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ALCHEMIST

MIAMI BEACH, FLA.
RENE GONZALEZ ARCHITECT

TEXT BY JOHN GENDALL
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL STAVARIDIS







Kinetic mirror installation



Movable display racks

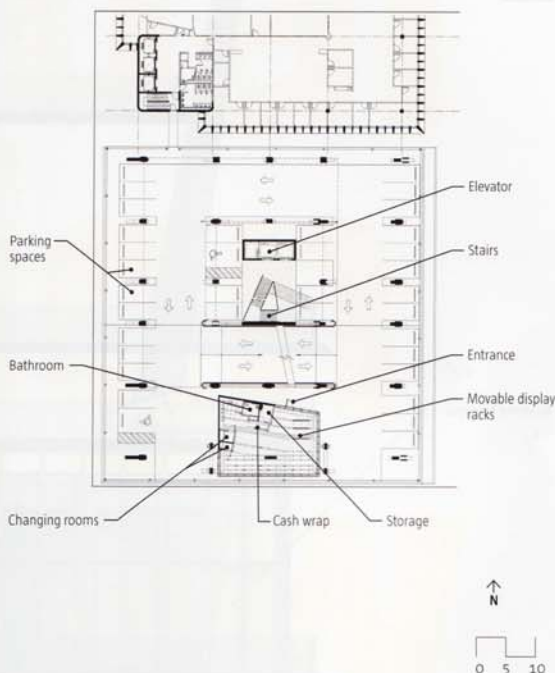
THE PERFECT SITE for a new boutique is rarely wedged into the fifth floor of a parking garage, but in Miami Beach, Fla., Alchemist is proving conventional wisdom wrong. Of course, the scenario couldn't work with just any store, or with just any parking garage: Roma Cohen and Erika Sussman already have a successful boutique farther down the street and a devoted clientele, and the setting is 1111 Lincoln Road, the Neapolitan-like Herzog & de Meuron design that merges parking, retail, and residences, and anchors the western terminus of Miami Beach's main retail allée.

But even with such a pedigree, the retail world can be fickle, and success is never assured. The duo's first step, they knew, would be to hire the right architect. "When we started the project, we were in the middle of a recession, so we knew we had to create something really, really exciting," Cohen says. This brought them to Rene Gonzalez, AIA. The kind of designer who understands the world poetically, Gonzalez's work is distinguished by a singular attention to environment—the hues of blue in the sky, movements of people, patterns of shade. It "is about making observations and putting them into architectural filters," he says. When it came to designing the interior of a 1,726-square-foot glass cube housed in a car park, however, he was faced with an unusual context.

The views from the site are far-reaching, encompassing the Miami Beach cityscape and the area's characteristic deep-blue sky. "You have a feeling of being in the clouds," Gonzalez says. He kept the floor-to-ceiling glass free from obstruction to capitalize on these stunning vistas.

But this is, after all, an urban boutique in a busy parking garage, not a beachside meditation retreat. Concerned with context as Gonzalez is, he wanted the store to acknowledge that kind of energy. "We wanted to keep a connection with the parking garage and the busyness of the sidewalk below," he says. To this end, the ceiling is lined with ribbons of

Site Plan



mirrored panels, which then cascade down the walls, setting up a series of fragmentary views within and out of the space. There are infinity effects around the room, but views are often cropped—you can see the back of your head in one mirror and your feet in another—so the experience of moving through the store is always changing.

In an effort to amplify this visual energy, Gonzalez collaborated with Random International, a London-based art practice, to rig the mirrors into a kinetic installation. As a result, some individual panels move, pivoting on one edge, like a door. The result is a constantly changing kaleidoscopic effect. "The environment is fragmented, reflected, and reverberated around," he says.

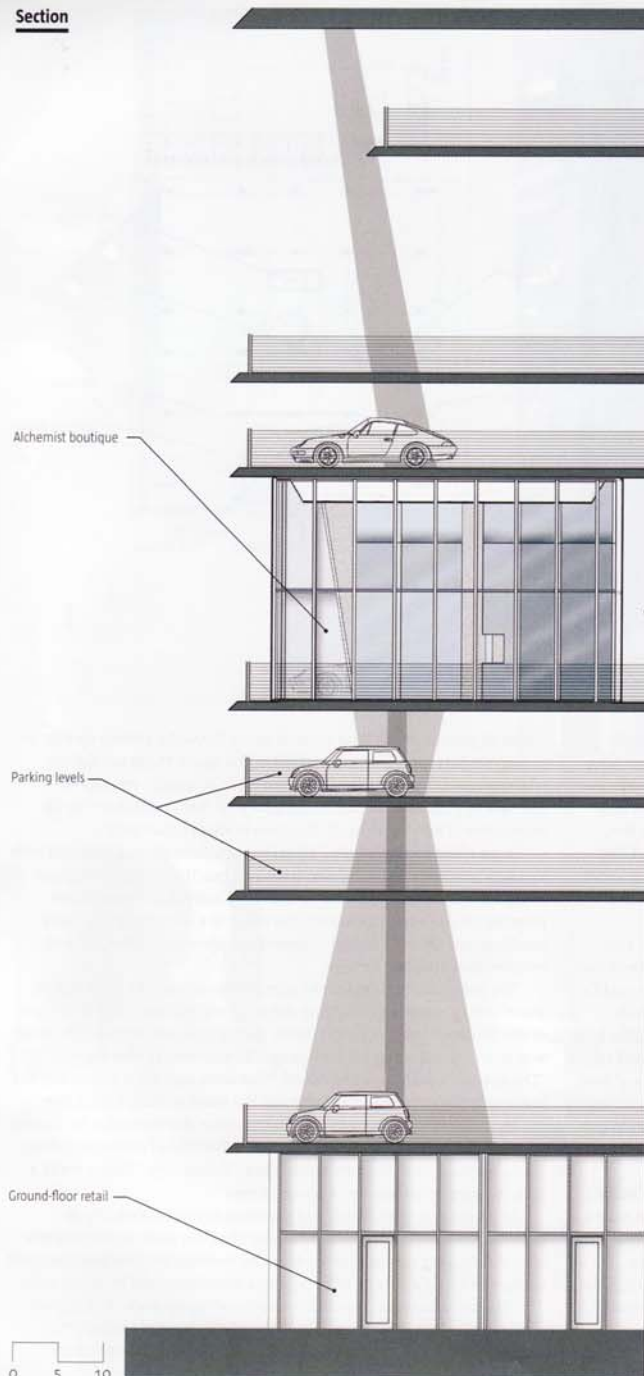
The subtle movements of the mirrors also attract the attention of street-level pedestrians, unifying the retail experience of the street and of the boutique five stories overhead. Taking this into account, the store was able to avoid using garish signage: Its presence speaks for itself. "The space is a store and a billboard," Gonzalez says. On a sunny day, the mirrors in the store reflect the sky and the space emits an azure hue.

In addition to drawing people in, the space also needed to be flexible. "Sometimes we might want to just show a handful of pieces and other times, we may want to show much more," Cohen says. "This is really a gallery space, so we wanted a blank canvas."

In an effort to give Cohen and Sussman as much flexibility as possible, Gonzalez poured a 2-inch layer of a clear satin-finish concrete over the rougher garage slab. He included periodic perforations that hold custom clothing displays, so the space is unencumbered by bulky racks.

The pair admit that the decision to lease the equivalent of 13 glassed-in parking spaces for their new store was born more of instinct than wisdom. But having recently finished their first year with revenues 25 percent above projections, the gamble seems to be paying off.

Section



Project Credits

Project Alchemist, Miami Beach, Fla.
Client/Owner Roma Cohen and Erika Sussman
Architect Rene Gonzalez Architect, Miami—Rene Gonzalez, AIA (principal); Monica Vazquez, Assoc. AIA (associate); Kevin Regalado, AIA (project director)
Mechanical/Electrical Engineer Vidal & Associates
Structural Engineer Optimus Structural Design
Construction Manager Chris DiFranco
General Contractor Aaron Builders & Development
Lighting Designer Brand Lighting; G2J Design
A/V Consultant HED South
Size 1,726 square feet
Cost Withheld

Materials and Sources

Ceilings Conti Glass (installed $\frac{3}{16}$ " custom clear mirror with safety backing) contiglass.net; Random International (kinetic mirror installation) random-international.com
Fabrics and Finishes Daniele Di Monte (black high-definition net window treatments) dadimo.com
Flooring 2" self-leveling concrete with clear satin finish over existing concrete
Furniture Chrome Hearts chromehearts.com
HVAC Rheem Manufacturing Co. (RHGG 240) rheem.com
Lighting Philips Lightolier (Mini Universal, black finish) lightolier.com
Metal Marine Designs, Rick Tavares (custom mannequins and rack systems)
Millwork Chrome Hearts (custom display cases) chromehearts.com
Wallcoverings Auralex Acoustics (Pyramis Studio Foam, purple finish wallcovering in changing rooms) auralex.com
Walls Conti Glass Corp. (installed $\frac{1}{4}$ " custom clear mirror and $\frac{1}{4}$ " acid-etched Starphire mirror) contiglass.net

