

Sophie Hicks' Electric Counters

A British stylist and journalist turned architect and a leading figure in London during the 1980s and 1990s, she designs extraordinary spaces for fashion brands, infusing them with her minimalist and rigorous aesthetic. A prime example is the Paris boutique of the Italian brand Max Mara on Avenue Montaigne.

According to Sophie Hicks, a ceiling can only ever be a flat surface. The architect hates these “hideous smoke detectors” imposed by regulations. While on her construction sites, the 65-year-old Englishwoman always assigns a member of her team to find solutions and work around these safety requirements. It comes at a cost. But in her projects, the issue arises less than elsewhere, as the architect mainly works in the luxury sector. Thus, for her latest project—the renovation of the Paris boutique of the Italian house Max Mara, at 31 avenue Montaigne in the 8th arrondissement—she reinvented a space of over 700 square meters, spread across the ground and first floors of a 1970s concrete building, using luxurious materials: marble, Verona stone fragments set in lime plaster, translucent walls in a myrtle hue, and pebbles imported from Italy, embedded in the entrance floor.

On this early April day, dressed in a strict grey tailored vest that contrasts with the soft, warm-toned outfits of the sales staff, Sophie Hicks moves energetically in all directions. She inspects the cleanliness of a vase, observes the condition of shrubs planted outside the building, and points out the variations in light. Above all, she proudly presents the centerpiece: a monumental staircase clad in bright orange double-helix corkscrew columns. “This isn’t just any shade of orange,” she says. “It’s vivid! Striking! Electric!” With this bold accent—both clever and slightly insolent—she explains that she wanted to “shake up camel,” the emblematic color of Max Mara, known for its famous coats. “Why not imagine this same camel, but in an acidic version?”

The house, a symbol of timeless Italian luxury and elegance beyond fashion trends, loved it. Maria Giulia Prezioso Maramotti, granddaughter of Max Mara’s founder and deeply involved in the family business, praises “Sophie Hicks’s sensitivity” and “her ability to translate complex architectural concepts into pure, powerful forms.” “Boutiques, I know them,” Hicks says playfully, glancing at herself in a metal mirror. While she also designs residential projects—she notably built a house for her daughter, actress Edie Campbell, in the Northamptonshire countryside, as well as her own, a block of glass and concrete among listed homes in West London—she is especially sought after by luxury brands.

In 1998, she transformed a ruined house in London’s Kensington district into a multicolored store for Paul Smith, where children were invited to ride tricycles. Four years later, at the request of Phoebe Philo, then creative director of Chloé, she designed shops with plywood-covered walls, going against the idea that a luxury house must appeal to expensive materials. “Shop windows are essential!” In 2008, she covered those of Yohji Yamamoto with white Japanese paper.

“In reality, I always work the same way,” she explains. “I ask questions—thousands of questions—to the CEO, the communications team, marketing, the workshop... I want to understand everything. Exactly as I would for a private project: I go to a client’s home, observe their kitchen, reception spaces, lifestyle, and then adapt the design accordingly.” For Max Mara, she immersed herself in the archives, spoke at length with Ian Griffiths, the discreet artistic director who has worked there for nearly forty years, and visited the Collezione Maramotti, the family-owned museum in Reggio Emilia.

She is delighted to present, opposite the orange staircase, a linen screen displaying in real time the atmospheric conditions of the Emilia-Romagna region—clouds, humidity, heat—all meant to resonate within the space on avenue Montaigne. Not sure that clients will recognize the Italian climate, but that’s not

the point. There is a Sophie Hicks style: a minimalist, conceptual aesthetic that is never cold, decipherable by connoisseurs. She loves raw materials—wood planks, metal—sober environments punctuated by bursts of color from abstract artworks, trompe-l'œil effects like the concrete columns added to form shelving. She not only dislikes fire detectors, but also LED lighting (which she covers with tape when visiting sites) and coffee tables (“I’m allergic to them, because as soon as there is one, people feel obliged to put something on it”). She shows a copper-leaf table. She smiles, as if uttering a taboo: “It’s camel, but without the acid. Under another influence—I don’t know which. We played with bad taste in that color. A touch of vulgarity was needed.”

Her career, however, is far from tainted. Barely out of adolescence, she began working for London magazines. A stylist, she collaborated with leading photographers on fashion editorials. The magazine press was at its peak, with cinema-level budgets. In the vibrant London of the 1980s, alongside figures like Amanda Harlech and Isabella Blow, she expressed her generation’s creativity in prestigious magazines, including Tatler, eventually working at Vogue—sometimes in her pajamas. In 1984, photographer David Bailey, icon of Swinging London, shot her portrait for the cover of i-D magazine, her right eye crossed out with a strip of black tape. The image is still considered emblematic of the decade.

“And then I got fed up,” she says. “The industry was changing. As a stylist, you have an expiration date.” She worked for a time with Azzedine Alaïa. From the great Parisian couturier, she says she learned two things: precision and attention to detail. “I also learned that if you want things done properly, you have to do them yourself.” She recalls the Franco-Tunisian designer watching over her until early morning as she endlessly reworked a dress pattern.

A life change followed. In 1990, she enrolled at the Architectural Association in London, whose graduates include major names such as Ron Arad, David Chipperfield, and Zaha Hadid. “I truly began as an architect at the moment the luxury sector was exploding.” In the early 2000s, the fashion industry expanded globally, building monumental boutiques across North America, Europe, and Asia, often designed by star architects. “Fashion became a religion at that moment,” she says, somewhat amused by the current homogenization of stores worldwide. She prefers the “little shops” she used to frequent in London—like Joseph’s, opened by the Ettedgui brothers near a hair salon in the late 1970s, or Anthony Price’s, the glam-rock couturier, who stood behind a counter like a post office clerk, displaying his creations hanging from the ceiling. “A small boutique, like a fitting room, is exactly the kind of place I love,” she exclaims, stepping into one of the entrances. “It’s a major space. Especially the mirrors—because we all want to know whether the trousers make our butt look good.” She smiles again, then pauses, suddenly serious. She moves a vase—just a few centimeters—observes it, and repeats the gesture. Everything is in order.