

RETAIL

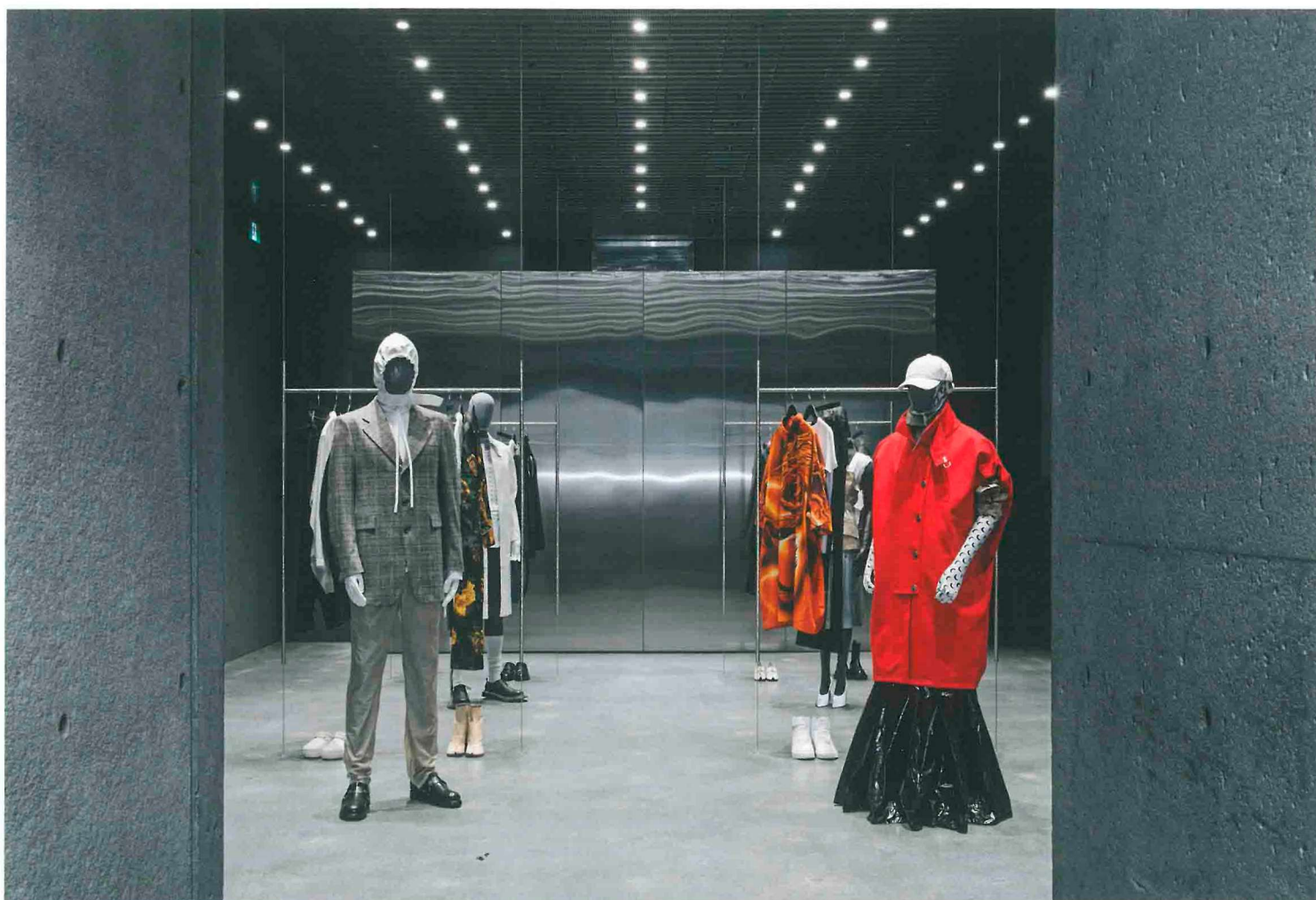
Design by data: Ssense's flagship by David Chipperfield applies lessons learned both online and off

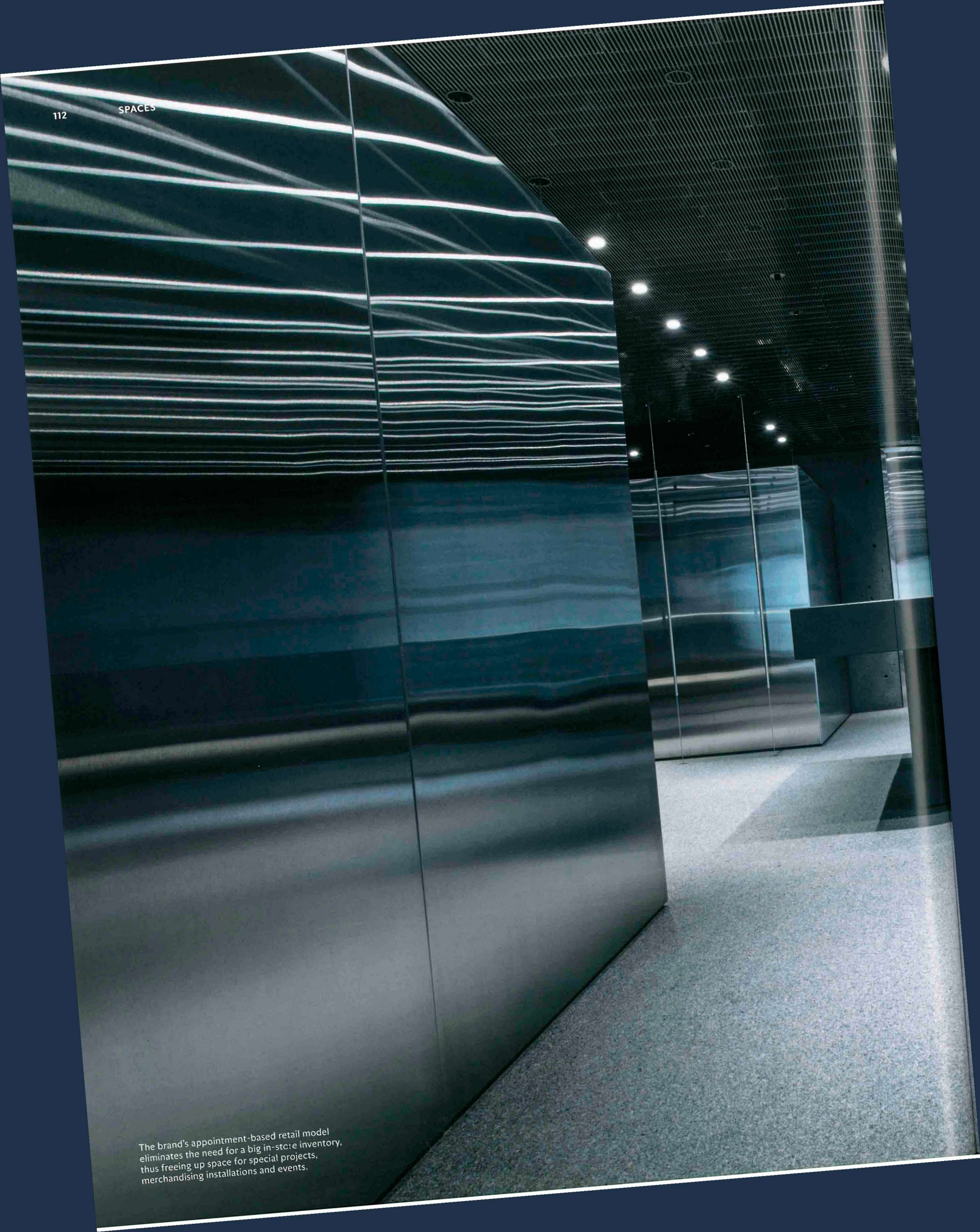
MONTREAL – Headquartered in Canada, global multi-brand fashion retailer Ssense (pronounced 'essence', for those tempted to lisp the first consonants) began as an experiment in 2003. 'I was completing my studies in computer engineering and built the platform as part of my thesis,' says cofounder and CEO Rami Atallah. 'My two brothers and I saw the potential of e-commerce and intended to merge digital and physical from day one. E-commerce was still in its early days, and many brands were reluctant to sell online. We decided to first open a store in Old Montreal, not far from where our new store stands. A few years later we launched ssense.com and have been simultaneously operating online and off ever since.' Atallah realized that while e-commerce enables scale, it has its shortcomings – namely fostering

human connection. Talia Dorsey, director of retail strategy for Ssense, explains how the David Chipperfield-designed flagship incorporates over a decade's worth of analytics, testing and iteration collected from the brand's website, as well as its previous store.

What kinds of data were revealed, and how were they translated into the new design?

TALIA DORSEY: The first boutique was important for direct client interaction. We gathered an entirely new dataset based on the staff's capacity to read, understand, adapt and respond to our customers. Clients developed strong relationships with our stylists and began requesting that online catalogue items be sent to the boutique for them to try on. Marrying the best of online commerce and in-store experience, this method came »





The brand's appointment-based retail model eliminates the need for a big in-store inventory, thus freeing up space for special projects, merchandising installations and events.

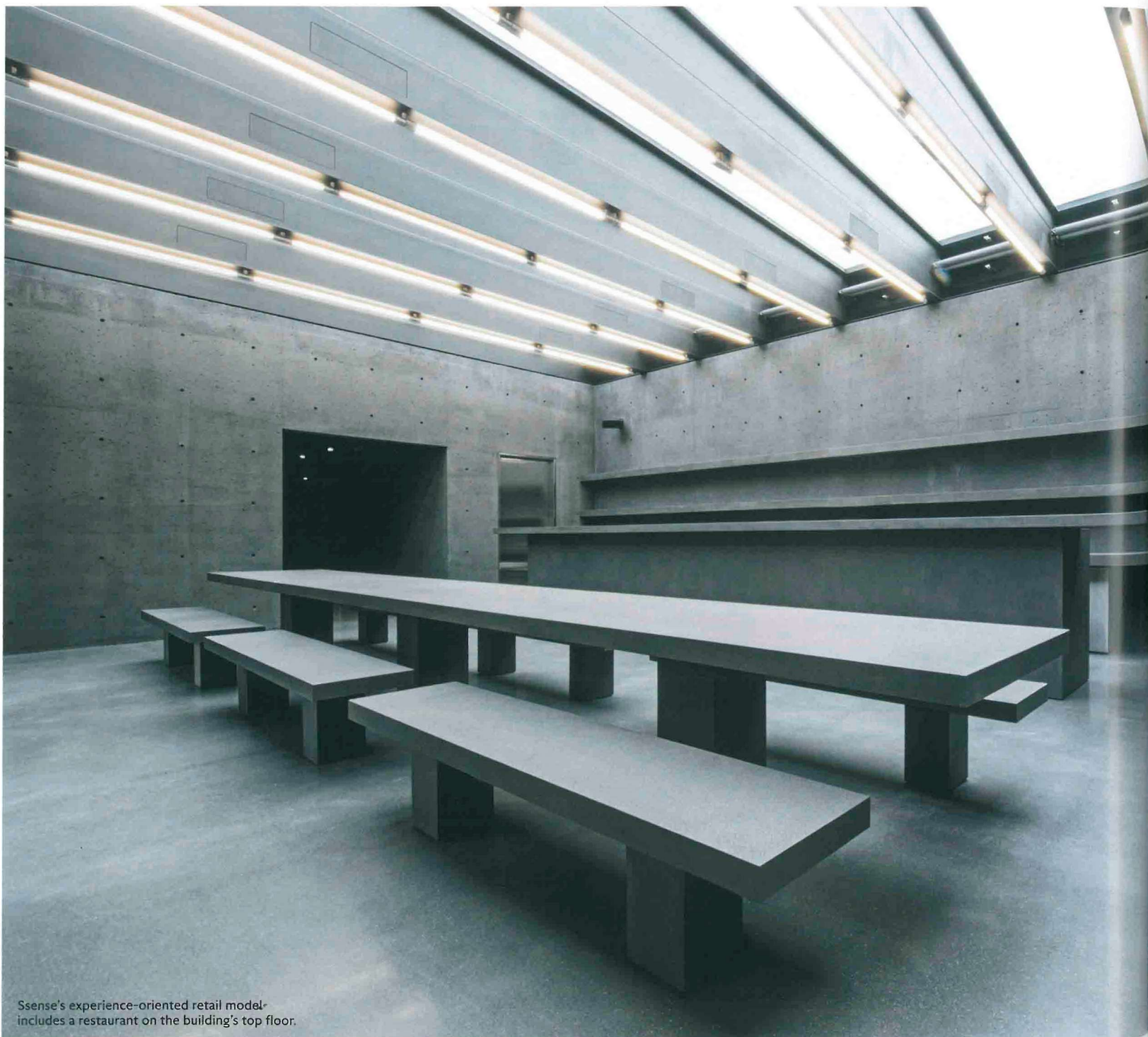


to represent 80 per cent of boutique sales, making Ssense Montreal one of the most productive retail spaces per square foot in North America. We consequently contoured our new flagship around appointment-based shopping and developed a robust technological back-end, which handles everything from appointment booking and fulfillment flow to the vertical lift module that sorts the daily flux of inventory. The data accrued through our online business further support these appointments – through an expanded assortment of inventory that we can suggest prior to a client's visit – while providing in-store availability for impulse additions and walk-ins.

How does the space facilitate Ssense's divergence into events and experiences?

Our appointment-based model means our retail real estate is no longer beholden to mainly housing inventory, allowing us to conceive of new spatial uses that better react to our market: primarily millennials and Gen Z. Part of our mission is to respond to and engage with the increasingly fluid boundaries of commerce, content and community. That's why we expanded our online platform to include editorial content, with *032c* magazine's Joerg Koch as our editor in chief.

Instead of working within a fixed traditional retail environment, David



Ssense's experience-oriented retail model includes a restaurant on the building's top floor.



‘Ssense Montreal accommodates ongoing experimentation and constantly changing content’

Chipperfield's team was tasked with designing the principles and possibilities of a *system*, one with an unlimited ability to support our special projects, merchandising installations and events. More infrastructure than building, Ssense Montreal accommodates ongoing experimentation and constantly changing content. Because piercing the concrete walls of the listed property was not permissible, Chipperfield's systems and flexible solutions were engineered into the 30-cm gap between the slab and the suspended stainless-steel ceiling grille. Custom-designed luminaires can shift from ambient to spot lighting and can move from one grid of sockets to another. The sockets also anchor the tension-cable display system, another Chipperfield design. Its weightlessness forms a stark contrast with the concrete's massiveness but is equally rooted in the architectural precept of function expressed through materiality. The cables can be positioned throughout the grid system, and attached to them are ultra-thin stainless-steel rails, shelves, tables and/or vitrines.

a building' concept – a cast-in-situ concrete structure within a preserved historical skin – makes Ssense Montreal both discrete and a destination, qualities that define the brand and the platform. Concrete asserts our resolute commitment to the project, while the honesty of its expression resonates with our core values and our dedication to acting within the legacy and lineage of Montreal's architecture. It may seem simple and sober, but – just like the Ssense brand and platform – the result was achieved only by finding solutions for complex sets of parameters and through relentless dedication to the details of execution.

Are there plans to open in other locations?

We always conceived of Ssense Montreal as a space in perpetual beta, so we're continuously testing and learning from it as an environment. We intend to open more locations and are now accruing data that might inform and validate our strategy as we evaluate opportunities worldwide. – T

ssense.com
davidchipperfield.com

What aspects of Chipperfield's design tell Ssense's brand story? The 'building within