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Work Architecture Company rises to the occasion with an innovative scheme for Diane von Furstenberg's New York headquarters. Equipped with a staircase that sheds light, the building proves positively dazzling

By Alex Bozicovic Photography by Elizabeth Felicella

Stepping up

Even on a cool fall afternoon, Washington Street smells like fresh blood. Standing outside the new downtown Manhattan headquarters of Diane von Furstenberg Studio, Dan Wood of Work Architecture Company points toward the culprit: a neighbour-

ing building that's still home to the area's most famous business, meat-packing. "They won't be there much longer," the architect says dryly. "We've seen them drilling for soil tests, and I don't think it's to expand the meat business."

Indeed, the six-storey DVF building caps the neighbourhood's rebirth as an international fashion and design hub – and the project marks the emergence of significant architectural talent.

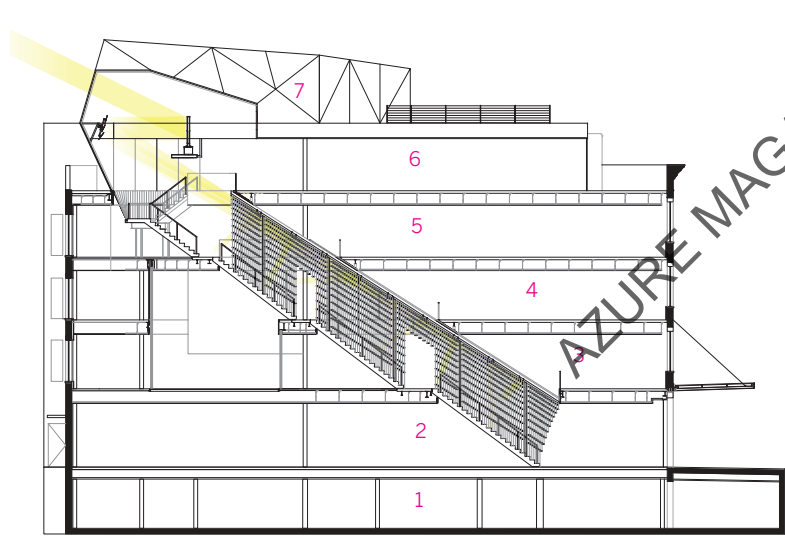
Completed last year, Work AC's 3,250-square-metre scheme gives the fashion design company a smart showroom, office space, a theatre, and a private residence for Diane von Furstenberg herself. It's all part of a brand new structure inserted behind the facades of two 19th-century buildings. But look up, and above the cobblestone streets a glass and steel diamond explodes from the top of the red-brick tenement on the corner. "It was important for us to tell the story from inside to out," explains Wood's partner and wife, Amale Andraos. "They're making fashion on the interior, but there had to be something physical on the outside that expressed the new identity of the building and the district."

The interior delivers on the rooftop diamond's promise, representing a sophisticated, lively response to the unique location and the fashion label's complex workings. The diamond isn't just ornamental; it forms a dramatic atrium over the fifth and sixth floors, which contain von Furstenberg's airy offices and private residence, respectively. From the fifth floor, a theatrical staircase cascades all the way down to the company's street-level reception area. This "stairdelier," as the architects call it, disrupts the basically rectilinear, loftlike order of the spaces, which house the company's design, marketing and business staff. Slicing diagonally through the structure, the stair also channels light. Under the diamond, a rotating mirror tracks the sun's movement throughout the day and reflects its rays onto a nine-mirror heliostat. This in turn casts the sunlight onto a series of mirrors placed just beneath the stair's ceiling, reflecting the rays down to a shimmering array of Swarovski crystals that brace the guardrail cables lining the stair. The dazzling move brings daylight to the centre of each floor, and asserts the presence of DVF's singular boss from top to bottom.

The decisive gesture isn't new for Wood and Andraos. The two founded Work Architecture Company in 2002, and have designed more than 100 projects (many unbuilt), several with a conceptual bent – from apartment interiors and Anthropologie clothing stores to a 15,000-unit master plan for Las Vegas called Greenbelt City. They met while Wood was working for Rem Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Architecture in Rotterdam and Andraos was studying with Koolhaas at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Eventually, Wood became a partner in the firm and Andraos a senior designer. Wood later led the opening of OMA's New York office, where he and Andraos had important roles in another fashion design project: Prada's Soho showroom, intended to invent new formulas for high-end retail. That ambitious gallery-shop became infamous when it opened, just after 9/11, for its conspicuous consumption of expensive zebra wood (and New York real estate).

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Opposite Slicing through the building diagonally, the staircase breaks up the rectilinear floor plan. Here, it also provides an atrium between the lobby and the second-floor showroom.



- 1 Basement: storage, VIP room
- 2 Ground floor: lobby, retail space
- 3 Second floor: showroom, event space
- 4 Third floor: open offices
- 5 Fourth floor: design and production
- 6 Fifth floor: private office, library
- 7 Sixth floor: private penthouse

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Naturally, the two architects are quick to point out contrasts between Prada and the DVF building. “That was just a store,” Andraos says. “We had to invent programmatic difference, saying, ‘This is the luxe area; this is the VIP area.’ Here at DVF, the store is just part of the overall program.” Yet the pair has clearly adopted OMA’s emphasis on research and intense testing of programmatic and spatial ideas. Not surprisingly, Andraos says the complexity of von Furstenberg’s requests made the project more attractive to them. Indeed, the office floors include modest (but custom) black cubicles and open workspace. A double-height atrium in the second-floor showroom breaks up the rhythm; with the help of custom wheeled clothes racks, the company employs this area for sales presentations, design work and formal dinners. DVF also uses it, and the street-level lobby, for private parties, public events and other meetings.

The retail space, though, holds another of the building’s most interesting features: its “wrap wall,” named after von Furstenberg’s trademark dress style. Prefabricated from wood and plaster, the wall curves to contain display niches and movable display shelves, interspersed with translucent low-iron glass. It represents the prototype for a modular system Work AC has since adapted for more than 15 DVF stores around the world. Poetic and tightly designed for high-end retail requirements, it also serves spatial functions – in this case concealing within itself a staircase down to the basement, and providing a translucent division between the store and the office’s reception area. “Its shape is really determined by creating the best possible lobby,” Andraos says. From the reception, “the glass allows you to see the shadows of the clothes, so there is this connection between production and consumption.” Both arguments – the pragmatic and the poetic – are true, and like the work as a whole they’re very convincing. **AZ**

Above left The second-floor showroom contains an airy boardroom space for presentations and special events. Glimpsed above, the third floor houses open offices.

Above Strategically located on the ground level, the retail area features curving walls and counters, in homage to DVF’s signature piece, the wrap dress. The walls pivot, opening up to the lobby for expanded public space when needed.

Top right A mirror under the diamond roof tracks the sun’s movement, reflecting light onto a nine-mirror heliostat, which bounces the rays down along the stair and onto the Swarovski crystals lining it. Thus Work AC brilliantly brought natural light into the building’s nooks and crannies.

Bottom right The architects preserved the facades of two 19th-century tenement buildings and inserted a new six-storey structure behind. The top floor, housing von Furstenberg’s private abode, walks out to a deck and adjoining green roof.



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