

MAISON HERMÈS

1998 – 2001; 2002 – 2006 Tokyo, Japan

In 1998, Maison Hermès asked RPBW to design its Japanese headquarters in Tokyo. Harumi-dori, the main street in the Ginza district, was selected as the site for the project.

The site had an unusual layout: it was an extremely narrow lot that required the building to be constructed in a mostly vertical fashion.

The result was a 15-storey building (including three subterranean levels), 45 metres long by 11 metres wide, home to stores, workshops, offices and display areas for multimedia activities.

This project represented a twofold challenge, in terms of both aesthetics and technical aspects: a building had to be designed that, within Tokyo's already diverse architectural landscape, would represent a significant architectural landmark and would also satisfy Japan's stringent earthquake safety regulations. The main problem consisted in dealing with lateral shockwaves in a building that would have a thickness of just 11 metres.

Traditional Japanese temples inspired the resulting earthquake safety system.

The building's backbone is made up of a steel structure and is divided into structural nodes comprised of viscoelastic dampers. The cantilever slabs that support the concrete-framed glass panels of the facade extend from these nodes.

The joints absorb the vibrations, and spacers separate all of the building's components.

During an earthquake, the entire building is free to move according to predefined movements, which are evenly distributed to all of the structural parts.

While allowing the building to withstand the movements themselves, this system also ensures the integrity of the structure and the various installed networks, as well as its air and water tightness.

Ideally, the tower's layout can be divided into two parts: the stairs, elevators and service areas are concentrated within a long strip approximately 3 metres wide; the remaining 8 metres, which house the commercial activities, are open plan. The slender 20 cm visible pillars serve as tie rods for a structure that works in a cantilevered manner, starting from the centre.

At the centre of the building, a small square plaza connects the street to the subway station two levels down by means of a long escalator included within the project. A mobile sculpture by Susumu Shingu, which reaches the same height as the building itself, overlooks this area.

The building's covering element consists in a single 45 cm square glass module, which is replicated 13,000 times.

Each module's size corresponds to a drop of molten glass: a measurement that is determined physically by the surface tension of the material itself. The drop is processed before it cools, and a unique characteristic rippling effect is created under the press.

Like the rest of the building, the covering elements also satisfy the necessary earthquake safety requirements: each tile is mounted upon a frame with a movement capacity of 4 mm with respect to the adjacent tiles. Thus, each of the facade's 13,000 glass blocks is capable of absorbing its own share of the seismic vibrations through its own lateral movements.

In 2002, Maison Hermès requested that new spaces be developed by expanding upon the building, but without creating any architectural discontinuity. Rather, the expansion was to be connected to the existing building, which had been inaugurated the previous year. This expansion resulted in a larger entryway, additional space on the 1st, 5th and sales floors, as well as larger dressing rooms. The "Le Studio" cinema on the 10th floor was also enlarged. The work began in June of 2004 and was completed in October of 2006.