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THE STYLE SPECIAL

Rocket-fuelled retail in China

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Parallel universe

Inspired by Mars and beyond, experimental and experiential department store SKP-S explores new retail trajectories in Beijing

PHOTOGRAPHY: NOAH SHELDON WRITER: NICK COMPTON



TWO ANDROIDS, BUILT BY GENTLE MONSTER'S IN-HOUSE ROBOT LAB IN SEOUL, HAVE A CLONE-TO-CLONE CHAT ON THE THIRD FLOOR OF SKP-S, A NEW DEPARTMENT STORE FROM CHINESE OPERATOR SKP



The 'retail apocalypse', a technology-driven blight, is leaving ailing high streets and zombie malls in its wake. Amazon, Alibaba and other e-commerce players, large and small, have transformed shopping into a sofa-based scroll and shoot. Well that's what the headlines say. But this trail of disruption is not indiscriminate. You can outsmart it and outmanoeuvre it, even if that sometimes requires a speculative trip to Mars.

Late last year, SKP, China's leading luxury department store operator, opened SKP-S, a smaller though still sizeable satellite to its brand-rich Beijing mothership. The new store's ground-floor window display features a wide-screen tableau, not of designer desirables, but of nodding electric sheep and comic-book heroic space farmers, buffeted by solar winds. The 'future farm' installation – the work of tyro South Korean eyewear brand Gentle Monster – continues inside. Where you might expect the heady scent and bustling aisles of the beauty department, sheep are being cloned on clinically clean production lines.

By the time you get to the store's third floor, heading skywards on infinity escalators, you are through the airlock of an apparently long-established Martian outpost where veteran terraformers pass on advice to their identical clones; landing modules and Martian buggies are parked up in red dirt; and a dome,

apparently 3D-printed in the same Martian dust (actually painstakingly formed in gypsum concrete), offers views of our solar system and beyond (rendered by Australian studio Artists in Motion). There are also Nike trainers, Champion sweatshirts and Swatch watches, but they are housed in alcoves off a 2001: *A Space Odyssey*-style dichroic glass tunnel.

For all the conceptual interplanetary trimmings this is still a luxury goods-heavy department store, of sorts. On the ground floor, past the electric flock and encircling encased CNC-milling machines making art of polystyrene blocks, are separate capsules for Prada, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Loewe, Moncler and others, though each announces itself only in a standardised digital 'logo band'. Thom Browne, Byredo and more are a floor up, with more street style elements available in the third-floor space station. There is even a basement food hall, coming off like *Blade Runner*'s street market as reimagined by Pierre Yovanovitch.

Many of the brands represented here also have a space in the original SKP store, a short but terrifying walk across the 12 lanes of Chang'an Avenue, five miles east of Tiananmen Square and in the heart of Beijing's CBD. All have been instructed that SKP-S should be thought of as a place for experiment, and that their outposts here should carry different stock from the

mothership. Essentially, they are retail micro-labs. 'We have been really pushing the brands to think outside the box,' says Lorenzo Grazzini, SKP's senior manager of store planning and design. 'We wanted everything to be a first. It's an opportunity for them to try something new in the way they engage with customers in terms of service, offer and experience.'

For at least the last half-decade, retailers have been wrestling with the problem of what to do with their physical stores as the nitty-gritty business of actually buying stuff increasingly happens online. In truth, luxury goods retailers have proven largely immune to the bricks-and-mortar malaise, but there is no room for complacency. Department stores, in the US at least, have been anything but immune.

Current thinking suggests that physical stores should concentrate less on delivering sales than an experiential hit, immersive IRL brand-building. This is especially true if you have a successful e-commerce business doing the heavy-lifting sales-wise. Sales racks are shrinking, opening up space for more tangential enticements, space colonies included. Having established itself as China's first-call partner for luxury goods brands, SKP has to keep proving that it is the country's smartest, most innovative department store operator. SKP-S is a 19,000 sq m claim on the future.

The design of the new store is largely the work of UK architects Sybarite, with conceptual contributions from Gentle Monster's baby-faced-but-whip-smart founder Hankook Kim. Sybarite first started working with SKP at the end of 2012, helping it transform the generic (if already successful) Shin Kong Place mall in Beijing into the first, 140,000 sq m SKP department store with an overarching visual and brand identity, a fresh coherence and evidence of curatorial hand. 'A mall is more about units than experience,' explains Sybarite co-founder Torquil McIntosh, 'while a department store is a controlled and curated space with a branded environment and positioning.'

The result is still more mall-like than the traditional Western department store, but Sybarite opened up the space and, crucially, created a distinct architectural language, a physical branding of swooping curves in marbles and brushed brass. The practice also created Rendez-Vous, a bookshop/wine bar/café/cheesemonger/event space that reappears in a different form in SKP-S (and may eventually be spun off as a standalone concept store). It developed this built-in branding even further at a 20-storey, 250,000 sq m, 1,000-brand branch of SKP, opened in Xi'an in 2018.

Ironically perhaps, it was this creation of a visible SKP super-structure, a mother brand, that cemented »

ABOVE, THE THIRD-FLOOR MARTIAN BASE, COMPLETE WITH BUGGIES AND RED DIRT
OPPOSITE, THE STORE'S FAÇADE, DESIGNED BY ARCHITECTS SYBARITE, FEATURES SKP'S SIGNATURE CURVES, INSPIRED BY THE BRAND'S LOGO



its standing with the luxury goods giants. It was a safe, profitable haven for Western brands looking to cluster and consolidate. (Kering supremo François-Henri Pinault flew in from London for the opening of SKP-S.)

SKP-S was conjured out of a relatively small and undistinguished speculative retail space. What it lacked in architectural integrity, it made up for in position. It was in a prime spot, that short disquieting walk from the original Beijing store (Sybarite is now working with the designer Jason Bruges on making the crossing a little less hostile), and SKP was keen that it not fall into the hands of a rival operator, even if it wasn't immediately clear what it was going to do with the site.

SKP talked with Sybarite about how to develop it. 'It definitely wasn't the case of just doing another SKP for the sake of it,' says McIntosh. 'And we couldn't just take certain categories out of SKP, because that would have diluted the flagship.' Thoughts quickly turned to creating a more experiential, experimental outpost. Seoul-based Kim, who had opened a Gentle Monster store at SKP Xi'an, was enlisted to join the brainstorming, and the plots for the Mars-themed emporium were hatched.

Sybarite began by taking the building back to its bare bones, adding an entirely new façade, a sensitive job given that it was a development with powerful

stakeholders. 'The building is on the main avenue into Beijing, which is really important to the government,' says McIntosh. 'Xi Jinping himself said that all of the new architecture on the avenue had to be of a world-class standard. So we really had to nail it.' Their plans, as it turned out, were quickly approved.

The new façade is dominated by what Sybarite calls the SKP curves, that signature architectural signifier that instantly links the new store to its big brother. The attention to detail is obvious long before you enter the store, from the curved brass insets on the building's forecourt and the use of brushed brass on the façade. Windows on the upper floors are blocked by a folding textured wall, the backdrop for nighttime illumination, developed with London-based lighting designers Speirs + Major. 'When you walk around the main SKP and then this one, you understand that there is a house style, and the façade of SKP-S is very much in that style. But inside is a playbox.'

And while Kim got to work creating robots at Gentle Monster's in-house lab, as well as curating art (including live robot-sculpting, devised by Italian artist Quayola; Daniel Rozin's 450 motorised toy penguins; and work by Chinese artist Xu Zhen), designing the multi-brand SKP Select store and a dessert-only café (with fixtures and tableware reconfigured in a *Star Trek*-

style transporter), Sybarite created interiors that were recognisably SKP but distinctly otherworldly.

SKP and Sybarite talked through the 'playbox' concept with their key brands from the outset. 'We told them that you can't take your standard store and shove it in there. It just won't work,' says McIntosh. 'And anyway, you already have that across the road. And some of the brands really embraced it and others were a bit more sceptical because it is taking them out of their comfort zone. But they have all risen to the challenge and created something bespoke.'

For SKP, the new store is a space where it can try out or 'incubate' new brands. But it is also designed to attract a younger audience more enamoured of precision pop-ups and exclusive product drops than the exhaustive sprawl of the traditional department store. 'Mr Ji [SKP CEO Ji Xiao'an] understands that brands like Supreme and Off-White are now the luxury brands,' says McIntosh. 'Retail is moving on and he is really staying ahead of it.' All admit, though, that SKP-S is inherently an experiment, and so a risk. And even measuring its success will be complex. 'It's no longer sales per square foot, it's experience per square foot,' says Sybarite's other co-founder Simon Mitchell. 'But how you really measure and understand all that is what the brands are trying to work out.'

ABOVE, FROM OPPOSITE, SPACE STATION INTERIORS AND DIGITAL 'LOGO BANDS'; SYBARITE CO-FOUNDERS TORQUIL MCINTOSH AND SIMON MITCHELL; A SPACE ODYSSEY-STYLE DICHROIC GLASS TUNNEL WITH RETAIL ALCOVES

For Kim, the new store is anything but an indulgence or a concept store with way too much concept. It is the very definition of contemporary luxury: 'Mr Ji is a businessman and I'm a businessman,' he says. 'I'm not an artist. This is about creativity and strategy. And about a different type of luxury. If you aren't offering different emotions to the customer now, it's not luxury.' And for all the time, money and imagination that has been lavished on realising the fixtures and fittings of SKP's Martian outpost, it has been designed to be easily jettisoned and replaced, the future future-proofed.

As SKP expands (and expand it will – there are two new stores quite far along the planning stages, including one in Chengdu, and three more due to open in the short term), SKP-S-style satellite stores may become its modus operandi. Or it may just launch them as standalone concepts in the right locations, in China and beyond. 'I think as an industry we have only just scratched the surface of experiential retail, and it is important for SKP to be pushing the boundaries of what is possible in the retail world,' says Grazzini. Mitchell insists that experimentation is not just possible but necessary. 'Retail doesn't have to be formulaic, what it has been for decades, for centuries now, so why not be Mars?' ★

SKP-S, 86 Jianguo Lu, Beijing, skp-beijing.com