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The Architectural Stage: Exploring how Runway Design Shapes Fashion Communication

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Abstract*: Runway design touches the core of how fashion is felt and expressed. This paper assesses the relationship between architecture and fashion through a discussion on how the layout and structure of a runway can influence how a collection is received by an audience. The paper will review several kinds of runways: the traditional catwalk, the immersive format, and even digital environments- regarding the role of the storytelling part in the presentation of a collection. Viewing how space, lighting, and movement collaborate will end up providing us with a much greater understanding of how these elements might improve or even change the presentation of a collection. Examples from famous catwalk shows are applied to research in this paper, thus making runway design increasingly significant in passing a designer's message, evolving from just being a stage but becoming part of the overall fashion narrative itself.

I. INTRODUCTION

The runway is much more than a platform for models to walk, and it's the place where fashion is going to be brought to life. Over the years, runway design has really become one great tool of narration, which means designers have the chance to bring forth an immersive experience beyond clothes themselves. Little as architecture influences how we perceive and connect with the spaces, so does the way in which a runway is designed determine an audience's perception of a collection. Fashion shows were once simple affairs, focused purely on presenting garments. Today, they have evolved into elaborate productions where setting and atmosphere communicate as much as the clothing. Whether in a minimalist runway which dictates that attention be strictly on the garments or more outlandish settings reminding of another world, the design of the space plays an impressive role on how to experience a fashion show. Every element-from the stage layout to lighting and materials-help to create a given narrative that mirrors the designer's vision. This research explores the relationship between fashion and architecture and the ways that runway designs have become integral to the overall communication of fashion. Looking at the various formats of runways and how they have impacted an audience can help see the ways in which the space that defines a presentation shape not just how a collection is perceived but how it is sensed.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Role of Runway Design in Fashion Communication

Runway design serves as an essential storytelling device, allowing brands to communicate their identity and the narrative behind their collections. In the opinion of Rocamora (2009) and Entwistle (2011), the spatial configuration of the runway plays a critical role in materializing fashion's symbolic capital, serving as a visible marker of a brand's identity. Similarly, Gill (2013) highlights how the design for a runway can either enhance or undermine the message that a brand intends to put across. Structures from the simplest runway minimalist design to avant-garde setups reflect the message of the designer. The spatial elements of runway design not only play a stage but also are an extension of immersion with the visual presentation of the clothing (Findlay & Li, 2017). Moreover, Jansson-Boyd and Laing (2019) support the idea that runway designs are functional forms of experiential marketing, thus communicating at the emotional and cognitive levels which informs a brand (p. 133). Incorporating abstract elements into runway design allows brands to create a multi layered experience. Kim and Lee (2018) assert that interpreting abstract elements as architectural styles through lights and stage helps define the interpretation of the collection from the audience's perspective. These designs help shift the mere presentation of fashion from a show to an event: one that is choreographed and remembered well by the audience (Cole, 2015). Sung and Bick (2020) further assert that this alignment between architectural elements and fashion narratives results in stronger brand identity (p. 22). In addition, the designs of the runways affect the way fashion collections are perceived by altering the sensory experiences. As noted by Lim and Lee (2021), audience's engagement of the collection increases due to the combination of lighting, sound and space. This approach adds dramatic effect to the clothes on display and engraves the concept created by the designer into the minds of the viewers. Moreover, Wong and Zhao (2022), argue that when the set design is in sync with the theme of a collection, it improves the narrative of the show, making it more like a play. Such manner of presentation further cements the brand in the market.

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2) Audience Perception and Spatial Design

The way runway spaces are configured deeply influences how the audience experiences fashion. Entwistle and Rocamora (2011) note that spatial design helps bring out hierarchy within the audience, guiding attention and hence constructing the way the audience is set to engage themselves with the collection. This idea is echoed by Mears (2011), who highlights that seating arrangements, proximity to the models, and even the elevation of the runway influence how the fashion is perceived by different audience (p. 77). Examples of such impressive runway shows of Louis Vuitton and Dior have been appreciated for engaging audiences on multiple sensory levels McNeill (2017). The selection of space and the integration of space and fashion have evolved to influence not only physical but also digital audiences, according to a report by Pham (2015) on the impact of digital media on fashion shows. The display of the runway spaces has a great impact on how the audiences appreciate the fashion, as well as how they interact with one another. Entwistle and Rocamora (2011) argue that spatial design creates layers among the attendees, redirecting the attention and even the involvement on the collection. Mears (2011) extends this, explaining how the audiences' experience of each show is in part determined by, for example, the way the seats are arranged, how close the audience is to the models and at what height the runway is placed (p. 77). As McNeill (2017) points out, Louis Vuitton and Dior showcase some classic shows as experiences in sensory overload. Pham (2015) however, illustrates that these designs of space are for both the physically present audience and remote viewership, thus improving the reach.

3) Impact of Digital Media on Runway Architecture

Because of social media, runway architecture has adjusted and improved not only the audience that is physically at the venue but also the virtual audience. According to Pham (2015) live streamed shows have pressed designers, and designers must think of how their sets, as well as their runway designs will be seen not just by the audience but by digital viewers as well (p. 3184). This has therefore led to more photogenic and cinematic settings to enhance the digital experience. Guercini and Ranfagni talk about the growth of hybrid shows where, the design needs to cater to a physical as well as a digital audience. The widespread adoption of this hybrid model during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in further accelerating the change in the architecture of the runway (Xun, 2021). Brands such as Burberry and Balmain have done well to engage in digital-friendly designs to create an experience that flows seamlessly across channels by infusing elements such as AR as well as 3D virtual sets (Lupinacci, 2021).

4) Sensory Engagement through Runway Architecture

One of the important aspects of fashion communication is the sensory experience of a fashion show. According to Steele (2013), architecture for the runway and lighting, sound, and textures are boosted to amplify the audience's auditory and visual response. Hence, it goes to their feelings (p. 52). This aligns with studies by Kim et al. (2018), who note that runway environments designed to stimulate the senses tend to leave a lasting impact on the audience's perception of a brand. Engaging several senses has been found to create emotional experiences between the viewer and the exhibited artifacts in architectural design. Additionally, Lehmann, (2016) commented that theatrical elements in runway design such as moving platforms, interactive sets, and immersive soundscapes changed the audience's perception of fashion. This is particularly evident in the shows of designers like Alexander McQueen, who seamlessly integrated art, theatre, and fashion into multisensory spectacles (Evans, 2015). The architecture of a runway bears the greatest interactive component to the audience which makes it effective in connecting them to the apparel. Steele (2013) goes on to note that light, sound, and surfaces, among other things, are incorporated into the environment purposefully to enhance sight and especially sound, which in turn engages the audience emotionally (p. 52). In addition, Kim et al.,1998 mention that environments that engage more than one sense leave enduring effects on the perception of the brand.

III. CASE STUDIES

A. Case Study A: Alexander McQueen Spring/Summer 2015

Alexander McQueen Spring/Summer 2015 collection in terms of runway experience involved a circular layout that bound audiences to the idea presented to them by the designer. It was inspired by traditional Japanese kimonos, with very minimalist set design and powerful lighting that emphasized themes of transformation and modern reinterpretation of cultural traditions. The circular runway design created a continuous, immersive experience while amplifying the emotional and visual intensity of the show. The choice emphasized how McQueen used the runway as a method to tell stories that connected the fashion to more universal cultural narratives.

B. Case Study B: Louis Vuitton Fall/Winter 2012

An amazing and theatrical set design for Louis Vuitton's Fall/Winter 2012 show was Marc Jacobs's, featuring a working, live steam train centered down the middle of the runway. The industrial and nostalgic feel of the "industrial past" injected into the runway really reflected the vintage elements of the collection within a more modern luxury context. Beyond being just a visual centrepiece, the train represented travel, exploration, and the passage of time, thus creating an incredibly narrative environment. The use of this element as a moving one transformed a simple runway into a dynamic, interactive space, where the distinction between a fashion show and performance art became vague.

C. Case Study C: Balenciaga Fall/Winter 2020

Balenciaga's Fall/Winter 2020 runway, handled by Demna Gvasalia, merged traditional aspects of the runway with digital innovation. In terms of design, the runway's minimalist appearance and virtual backdrops, as well as digital projections, resulted in an overall futuristic atmosphere. This process of merging digital media actualized the modernist aspect of the collection while also elevating the importance of technology in fashion. The show took advantage of the digital features of the presentation to stretch the boundaries of fashion communication, making it so that the physical catwalk could interact with virtual elements and thus creating a new way of interacting with the audience.

D. Case Study D: The Versace Fall/Winter 2020

Under the creative vision of Donatella Versace, the house's Fall/Winter 2020 runway show became a landmark fashion event because it was the first co-ed collection for the brand. Both the collections of women's and men's line walked down the runway as each showcased their deserved highlight, obscuring that seems to set gender apart in a more macho, powerful, and yet delicate, vulnerable evening dress and other contents.

The spatial design for the show included an impressive LED backdrop that was set to screen psychedelic projections of house iconography. The theme, thus, infused into the show appears rather vibrant and dynamic. This futuristic digital element harmonized beautifully with the physical space of the runway to create an immersive experience that aligned with the themes of modernity and fluidity in identity.



Fig.1 Photographs of the case studies
Source: https://www.gettyimages.in/

IV. SPATIAL SETTINGS OF CASE STUDIES

The spatial configuration of a fashion runway significantly determines how collections appear and are experienced. The addition of architectural and scenography elements changes the runways into narrative spaces. As follows, this paper explores the spatial configurations in Alexander McQueen Spring/Summer 2015, Louis Vuitton Fall/Winter 2012, Balenciaga Fall/Winter 2020, and Versace Fall/Winter 2020, underlining their potential to strengthen audience experience and interpret thematic narratives.

A. Alexander McQueen Spring/Summer 2015

The Alexander McQueen runway used a circular layout and surrounded the models with the audience, a pattern that created an experience of continuity while maintaining an intimate ambiance, reflecting notions of transformation and cyclical renewal, central to the collection. Minimalism served the focus of the collection, keeping the focus on the garments while remaining underplayed yet theatrical. According to the studies on fashion shows, circular designs increase the interaction and visual relationship between the observer and the viewed fashion, thereby increasing emotional resonance even more (Ferrero-Regis, 2020).

B. Louis Vuitton Fall/Winter 2012

This use of a linear runway was augmented by the central positioning of a working steam train, an important feature of industrial imagery. The linearity provided clarity and coherence for the audience, with the train acting as a visual anchor as well as the moving element representing journey and action. These arrangements are considered theatrical because they are based on moving, dynamic parts to suggest wider thematic settings (RTF, 2024).

C. Balenciaga Fall/Winter 2020

Balenciaga rethinks the conventions of runway showcases by flooding the runway. Models walk through shallow water under digital projections of apocalyptic imagery, striking and immersive. The spatial design merges physical and digital dimensions, making it easier for the audience to connect on a conceptual as much as an emotional level. Research into digital scenography indicates that such hybrid approaches help widen themes in storytelling while extending the sensorial experience in runway spaces (Staging Fashion, 2021).

D. Versace Fall/Winter 2020

Versace had paired their straight runway with LED screens that project psychedelic visuals, bringing forth a bright energy to the stage. This spatial design outweighed traditional presentation with modern digital innovation, working alongside the co-ed theme of inclusivity and gender fluidity. Straight layouts carrying energetic backdrops are known to be one of the features that can offer clarity while enlightening the visual effect of the collection (Woo & Kim, 2008).

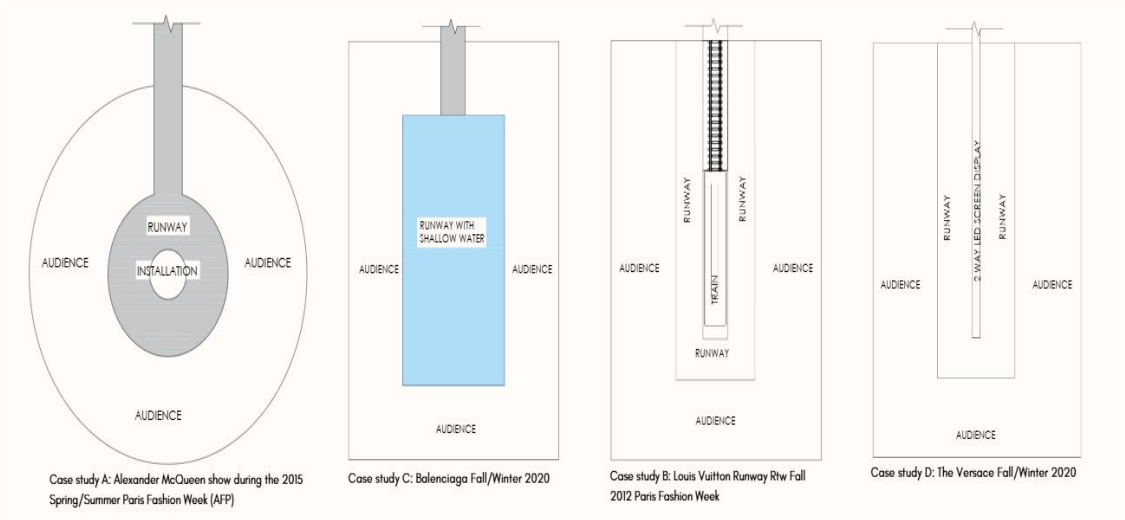


Fig.2 Layout of case studies
Source: Author

V. COMPARITIVE ANALYSIS

Runway Show	Role of Runway Design in Fashion Communication	Audience Perception & Spatial Design	Impact of Digital Media on Runway Architecture	Sensory Engagement through Runway Architecture	Inferences
Alexander McQueen Spring/Summer 2015	The circular layout reinforced the collection's themes of transformation and intimacy, creating a connection between audience and fashion.	The circular layout allowed for 360-degree viewing, enhancing audience engagement and interaction.	No significant use of digital media, relying on physical space and lighting to communicate themes.	Dramatic lighting and minimalistic design created emotional engagement, enhancing the immersive experience.	Circular layouts emphasize inclusivity and full engagement, enhancing thematic storytelling.
Louis Vuitton Fall/Winter 2012	The steam train as a central visual element emphasized themes of travel and exploration, integrating fashion with a narrative journey.	The straight runway allowed for clear linear movement, with the train acting as a focal point, enhancing the drama of the presentation.	While there was no major digital component, the train's movement and the large industrial set design acted as dynamic visual elements.	The inclusion of the steam train added a sense of movement and theatricality, engaging the audience through both sight and sound.	Physical elements like props can act as central anchors, enriching the narrative and audience focus.
Balenciaga Fall/Winter 2020	The flooded runway and digital projections emphasized themes of societal collapse and climate change, pushing fashion as commentary.	The immersive nature of the flooded runway with digital projections created an emotional and intellectual connection with the audience.	Digital projections were central to the show's narrative, merging physical and virtual spaces to enhance the thematic expression.	The flooded runway created a surreal sensory experience, with projections adding to the dystopian atmosphere. The physical space evoked a powerful emotional response.	Integration of digital media enhances thematic depth, bridging physical and virtual audience experiences.
Versace Fall/Winter 2020	Co-ed layout, celebrating inclusivity and fluidity between genders, with vibrant visuals reinforcing the boldness of the collection.	The straight runway with LED screens created a visually impactful environment, reinforcing the collection's modern and inclusive themes.	The LED screens provided a dynamic digital backdrop, amplifying the psychedelic projections and enhancing the modern, energetic feel of the show.	The LED backdrop with dynamic projections added a visual and sensory layer, complementing the vibrant, party-ready atmosphere of the collection.	LED screens and vibrant designs foster modern, inclusive, and dynamic fashion environments.

VI. CONCLUSION

Studies of fashion shows of Alexander McQueen, Louis Vuitton, Balenciaga, and Versace show that there is an importance of spatial design in the telling of the fashion story. These designers shared the same sentiment that modified spaces were essential in showcasing their works thus the changing dynamics of spatial design, clothing, and viewers' involvement.

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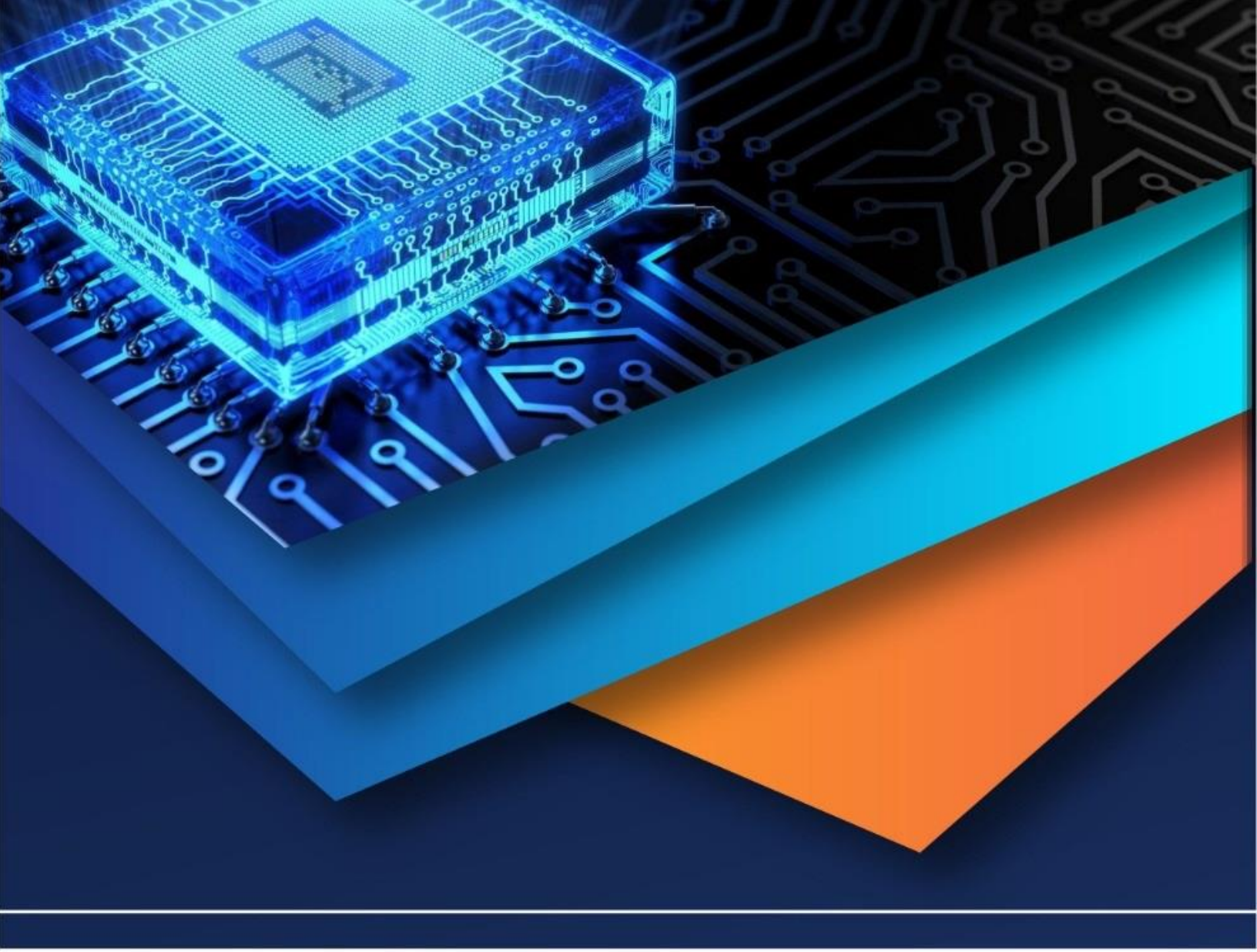
The circular catwalk created an ambience of closeness and continuity in the Spring/Summer 2015 show that complemented the ideas of change and multiculturalism (Ferrero-Regis, 2020). In Louis Vuitton Fall/Winter 2012 collection, a straight runaway was surrounded by a steam train at the middle which brought an element of performance and movement meaning travel and exploration which added to the experience of the viewers (RTF, 2024). Likewise, when Balenciaga's Fall/Winter 2020 show's audience boarded the flooded runway, the audience also entered an illusionary world through a narrative accentuated by screen whirls of video images. Use of this spatial digital media design shows how runway shows are gradually moving to become multimedia based (Staging Fashion, 2021). For instance, in the Fall/Winter 2020 show of Versace, also, present in its straight runway was the use of LED projections which highlighted the idea of gender fluidity that complements the visual effect of the collection in the runway (Woo & Kim, 2008).

These case studies and their analysis bring to focus the crucial role that the design of runway spatial arrangement is assuming as a narrative strategy in the present-day fashion world. Classic runway designs, for example, McQueen's circular design and the central steam train of Louis Vuitton, are still relevant in providing as well as entertaining the audiences with meaning. Nonetheless, the use of digital aspects in Balenciaga and Versace showing changes that are more fusing both the virtual and the physical aspects of the show with a runway performance. This means that like in the case of the runway shows, the behavioural tendency in the fashion industry today is the use of technology and performance in the presentation. Since the contemporary fashion show is increasingly becoming a performance, more emphasis must be placed on spatial design in storytelling and building up the sentiments associated with the collection to the audience. This study clearly explains why the runway design cannot be regarded as merely an offing for exhibiting fashion but an indispensable part of fashion communication enhancing the narrative and extending the collections in depth and scope.

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