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Ar. Eric Carlson
CARBONDALE Paris

RETAIL

ARCHITECTURE

Louis Vuitton & more

Creation with
Carpets!

Have fire in your belly.
Be quality conscious.
Negotiate stiff prices...

Shyam Ahuja

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RETAIL ARCHITECTURE

Unlike the other branches of architecture, one that has most recently come into existence is Retail. Design, Lighting, Ambiance, Material Selection, Visual branding of the store, all play crucial roles.

Retail architecture is a specialized field, it combines elements of architecture, interior decoration, industrial design, graphic design, ergonomics and advertising to create the most conducive experience for a customer to enter into a store, maneuver along the store, sift through the merchandise, get a feel of the brand quality and customer service, at the same time provide an enjoyable and hassle free shopping time. A retail designer today must create thematic experiences for the customers. It has come a long way from simple supermarkets to chain stores to boutiques and now specialized stores which are innovative enough to blur the lines between the physical and virtual worlds with online stores, pop-up stores, shop-in shops or experience centres and digital experiences with customizable outfits etc. Leave aside the design itself, Lighting, Ambiance, Material Selection Visual branding of the store, all play a crucial role.

Lighting should be functional yet compliment the product, it can often have dramatic effect on the space. The music played in the store is another way of reaching out to the targeted clients, the choice often depends on the merchandise sold. **Colours** used should compliment with the merchandise and not clash with the product. Being high traffic areas, the choice of materials for Retail designs are also crucial, a floor that is firm yet somewhat buoyant will be more comfortable for a customer to walk and therefore let them spend more time etc.

Unlike the other branches of architecture, one that has most recently come into existence is Retail. In the market where the forces of Demand & Supply decide the survival of the fittest, design & architecture plays pivotal role. Big Global brands like Louis Vuitton work on the principal of **unanimous décor**; irrespective of the place or country, you will get exactly the same feeling and atmosphere once you enter in a particular brand's store. This has been made possible with the intense focus on retail architecture. It signifies keeping the brand's soul intact if you are visiting the **Tiffany's at Oxford Street** or in Paris.

RETAIL ARCHITECTURE & INDIA

The scenario back home is little different when it comes to designing retail stores. India is a land of handicraft; we love our flashy designs and vibrant colours. Therefore, the traditional stores that exist in India never really focused on architecture. Walking on the lines of *Oonchi Dukan*, *Feeke Pakwan*, we never really believed in creating a big store with lots of display since we think that the product speaks for itself. Even today, you can walk into a traditional store which may be selling a saree or Lehnga worth a lakh. There could be an ultimate chaos in the store. Still we could buy the best and end up moving out happily with our purchase. However, with the increasing mall culture and branded luxury stores, the focus is shifting. The coming of foreign brands in India with their exclusive stores was probably the first experience of Retail Architecture for Indians at large.

Indians are known for being budget conscious and are very good at bargaining. Majority of Indian's are skeptical about buying from flashy stores as they feel that the spent on branding and designing of store or paying for the hefty location of the store is passed on to customers. They believe that the same should be bought from someone minus the extra cost on glorifying the product. **Many hesitate to even enter the stores.**

The super rich & brand conscious Indians who are traveling around the world, and the new generation of global Indians are the buyers of luxury branded products. **Mindset is changing** among the middle class. Yet, it can be said that retail architecture is in its very nascent in India.

The change in the socio-economic conditions, increasing middle class living standards, additional disposable income, influx of global brands in India have led to the rise of the Retail industry in India and naturally the need for better retail design surfaced. What started off as organized retail store or supermarkets which worked on the concept of maximum discounts, maximum footfalls and increased revenue. They offered comfortable, air-conditioned decent environments for people to shop for the traditional value based consumers and turned out to be very successful. While it

is true that the Indians still remain price conscious, but they want value for money. A brand which delivers on quality and provides an equally pleasing experience find many takers in India. At the same time, with the Indians getting more global exposure by travelling abroad and experiencing the global brands and retail experiences there, the need for a similar brand experience for the high end buyers have cropped up in India too. Big brands like Burberry, Louis Vuitton etc understood this need and therefore they have made retail store designs as well as their online stores cohesive to each other. The customer is delighted when he is able to get the same brand experience every time he shops from different touch points. With about half of the Indian population under the age of 35, the impact of the ecommerce shopping portals makes all the sense, hence the need for creating unique fusion of physical and digital world in order to catch the attention of this target segments makes it an important designing aspect for retail designers as well as brands to consider.

KEY CONCERNS - ACCESSIBILITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

While designing the architecture of a retail store, there are two aspects that an architect keeps in his mind, i.e., accessibility and productivity. They are highly co related. No matter how good you design, if a place is not accessible, doesn't have a right parking or the location, the niche that you are expecting will never come to the store.

The second aspect deals with the productivity. So how an architect can ensure the productivity in the store? Without any control on the product being sold, he takes care of the space being used. Therefore, the space has to work efficiently for both, i.e., customers who walk in and the staff employed. If it's a big place like Shopping Mall, resting areas and food court at easily accessible vantage points are a must since people who get tired after long walks need to take rest and enjoy food which also increase footfalls in

the mall. The same thing when it comes to a branded store, then space has to be designed in such a way so that there is proper utilization of every corner and from everywhere, the prospective buyer could see the product in its best display manner possible.

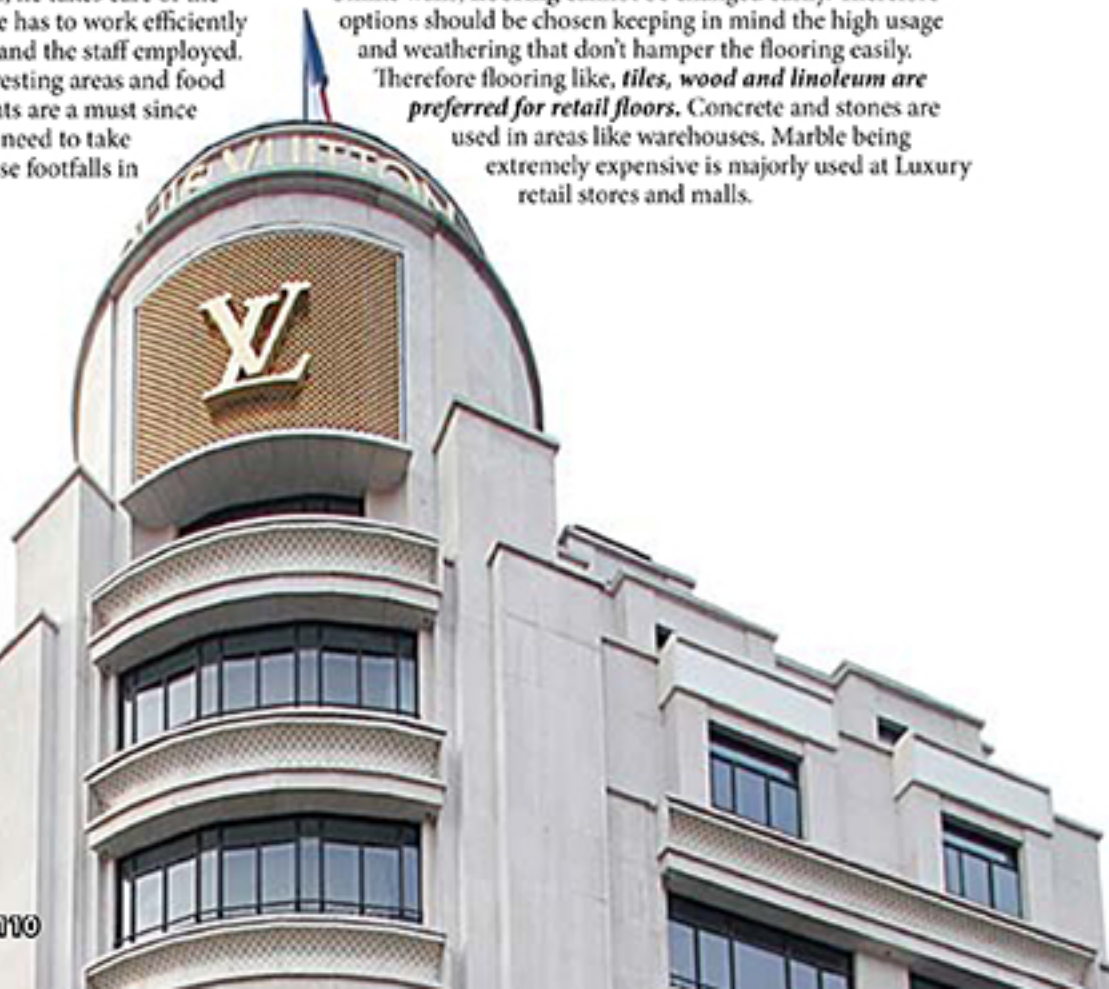
Similarly when it comes to staff, there are things that need to be taken care of like the utility rooms should not be very far, there must be a resting place and lockers for staff etc. Catering well to all these aspects come under the purview of Retail Architecture.

INNOVATION & RECOGNITION SHOULD GO HAND IN HAND

Innovation & recognition should go hand in hand while designing the retail space which is the most challenging job. You need to adhere to the strict guidelines keeping the global taste intact while creating some kind of local innovation at hand. Most major brands have their own team of designers who create their signature stores at every location. However, retail architecture is also fun since it has a lot of room for innovation. You can opt for modernized ceilings, bold colours, umpteenth flooring choices etc. **The only thing to be kept in mind is that the overall décor should not be too flashy to irritate the eyes or neither too subtle to go completely unnoticed.** A fine balance between these two paves the way for successful retail architect.

Another thing to keep in mind is since retail is a high traffic floor area, the flooring has to be chosen with extreme caution. Unlike walls, flooring cannot be changed easily. Therefore options should be chosen keeping in mind the high usage and weathering that don't hamper the flooring easily. Therefore flooring like, **tiles, wood and linoleum are preferred for retail floors.** Concrete and stones are used in areas like warehouses. Marble being extremely expensive is majorly used at Luxury retail stores and malls.

"To me 'Luxury Architecture' means designing projects that are customized."



PRINCIPAL, CARBONDALE, PARIS

AR. ERIC CARLSON

A PIONEER DESIGNER IN RETAIL ARCHITECTURE, ONE OF THE FACES BEHIND LOUIS VUITTON AND MANY MORE...



Ar. Eric Carlson is a person who is known for his expertise in the retail architecture. One of the faces behind Louis Vuitton Architecture Department, Eric has established the Architecture studio CARBONDALE in Paris in 2004. He has received numerous accolades for his works in Luxury architecture including, "Talent de la Rareté", "The most Beautiful Construction in Metal" and "The Seoul Metropolitan Government" award.

"Luxury retail Architecture began to be considered 'Architecture' with a capital 'A' and I felt like a kid in a candy store."

Often known as the first firm to bring architecture to luxury brands, were you always inclined towards designing for luxury?

When I first began working at Louis Vuitton in 1997 the store designs were composed essentially of standardized display counters and to be honest, I was dubious that good architecture could be achieved here because of the commercial constraints and the long tradition of a decorative, neo-traditional approach. However, with the Brand's timely product expansion into Ready-to-Wear, and the need for bigger stores and buildings combined with an inspired, open-minded President at the time *Yves Carcel*, I found myself in a fertile environment for motivated individuals with ideas.

After designing the first "flagship store" with a contemporary multi-level exterior façade and articulated interior volumes in Osaka the flood gates opened, and the thirst for Architectural ideas allowed me to create an internal Architecture studio of 30 people and a multitude of interesting projects every year. The other luxury brands took notice and soon followed with buildings by Rem Koolhaas and Herzog de Meuron for Prada and Renzo Piano for Hermes. Luxury retail Architecture began to be considered "Architecture" with a capital "A" and I felt like a kid in a candy store.

After 7 years as Founder and Director of Louis Vuitton Architecture Department in Paris, I wanted to continue to grow and expand my expertise in Luxury Design to other types of high-end projects. So, I opened my Parisian office CARBONDALE in 2004 and since then we've designed a rich diversity of works including private homes, office headquarters, museums, restaurants as well as stores.

Architectural Jewelry as a luxury element is a great concept. Please tell us how you incorporate them in the most subtle yet luxurious way in your projects.

For some projects, there is the need and opportunity to create an architectural space, surface or object that produces a sense of amazement, wonder or awe. Like a spectacular piece of custom jewellery, these features can make the architecture experience remarkable, unforgettable and become attractions in themselves.

For example, the central atrium in the Louis Vuitton Champs Elysees building in Paris is composed of 2000 stainless steel rods suspended above the skylight in a half-dome pattern. A six-story mirror polished stainless steel wall reflects the half-dome of rods to create virtual full dome. Also in this store,



The ephemeral veil at the store, inspired by the Louis Vuitton monogram motif is composed of 60,000 cast aluminum diamonds that are coated with silver and gold then invisibly assembled to portray the circle and flower patterns.

we designed an architectural "skin" that lines all the interior spaces filtering the views and the nature light. This ephemeral veil, inspired by the Louis Vuitton monogram motif is composed of 60,000 cast aluminum diamonds that are coated electrolytic baths with silver and gold then invisibly assembled to portray the circle and flower patterns. Then we inlaid solid wenge wood, white porcelain, and cast crystal diamonds into the skin to identify the corresponding product zone.

At a smaller scale for the *TreBicchieri Restaurant in Sao Paulo*, we took the facial profiles of the 3 restaurant owners and worked with the renowned **Murano glass craftsman** to produce 950 hand-blown wine glasses whose stems follow the 3 facial silhouettes. We then stacked the glasses end-on-end with ultra-violet glue to create the Architectural facade as well as the emblematic jewel-like image for the restaurant.

S Having a diverse range of experience right from interiors, architecture, installations to furniture designing, do you have a favourite?

In "Luxury Architecture" everything is important irrespective of the size. Our expertise at all scales has been refined over the last 30 years. In my office **CARBONDALE**, the building, facade, interior, furniture and door knob are not considered as separate elements; they are integral parts of one experience.



The central atrium in the Louis Vuitton Champs Elysees building in Paris is composed of 2000 stainless steel rods suspended above the skylight in a half-dome pattern.

At the TreBicchieri Restaurant in Sao Paulo, the facial silhouettes of the 3 restaurant owners mark the distinctive feature..



The stacked wine glass joined with ultra-violet glue

Often projects are separated into parts and even separate designer for each part. This happens because it is rare to find designers that understand how to design at many scales. This is something I learnt from my early professional experiences. My first job was with the Architecture office of Mark Mack in San Francisco, known for his villas in the Northern California hills. Then I moved to Rotterdam, Holland to work with the celebrated Ar. Rem Koolhaas on a large contemporary art museum in Germany and office towers in Paris. Both of these studios were fantastically creative environments where grey-matter and ideas flourished. I learned that Large and Extra-Large projects required a very different design approach to that of smaller buildings and interior such as individual homes. The discovery was the opposite of what one might expect, the importance of 'simplicity for the big' and the 'complexity for the small'.

S What role does material selection play in your projects?

Materials can be the most satisfying aspect of a project or the most dangerous. Everybody engages with materials visually, by touching and emotionally. The danger is that this basic attraction can mislead people to think that materials = design or architecture. Materials are just materials, but used correctly with lighting, they are tools that help reinforce ideas. There are NO good or bad materials; only the right material for the right situation.

Often in our designs, we create materials that are customized uniquely for each Client. This is particularly important when

In Retail Architecture design, there is the need and opportunity to create an architectural space that produces a sense of amazement, wonder or awe just like a spectacular piece of custom jewellery!

designing for luxury brands so others cannot simply copy their image by using the same materials.

S What are you currently working on?

Currently, we are designing a second residence and fashion school in Paris, an interior plaza and atrium skylight in Sao Paulo Brazil, a Paspaley Pearl boutique in Australia. For me, "Luxury Architecture" means designing projects that are customized. Every project we create is uniquely designed to correspond to the Client but also to the local culture, climate and sense of "place". Our Clients come to us from all over the world to conceive and materialize their dreams, so we have developed a unique process of research and analysis to understand the strategy for each unique circumstance.

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BMW Park Lane
Photo credit:
Roland Halbe



Longchamp Head Quarter
Photo credit: PS I Colzsten



There are NO good or bad materials; only the right material for the right situation.

S Luxury and sustainability are often thought of being far apart. Is it true?

Sustainability has many dimensions including biodegradability, recycling, energy efficiency, carbon footprint, all of which are important for Architects to consider for every project. For me, luxury has the resources to consider all of these aspects correctly. But perhaps the most important and basic dimension of sustainability which is often the most overlooked is the idea of QUALITY. Designing and building qualitatively to last in time will reduce the resources lost in renovating or rebuilding over and over again. For me luxury, quality and sustainability are intertwined.

S How do you define luxury?

I've come to understand and divide luxury in two categories. The first is **Absolute Luxury** which is the universal or collectively agreed upon luxury icons such as a Rolls Royce car, caviar, a yacht, champagne or diamonds. Secondly, there is something I call **Relative Luxury** which is a personalized expression of value unique to each individual, brand, companies or even city.

A simple example would be a chair designed precisely to fit the shape of one individual's body. In other words, it is not a chair, a car, or a yacht that is in itself "luxury", but it is the way that thing is individually conceived to personalize a distinctive experience. It is this "Relative Luxury" which I find more meaningful and that guides my work.