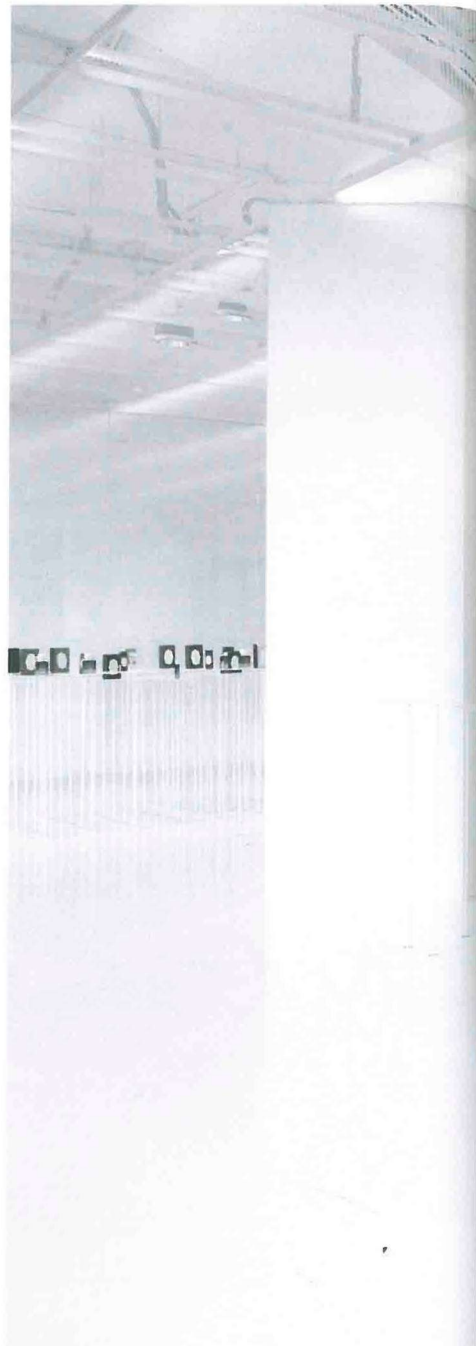
The power of the physical

Although e-commerce has permanently changed the way retailers operate, bricks and mortar remain part of the digital age. In fact, physical stores are going through a renaissance of sorts. No longer bound to the traditional process of transactions, savvy retailers are radically rethinking the role of the physical store in its entirety – as a convergent space that can embrace aspects of culture, education, wellness and more.

'The physical store is the place where a brand can connect best with its customers, where it can communicate and interact directly with them on a personal level,' says Vogl, describing a model for retail that is less flagship and more 'brandship'. 'Providing quality physical space is a real luxury in a world where all information and every item

are constantly available and updated online,' agrees Cheung. 'Retailers need to understand and evaluate the greatest advantage that real stores have over their online counterparts. I'm talking about the spatial experience and all the possibilities within.'

It is in this context that we can better understand some of 2016's retail innovations. The Samsung 837 store in New York, for example, is described as a 'digital playground' where technology and culture meet, a hub for hosting everything from fashion events to cooking demonstrations. The one thing it doesn't do is sell merchandise: no stock is available in-store. In a similar vein, Burberry answered criticism



The robotic inventory system at Au Pont Rouge leaves the shop floor free of excess stock, allowing for a minimal, museum-like display of products.



Courtesy of Cheungvogel

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that its see-now-buy-now retail model would undermine the romance of seasonal connections by launching Makers House in London, a showroom-cum-workshop that celebrated the best of contemporary British craftsmanship.

Another challenge for department stores like Au Pont Rouge is how to tell a story that reflects the complex and divergent narratives of the brands on offer. ‘Luxury brands are increasingly reluctant to let department stores build their narratives, because they may not get it right,’ says Ana Andjelic, SVP and global strategy director at Havas Lux Hub. ‘Luxury brands are about building brand equity, whereas department

stores are about driving sales. There’s a fundamental conflict here.’

Robotic delivery system

One of the most striking innovations of the Cheungvogel design is a vast robotic inventory system that automatically conveys purchases to checkout points. Liberated from the chore of heaving a basket around the store, Au Pont Rouge customers can simply scan sample stock, add their choices to a virtual basket and continue browsing unhindered. When they’re ready to pay, the robotic system transports all items to checkout; the process can also be integrated into an e-commerce delivery system at home. »

Reserved for samples and testing, the Selfie Room offers shadow-free facial illumination.



'The retail ecosystem connects online and offline shopping and informs an entirely new store concept,' says Vogl. 'The traditional trading process, including in-house stock and logistics, is removed from the display area to make place for intellectual exchange, consultation and spatial experiences.' Rather than introducing digital screens or one of the interactive gimmicks that have become so popular in recent years, Cheungvogl used technology to engender the experience of being in a physical store by removing clutter from the sales floor and permitting staff to engage with shoppers instead of handling logistics.

'We've had clients who have explicitly asked for more "tricks", such as interactive

mirrors or huge digital screens, but we really push back on that,' explains David Dalziel, creative director of London-based retail and design agency Dalziel & Pow. 'Technology has to spur conversation and engagement rather than just producing a good headline. The question people need to ask themselves when introducing technological elements in-store is: will this drive involvement with my brand? Return on Involvement is the new Return on Investment in bricks and mortar.'

The robotic system streamlines the shopping process, but it also introduces a sense of drama to checkout, previously not the most engaging part of the retail experience. The focus on transparency, apparent

throughout the store design, is also evident here, where swooping robotic arms and automated conveyer belts are visible behind a wall of glass.

Selfie Room

Apart from its gallery-like spaces, Au Pont Rouge features spa and treatment areas, as well as a Selfie Room, which is reserved for samples and testing. Shoppers who take advantage of this opportunity claim to feel like performers, models and photographers – all at the same time. The room provides them with perfect facial illumination: no shadows. A long mirror reflects a curved wall of mesh, which filters indirect lighting. End-



Where today's in-store technology often assumes the form of digital screens or interactive gimmicks, at Au Pont Rouge a robotic inventory system opens the interior to enhance the experience of being in a physical store.

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less reflections are exquisite eye candy for snap-happy patrons. The designers believe that by ‘animating self-reflection within an abstract context, one is driven and inspired to act, document and ultimately share the moment. The space merges the online and offline experiences of visitors and brands. By sharing the self-image through social media, visitors enjoy 15 minutes of fame for themselves while generating free advertising for brands. In their shared posts, the brand itself is apparent only in the Geotag.’

Commerce and culture

By returning to the original function of 19th-century department stores as urban engines

of change and social mobility, Cheungvogl re-evaluated the role open to physical retail in today's cities. As our daily lives become increasingly dominated by all things digital, physical spaces become more important in the search for moments of respite and deeper connection.

‘For department stores to stay socially and culturally relevant, part of the long-term development is understanding changing social habits in parallel with reviewing the holistic store concept,’ says Vogl. By opening Au Pont Rouge to the city and freeing the shop floor of stock and clutter, Cheungvogl invites the people of Saint Petersburg to reassess their use of this

public facility. Since its launch, the store has been used for art exhibitions, Saint Petersburg Fashion Week and a private banquet hosted by a Parisian fashion house. A packed cultural schedule is planned for this year.

To compete in an age of digital efficiency, retailers need to create destinations that provide more than simple transactions. The Cheungvogl redesign of Au Pont Rouge proves that technology can help them to do so, but designers have to steer clear of gimmicks and make quality human interaction their end goal. ●

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