



# Haute Architecture

*Text* / Danielle Demetriou   *Images* / Courtesy of Herzog & de Meuron

It's not just the latest fashion collections that are likely to catch the eye of well-heeled shoppers in Tokyo's upmarket Aoyama district: the buildings in which they are housed are just as captivating.

Over the past decade, the central shopping neighbourhood has slowly but steadily evolved into a pioneering showcase of award-winning fashion flagship architecture. And today, a stroll along Aoyama's main street — the zelkova tree-lined Omotesandō — is akin to exploring an open-air architecture museum, with both sides lined with conceptual stand-alone flagships for global fashion brands created by an impressive roll call of top Japanese and international architects.

'The unique features of Tokyo — small plot sizes, low-rise, dense neighbourhoods — produce a very interesting pedestrian experience for shoppers and architecture fans,' explains Darryl Jingwen Wee, an architecture expert who leads tours of the neighbourhood. 'Aoyama is one area where fashion flagships have been designed by top architects for some time.'

Perhaps Aoyama's most famous flagship (and one of the first to get in on the act) is the Prada building by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, which opened in June 2003. An optical illusion of a building inspired by crystals, the contemporary six-storey structure is made up of a diamond-shaped grid packed with hundreds of

panels of glass tinged a light sea green — some concave, some convex, some flat. 'The resulting building challenges our perceptive energies in the most radical way,' explained Herzog at the time.

It's not the only shop in the area worth an architectural pilgrimage. Other iconic flagships include Christian Dior — a tall, angular box enveloped in a distinct white translucent glass and acrylic 'skin' dreamt up by cult Japanese architects SANAA — and the Jun Aoki-designed Louis Vuitton storefront, whose compartmentalised structure was inspired by the concept of randomly stacked trunks, complete with a metal mesh screen facade and a sunlight-drenched white gallery on the top floor. Another nearby favourite is Toyo Ito's Tod's that, with its organically curved-glass window cut-outs resembling leaves and branches, was designed to emulate a tree.

Even today, the neighbourhood's dialogue between fashion and architecture is showing no signs of slowing down. More recent creations include Herzog & de Meuron's Miu Miu flagship, which opened three years ago to reveal a minimal overhang in angular steel and smooth-edged copper. 'Apparently when Herzog & de Meuron did a site study for their Prada store, they concluded that they'd just go ahead and build anything they wanted — a capsule-facade spaceship, for example — as there was very little neighbouring context that demanded accommodation,' says Wee. 'When they returned

The Herzog & de Meuron-designed Miu Miu flagship in Tokyo's Aoyama fashion district includes a minimal overhang in angular steel and smooth-edged copper. The area is described as akin to exploring an open-air architecture museum





to design the Miu Miu boutique in 2015 though, just diagonally across from Prada, they managed to pull off a very subtle building with a respectful nod to the tradition of Japanese overhanging eaves that shield the actual store from the street.' Tokyo architectural firm Wonderwall, run by Masamichi Katayama, has also left an imprint on the neighbourhood, creating striking flagships for Thom Browne and Mackintosh, as well as the new concept space for Intersect by Lexus.

So while areas such as Hong Kong's On Lan Street and Beijing's Sanlitun perhaps stand out for their retail design, Aoyama is particularly unusual due to its concentration of top-quality fashion architecture, according to Wee. 'Aoyama is unique in Asia. Nowhere else does it on the same scale and density.'

Inside the Miu Miu store (top) and an interior and exterior view of the Prada store, also by Herzog & de Meuron (right and facing page)

