

1 Virgin Megastore Orlando, Florida

TO EXPRESS THE SPIRIT OF THIS MUSIC STORE CHAIN, A NEOCLASSICAL ARCHITECTURAL IDEAL WAS WRAPPED IN ROCK 'N' ROLL IRREVERENCE.

by Shax Riegler

Project: Virgin Megastore, Orlando, Florida

Owner: Virgin Entertainment Group

Architect: Stenfors Pali Fekete Architects (SPF:a)—Jeffrey S. Stenfors, Zoltan S. Pali, AIA, Judit M. Fekete, S. Daniel Seng, Drew Wilson, Cherry Lietz, Yo Hakomori, Peter Ridley

Associate Architect and Store

Designer: Irvine Johnston Design Consultants

Engineers: W.P. Moore & Associates (structural); Tilden, Lobnitz, Cooper (mechanical, electrical, plumbing)

Consultants: Irvine Johnston Design Consultants (lighting); Pat Stein & Associates (kitchen); Ride and Show Engineering (performance platform); Audiovisions (sound/visual system)

General Contractor: Sunseri Associates

Size: 40,000 square feet on two levels

Cost: \$12 million

Program: Departments for selling music in various formats including compact disc, video, laserdisc, digital-video disc, multimedia games, software, and CD-ROMs; 300 listening stations, 20 video-viewing stations; 6 computer stations; full-service café; book and magazine department; and separate children's area

Bring the energy of a live musical performance at London's Royal Albert Hall to Florida swampland? Such was the directive the Virgin company and its longtime store designers, Irvine Johnston, issued to SPF:a, the small, young Los Angeles-based architecture firm it had hired to design its newest Megastore, in Orlando. The store's site is prominently located within Downtown Disney Westside, the latest addition to Walt Disney World's 120-acre shopping and after-dark entertainment destination.

Like other retailers who seek to lure patrons by entertaining them [see Building Types Study 747, March 1997, pages 90–115], Virgin offered a starting theme—in this case, the Royal Albert Hall, intended to evoke Britain's contributions to musical culture. Although the project's production schedule was fairly short (it was designed and built in under two years), Virgin had already established a track record with Zoltan Pali and Jeffrey Stenfors, two of SPF:a's principals, who had been architects on Virgin projects with another firm. Founded in 1995, SPF:a's signature designs were more technological than retro, but the mutual trust among the archi-

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itects, Virgin, and Irvine Johnston secured the job.

"At first, we were looking at this round, neoclassical building and wondering what we were going to do," says Pali. "But more important, it seemed, was that it was a place where the Three Tenors perform and the Stones hold their concerts. It's a building that means music."

The store's site is within a pedestrianized entertainment precinct (right) but faces parking on its south side. On the southern elevation the metal framework is scaled up to hold signs big enough to be seen from a distance (below).

An invaded ruin

Then there was the site. Disney's master plan for the project called for the development of an idealized urban center around a "town square." But this square would be surrounded by such aggressive attractions as the House of Blues, Planet Hollywood, the Wolfgang Puck Café, and Bongo's Cuban Café,





The original neoclassical idea is suppressed in the final scheme—it's merely a metal-clad cylinder. The truss-columned entrance (far left and below) faces a plaza. The canopy is on

stage lifts, offering a live-performance venue. The external steel framing, evoking rock-concert stage technology, becomes a signage armature. The east elevation (left) addresses a multiplex across a narrow street.





Although the curved forms and building-within-a-building ideas remain, the neoclassical and fantasy-ruin antecedents have largely disappeared. VJ booth (far left) and ground floor (left).



FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR

- | | | |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Rock and pop | 5. Video | 9. Children |
| 2. Jazz | 6. Bookstore | 10. Café |
| 3. World music | 7. Open | 11. Performance platform |
| 4. Classical | 8. Magazines | |

as well as a 24-theater cinema complex, a Cirque du Soleil performance venue, and the interactive Disney Quest.

Early sketches moved from the initial Albert Hall idea to a Palladian villa. The team members spoke of designing a temple to music, but Disney officials objected to the round plan that was emerging, requesting that the building hold tight to the street adjacent to it in the master plan.

Later the architects asked Virgin to imagine the building as a stone ruin (some stolid London warehouse damaged during the blitz?) that had been invaded and rebuilt by heavily armed "entertainistas." Explains Stenfor, "It's like taking a 19th-century bank, or some other archetypal classical building, and invading it with this rock 'n' roll idea."

Ultimately rock 'n' roll won out. The architects kept the drumlike neoclassical envelope, an icon of solidity, adding stone-clad towers to hold the corners down. They wrapped the exterior with a steel-frame armature, suggesting the temporary quality of rock-concert lighting towers. The pair of truss-work corner columns dominate the southeast side of Disney's plaza. What at first glance appears to be an awning inviting passersby into the store is in fact a movable performance platform. It evokes the

temporary stages built for outdoor music festivals.

Shopping as a ride

"Early on we realized, OK, we're in a theme park," says Stenfor. "These people are overstimulated, and the building will have to be a ride." The drama could not end at the door.

The architects brought the stage-house iconography inside, using exposed brick and rough plaster. A high, cylindrical volume opens above the main selling floor. It is crossed by catwalks, like a theater's flyspace. In the center of the curved opening, sitting slightly askew, is a rectangular mezzanine, suggesting an older structure incorporated into the "new" one. These spatial acrobatics, augmented by sound and video, help create distinct selling environments within the 40,000-square-foot space (see plans).

Though the store is a far cry from the Royal Albert Hall, Virgin says it is pleased with its not-entirely-reconciled aesthetic. Its maverick, anti-establishment air is in keeping with Virgin's roots. ■

Sources

Cladding: Steward-Mellon (stone veneer); Reyno-Bond (metal panel)
Upward-acting door: Fimble doors
Paint: Devoe
Resilient flooring: Forbo Marmoleum
Signage: Superior Electrical Advertising