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London exhibit probes parallels between architecture and fashion

By Suzy Menkes

LONDON: Put Thomas Heatherwick's model of a Japanese Buddhist temple in birch-wood folds beside a Comme des Garçons dress of manic drapery - and what do you get? A meeting of architectural and fashion minds.

The idea of designers and architects working together is nothing new, from the Tokyo store collaboration between Prada and Rem Koolhaas to Hussein Chalayan's techno virtuosity in morphing dresses into chairs.

But "Skin + Bones, Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture" (at the new Embankment Galleries in London's Somerset House until Aug. 10) is something else: a fascinating study of how the two crafts have run separately but on similar lines over the last 25 years.

"And I am curious to see what is happening five years from now," says Brooke Hodge, curator of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, where the exhibition originated. With input on the British side from Claire Catterall at Somerset House, Hodge has created a thought-provoking study in which she looks at fashion with an architect's eye - and sees Frank Gehry's scrunched metallic materials in the folds of a Lanvin dress.

The show starts with the 1980s and the early graphic work of the architect Zaha Hadid, although Hodge admits that she would have liked to have included fashion's avant garde of the 1960s from Pierre Cardin to Paco Rabanne.

A giant projection of Viktor & Rolf's 2002 "Bluescreen" collection, in which moving images appear on the clothes, sets the tone for the long upstairs gallery, modeled by the architect Eva Jiricna to create a sinuous high-tech installation, expressing the undulating curves that have taken over from minimalist geometry.

The usual fashion suspects - primarily Japanese and Belgian designers - are chosen to link the fashion and architectural themes, starting with "Shelter." That includes images of refugee tents by the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban and the clothes of Junya Watanabe, Yohji Yamamoto and the American designer Yeohlee Teng. Prominent also is Nanni Strada, an experimental designer in Milan in the 1970s.

Sometimes the focus on a few radical designers becomes repetitive. A Selfridges store created from anodized aluminium disks by Future Systems is crying out for a Gianni Versace metal-mesh dress from the 1980s. But the late designer does not fit neatly into a world peopled by Prada or Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons.

Since Hodge's interest in fashion was sparked by a Comme exhibition she created in 2000 at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Kawakubo is omnipresent and her deconstructed clothes have a powerful resonance. Issey Miyake's experiments with knitted tubing were, in fact, trumped by Strada's earlier work. But, in fashion as in architecture, some particular creations - Miyake's "Pleats Please" line or Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain - have caught the popular imagination.

The core of the exhibition (and the accompanying Thames & Hudson book) is in its "Skin + Bone": the structural skin that allows the façade of the Tod's building in Tokyo's Omotesando, designed by Toyo Ito, to be wrapped around its structural system. Since so much of modern architecture depends on technological innovation, the exhibition ought to consider why fashion rarely embraces high tech. A Ralph Rucci suit, its silk and cashmere open-weave fabric held together with delicate layers of hand stitching, is likened to the engineering of a suspension bridge. Yet the futuristic Norman Foster-designed viaduct bridge in Millau in southwestern France surely has the greater emotional charge.

The show closes with a Chalayan creation of light emanating via 200 moving lasers and Swarovski crystals. Is this fashion? Is it architecture? It certainly is not ready-to-wear. But, as Hodge says, with so much in architecture transformed by technology from futuristic concept to reality, fashion may also develop extraordinary new ways of covering our skin and bones.

