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The Fashion House With- out Quali- ties

The Fashion House Without Qualities

The House of Chanel. The House of Dior. The House of Balenciaga. The house was traditionally the symbolic and physical container of fashion empires, its architectural form stabilising an ever-changing discipline. Clustered in Paris' 8th arrondissement, the generic Haussmannian townhouse had the ability to host the productive and domestic character of these houses. Ateliers with seamstresses under the mansard roof, a design studio in the former boudoirs, a private quarter for the couturier on the mezzanine, a large mirrored grand salon on the piano nobile, a boutique on the ground floor and archives in the basement. The photographs of Dior's mould-breaking New Look collection of 1947, reveal a reciprocity between the architecture of the house and its fashion: the grey neoclassical Louis XVI interior formed a scenography for the particularity of seasonally changing collections.

However, the decentralisation of the fashion supply chain over the last decades has led to a disintegration of the grandeur type of the fashion house. A trending runway show in the Grand Palais, HQ in a business park, a tax haven on the Cayman Islands, low-cost production facilities in Bangladesh, python farms in Thailand; since the economy of fashion takes over, houses now hunt for price over quality. Cities like Paris and Milan are no longer places for either production or domesticity, the two vital aspects of the fashion house. The sole objective for being situated in the 8th arrondissement is now reduced to branding the houses' histories, hence the recent showcasing of their archives in massive exhibitions, nostalgia for the heydays of the postwar boom, just another conspicuous form of marketing. Can the exodus of fashion be halted by bringing couture back to the architecture of the house?

The dichotomy between the temporality of the things we wear, and the permanence of the things that shelter us, has been challenged ever since New Look. It is within this tension that the idea of the 'model' offers a point of synthesis. On the one hand, the model is an ideal representation of something other than itself, while on the other hand, it is the ultimate abstraction of a type, an archetype. In fashion, this dualism is expressed in the double meaning of the model. It can refer to the human, though inanimate mannequin that occupied the salons of the Parisian couture houses since the 1860s. Engulfed in a fug of perfume and made omnipresent by the use of mirrors in the salon, the ideally moulded body derived its existence from timber or wicker life-size dummies, while its generic appearance and measurements were essential for the reproduction of the model. At the same time, the model can also refer to the model-dress, a prototype, aimed to be copied and adapted for sale. The rich clientele of the fashion house would visit a line-up of various styles in the salon, after which the preferred dress worn by a mannequin was ordered and re-made to the client's measurements. Few of these model-dresses survived, but their copies guaranteed their permanence. In 1994, Martin Margiela used the model, or as he called it the 'replica', to oppose the temporality of fashion. Existing garments were lavishly reproduced accompanied with a label explaining their origin, function and period, relying on the principle that there is no need for reinvention since the model derived from vintage pieces is timeless. In today's ever-changing trends, can modelling bring back a noblesse oblige to produce an architecture and fashion that is as relevant today as tomorrow?

✦ For a projective answer to these questions, see the upcoming publication of The Berlage entitled 'Necessarily Eurometropolitan; with contributions by Ido Avissar, Salomon Frausto, Diederik de Koning, Michiel Riedijk and Thomas Weaver.

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