

RETAIL

KOKAISTUDIOS takes a leaf from a lifestyle trend that's sweeping Asia



Dirk Weiblen

NINGBO – ‘We started by studying circulation: how people would move through and access the space,’ says Pietro Peyron, chief architect and associate partner at Shanghai’s Kokaistudios, as well as project manager for the interior design of Alt-Life, a bookstore in Ningbo, China. The 2,400-m² venue presented Peyron and his team with very specific challenges, including an underground location, ambitious programming and a fixed-yet-flexible template for future tenants. Realized in just five months, the store goes beyond books to deliver a comprehensive lifestyle destination in the eastern Chinese city.

Effectively sponsored by Chinese publisher San Lian, Alt-Life is the latest in a string of book-themed, lifestyle-concept stores in Asia. In a nod to the likes of Taiwan’s Eslite

and Tokyo’s Daikanyama T-Site, complementary functions support Alt-Life’s impressive stock of books for sale. These include a tea-house, a bakery and a double-height auditorium for lectures, performances and events. Designed as a multifaceted emporium that encourages visitors to spend several hours on the premises, Alt-Life was developed with a specific demographic in mind: families. ‘One of the client’s priorities was to pay attention to visitors with children – to create a space for people to stay,’ says Peyron. Kokaistudios’ brightly coloured children’s area for young readers satisfies that requirement.

The design is dictated largely by the store’s public access point. People enter through a renovated glass pavilion at ground level. Allowing ample natural light »



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to penetrate the interior during the day, the structure radiates artificial light from within as night falls, becoming an outward-facing landmark that draws passers-by into the subterranean world of books. Kokaistudios replaced an existing spiral staircase with one that turns in the opposite direction, offering users an open view across the store. On one side, dramatic hanging shelves serve as displays.

Taking advantage of a high floor-to-ceiling clearance, Kokaistudios greatly increased the retail area with a new mezzanine, whose 'shape was very much determined by how we wanted people to move within the space', says Peyron. 'There are multiple vertical connections between the mezzanine and the lower basement level, and we wanted to integrate the two floors.' The solution was cardboard-coloured 'ribbons' of shelves that wind around the entire space. Gently curved, they guide visitors through the store and between the various functions.

Augmenting Alt-Life's broader role as a lifestyle destination are the store's third-party tenants. Although some, such as Starbucks, were confirmed early on, most were unknown to Kokaistudios during the design

and construction phases. 'That was our main challenge,' says Peyron. 'We were in control of, say, 70 per cent of the interior design, leaving 30 per cent for the tenants. We had to make sure that the part under our control – the main envelope – would be strong enough to let the visual identity of smaller tenants blend in.' To establish consistency, Kokaistudios designed display cases, shelves and counters for the majority of Alt-Life's rentable units.

Alt-Life is fast becoming a fixture on Ningbo's cultural calendar, thanks to a roster of book launches, lectures and performances. What's more, judging by the interior's insatiable 'shares' on Chinese social-media sites, Kokaistudios' design taps into a palpable Asian trend for hybrid lifestyle bookstores that shows no sign of abating. – FA

kokaistudios.com

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