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THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN

*Referencing traditional Indian imagery albeit in a subtly contemporary interpretation, **RDAI** designs the Ganjam flagship store in Bengaluru, illuminated by the illustrious **Philippe Almon**. **Devyani Jayakar** examines this slick marriage of architecture and jewellery, facilitated by sophisticated lighting.*



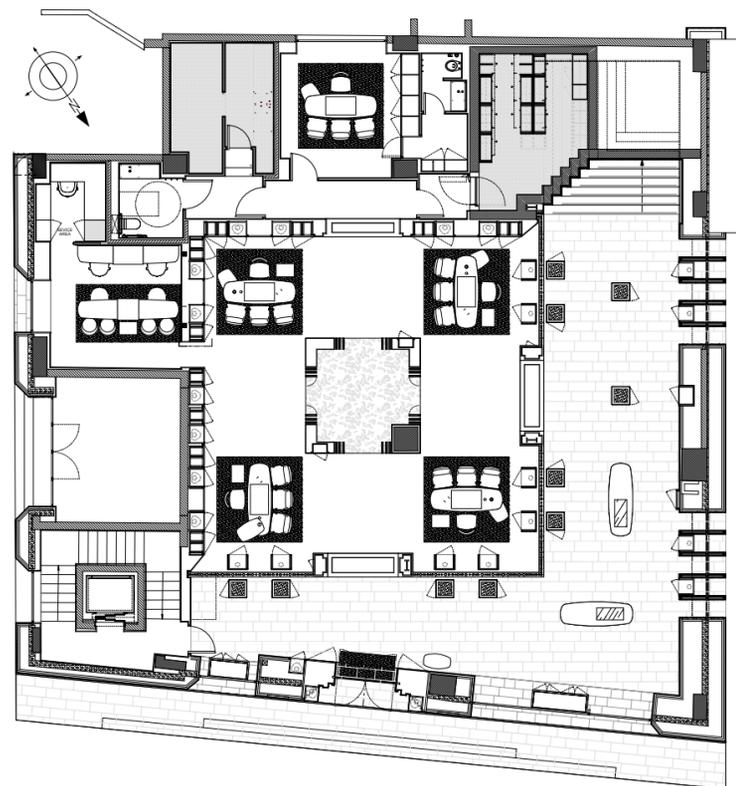
Jewellers to the Maharajas of yore, Indian jewellery brand Ganjam is deeply rooted in tradition. Not unexpectedly, Denis Montel of RDAI decided to anchor the design of their new flagship store in imagery drawn from Indian architecture, more specifically from Hampi (a World Heritage Site, it is a temple town located within the ruins of the former capital of the Vijayanagara Empire in Karnataka). Of special note is the lighting in this store, by Philippe Almon of PH. A Concepteurs Lumière and Design.

At first glance, the visual link to Hampi appears tenuous. However, Dinesh Rao of Monsoon Design, the coordinating architects, points out that the connection is not overt or kitschy. "It is more in the language of the stone, the way it has been used in the interior, the monolithic proportions and the rough stone flooring. The staircase to the mezzanine level recalls the *kund* or traditional stepwell, where the steps disappear at a certain angle." The idea was to create a massive and timeless

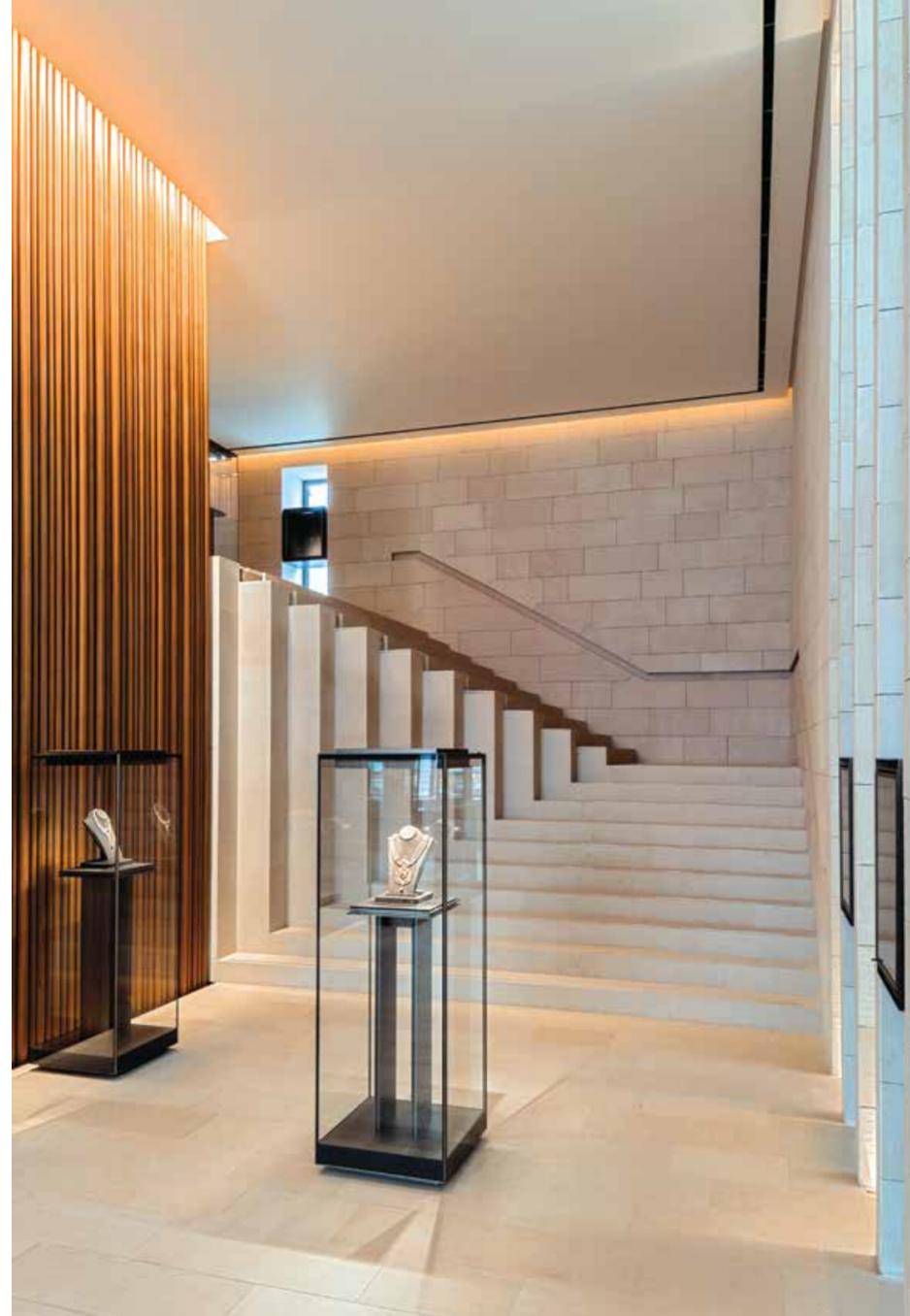
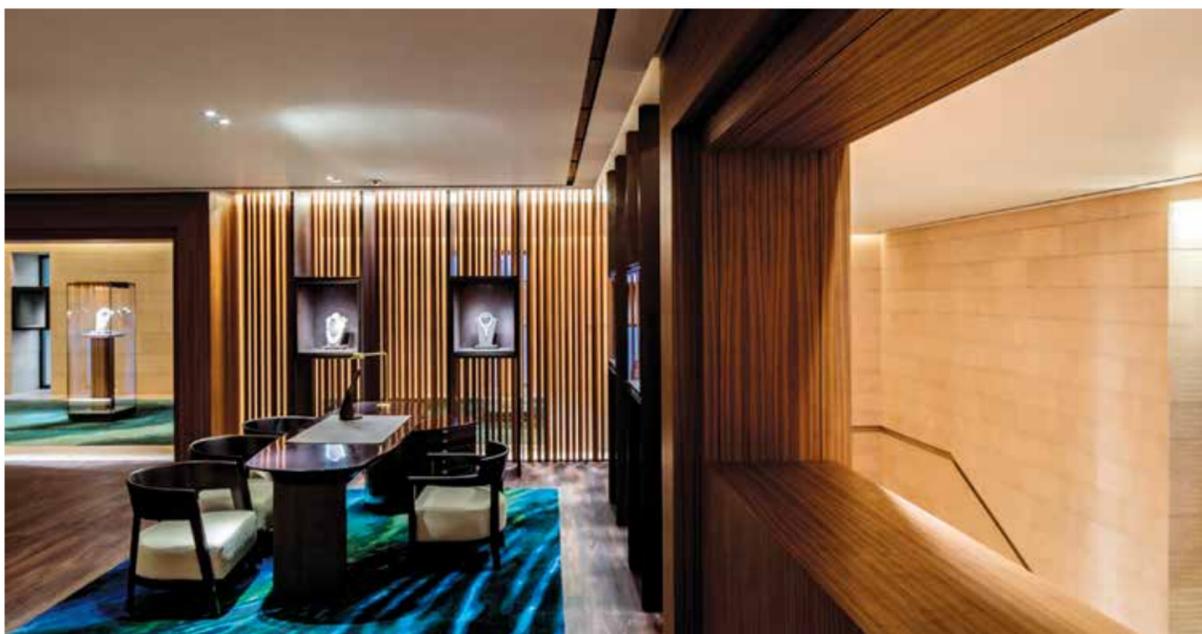
architecture, its aesthetic of mass and roughness providing a strong contrast to the refinement of the jewellery. "It was important for us that the unique handcrafting of Ganjam and their heritage were expressed in the architectural design and details," says Montel. "The store has been created keeping in mind the guidelines that govern Vastu, to ensure that energies have been utilised to achieve greater harmony with nature," explains Montel. The *panchamahabhuta*,

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– Dinesh Rao

based on the five basic and essential elements, which are *Vayu* (air), *Agni* (fire), *Jal* (water), *Bhumi* (earth) and *Aakasha* (space), of ancient Indian Vastu Shastra have been adhered to. The 930 sq. m. space is drafted into a grid of nine squares reflecting a *mandala* composition, keeping the centre empty, honouring the *shunya*, which translates as zero. This develops a box-within-a-box plan with multiple concentric layers of functioning. “While these principles of Vastu have been used as an organising diagram, we had to ensure that the resultant symmetrical plan works well at a retail level.” adds Rao. The outermost square or box, composed of the building periphery is an impressive series of stone clad walls that rise through two storeys. Large windows are guarded by vertical ‘fins’ that cut the influx of natural light into the volume. LED strips embedded at the ceiling and floor levels graze the textured walls, bringing alive the majestic stone facade to reminisce royal fort walls. While most jewellery stores are closed spaces with no windows, but flooded with artificial light, the Ganjam store is a departure from the norm. “The windows have been retained, which results in a changing quality of light throughout the day. We did not want to be cut off from the outside world and thus worked around the considerable security issues which the windows posed,” says Rao. Security rated glass and frames with an 8 inch thick



concrete wall on the outside serve to dissuade intruders. An open gallery runs along the inner periphery of the store, enjoying a double height volume, where visitors are free to view pieces displayed on enclosed pedestals. With daylight being a contender, the exhibits in the showcases had to work with the combination of both kinds of light - natural as well as artificial, the former more difficult to predict or control. There are no screens on the windows, the largest one facing north; however, architecture’s beloved light may not be the best for displaying jewellery. “Besides, the scale of the jewellery is very small compared to the size of the store. Since every piece is an exquisite high value item, it is displayed as a museum artifact to emphasise its design,” says Rao. Indeed, the exhibits are not packed cheek by jowl as in most jewellery showrooms. They are stand-alone pieces on individual pedestals, each one a star with its own space. Slender canopies with concealed light fixtures are suspended from the ceiling over some showcases, while others get focused illumination from light fittings embedded within the cases. The inner edge of the open gallery is defined by a striking screen made of vertical teak wood rods that represent the multiple aerial roots of a banyan tree. Concealed strip lights in ceiling coves graze the 6m tall undulating surface to give it an ethereal glow.



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Inside, the soaring volume is broken into two levels and caters to personalised customer interaction. Separated from the casual viewing gallery, clients here are encouraged to take their time in selecting jewellery and trying it on. In this high-value luxury experience, sales are not a quick transaction. Interactions with each customer may take a few hours, and require privacy. Thus, they take place within the inner box.

“The collection of stones and precious metals have a wide diversity; white-pink-yellow gold, graded gems in hues of blue and green or fancy coloured sapphires, ranging from yellow and orange to reddish tones. The precious platinum used for the settings creates dramatic rushes of sparkling diamond light. It seemed impossible for us to find one single type of lighting which could bring to

life all these different colours,” says Montel. Thus, the final solution was a complex measure of various elements that helped achieve the ideal scenario. It was critical to strike a fine balance between intensity and colour temperature, and that too in a manner that would cater to the sheer multitude of jewellery displayed. Each showcase is fitted with its own system, specifically addressing the artifact to be illuminated. Gold jewellery and coloured gems are bathed in milder tones of white to accentuate their warmer hues, and highlight the deeper colours. On the other hand, platinum pieces and diamonds are rendered in cooler colour temperatures to bring out their brilliance. Care was taken to avoid multiple shadows and reflections, for which the showcases are covered in anti-reflective film.

However, what happens when the jewellery is removed from the showcase for a potential customer to try on, is another matter. That is the acid test of what it really looks like. “The difference in lighting causes a big problem. While the lighting in the showcase presents the jewellery at its best, taking the piece out from the carefully stage-managed setting means having to contend with other variables. Although each retail desk has recessed metal halide spot lights in the ceiling above, it is the table lamp which eliminates shadows at neck level, to give the most flattering image possible in the table-top mirrors,” says Rao. The position and lighting of the mirrors is also essential to the experience and discovery of the jewellery: the perception the client has of the jewels when they are worn needs

to be as close as possible to how they are perceived in the showcase. A jewellery store is after all a platform for luxury and extravagance. While the brand Ganjam offers delightful richness to their clients, the architect weaves an experience of affluent gratification and light becomes critical to evoke a sense of grandeur. The opulence that is the Ganjam flagship store is witnessed throughout the space. The lower level is draped in alluring flamed and brushed finish stone flooring, which wraps itself onto the staircase. On the mezzanine level, the stone is replaced with rosewood marquetry over the floor. Dark and stately, its complex geometrical pattern restricts itself to straight lines. Meanwhile, carpets in blue and green jewel tones are inspired by the peacock, their design abstracted as a pixelation

of the bird’s feathers. Luxurious Indian silk paneling on the walls offset bronze finished metal accents to add a hint of glamour. The store appears as a glimmering jewel in itself. “It was decided not to light up the external façade of the building, since we wanted it to glow from within. Consequently, the lights inside the showroom are left on till midnight,” says Rao. The winner of the Prix Versailles 2016, the design of this store demonstrates the partnership between lighting and architecture - its walls silent sentinels which offer a dramatic backdrop, even as the jewellery within is generously allowed the limelight.

www.rdai.fr

www.monsoondesign.in

PROJECT DETAILS

Ganjam Flagship Store, Bengaluru
Client: Ganjam Nagappa & Son Pvt. Ltd.
Architect: RD&I
Project Team: Denis Montel, Cécile Buhagiar, Daniel Le Pan, Mathieu Alfandary, Karen Crequer, Anne Kérignard
Coordinating Architect: Monsoon Design
Lighting Designer: Ph. A Concepteurs Lumière & Design

LIGHTING SPECIFIED

Firalux: Firastrip + profile Mini7up
Firalux: Lucioled Doppio
Firalux: Profile, orientable and fixed
Firalux: TraceLED
Osram: Halostar Standard
Soka Disderot: Gyrostaff 50, half cone, frosted lens