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# Retail and Hospitality

EDITOR \_Kendra Jackson

Concepts and strategies for a sector in flux

## Blu Dot Matrix

DEFINED BY A RIPPLING INTERIOR, THE FURNITURE BRAND'S NEW WEST COAST SHOWROOM PAYS HOMAGE TO THE ART OF MAKING

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**It was love at second sight** for Ben Waechter. The Portland, Oregon-based architect was on vacation when Blu Dot co-founders Maurice Blanks and John Christakos came to town to meet potential architects for a new furniture showroom in the West Coast city. When Waechter flew to Blu Dot's Minneapolis headquarters to make up for the lost opportunity, he felt a kinship watching the company's designers as they fabricated their own prototypes. "Being an architecture firm that still values physical model-making, there was definitely a shared passion for craft and making," he recalls. Blanks and Christakos felt it, too: They tapped the architect's eponymous firm to design the 864-square-metre outpost, which opened to the public late last year.

Blu Dot had chosen a circa-1921 masonry structure in the Pearl District to become the eighth destination in its portfolio of stores. When Waechter stripped away the layers that had accumulated over the corner building's life as a phonograph warehouse, mason-jar factory and, most recently, retail and office spaces, he uncovered a perfectly square interior held aloft by rows of heavy timber pillars. "You couldn't experience the raw beauty of that grid before renovation, and we really wanted to embrace that," Waechter says. Yet he also had to contend with a trio of non-negotiable intrusions into the grid: an ADA-compliant ramp, a stair and elevator tower and a rear mezzanine containing offices and bathrooms.

To hide these three necessities, as well as ductwork, he connected them with an undulating ribbon clad in ash battens. The volume — which reaches to the top of the mezzanine guardrail — never intersects with a column. "The ribbon is a singular thing with a new identity, but it also heightens the identity of the original building," he

**ABOVE AND RIGHT: A sinuous volume clad in whitewashed ash battens winds its way throughout the interior of Blu Dot's new Portland showroom. Devised by architect Ben Waechter, the intervention references the craft of furniture-making and offsets the original grid of timber columns.**



says of the curving complement to the gridded square. That the textured insertion evokes the ergonomics and material craft of a Blu Dot prototyping session is no coincidence either, although the battens were whitewashed "to not conflict with the rich furniture palette."

The handiwork extends to the exterior, where Waechter conceived an aluminum awning that honours the historic neighbourhood's characteristic loading-dock canopies. This solution came about via a similar process, as the architect created a folded form to hide an ugly (albeit immutable) lintel, as well as new drainage and lighting. The shape also echoes the wending interior, while countering the warehouse's regular grid of windows and muntins. "If you were to uproot it from its context, it would have a logic of its own," Waechter says of his curve-appeal strategy. "But in this context, it's contributing to its place." [waechterarchitecture.com](http://waechterarchitecture.com)