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Photography by Jaime Navarro



GRUPO ARCA

Guadalajara, Mexico
Esrawe Studio

Photography by Cesar Bejar as noted

We may be stretching the definition of 'retail' here, but we couldn't resist this one, so, too bad. Anyway, they do sell stuff here. Lots of stuff in fact, just not to many casual, walk-in customers. One would have to say this one's as much about the architecture as about the interior design. In essence, a rectangular headpiece has been erected just in front of a factory warehouse, acting as a public face and symbol of the company. There is a lobby area, a library area, sample display galleries, cafeteria, office space upstairs, and then the climax: an open-topped courtyard clad entirely in the main thing ARCA sells: marble. This space is a certifiable showstopper, a vaguely irregularlyshaped forum with



Photography by Jaime Navarro

stepped seating that can exhibit sculpture or accommodate gatherings or presentations (in good weather). Every surface of the space is clad in horizontally grained creamy stone, using a classic material to effect an almost futuristic, abstract space. The strong veining of the stone, which has been coursed in very large panels, blurs dimensions and scale, while the facets of the walls, pushing gently in and out and revealing discreet gaps, make the volumetric envelope quite unusual and almost disorienting... in a pleasant way, if that's possible. It really is a tour de force, and clients won't dare missing it. It even has a sibling space: a narrow slot of a courtyard holding greenery that rests perpendicular nearby. This space is really a light well, and is clad in the same stone as the larger one.

The building was inspired by the "strange and visually striking geology of stone quarries... A 'manufactured landscape', an organic architecture created by the trace of the search for raw materials." Indeed. For anyone who has ever wandered through an active or even abandoned marble or stone quarry, this architect's description of the conceptual basis here makes perfect sense; the carved out spaces and monolithic leftovers can be evocative, even ethereal. This little building starts from that,



Photography by Jaime Navarro



Photography by Genevieve Lufkin



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and goes very far. That courtyard, which is called the 'Agora', is Esrawe Studio's interpretation of stone quarries, but 'civilised' into something that is extremely refined.

The other interior spaces are handsome and spacious, working together as much to share knowledge and cultural history as to sell product. According to the architects, that was a big part of the commission: "The concept moves away from traditional retail space and promotes learning and dissemination, understanding of why and how architecture, design, art and culture are generated... Its main objective is to promote involvement in the construction

of the cultural and creative expression of Mexico." And it must do a good job of it, too.

In fact, the warehouse hall just behind is part of the project, and it's where buyers peruse actual slabs of stone they might order. It is a giant, naturally illuminated hall of veined marvels of nature. But guests will hurry back to the smaller building they entered through, and then make every excuse to linger as long as they can. If selling stone has an inherent link to making architecture (that's what most buyers need the stuff for), then this new building is the ideal, wordless argument for it.