

# METROPOLIS

LOUIS VUITTON  
trades traditional grandeur  
for a THEME-PARK  
take on luxury

ARCHITECTURE < CULTURE > DESIGN

March 2006

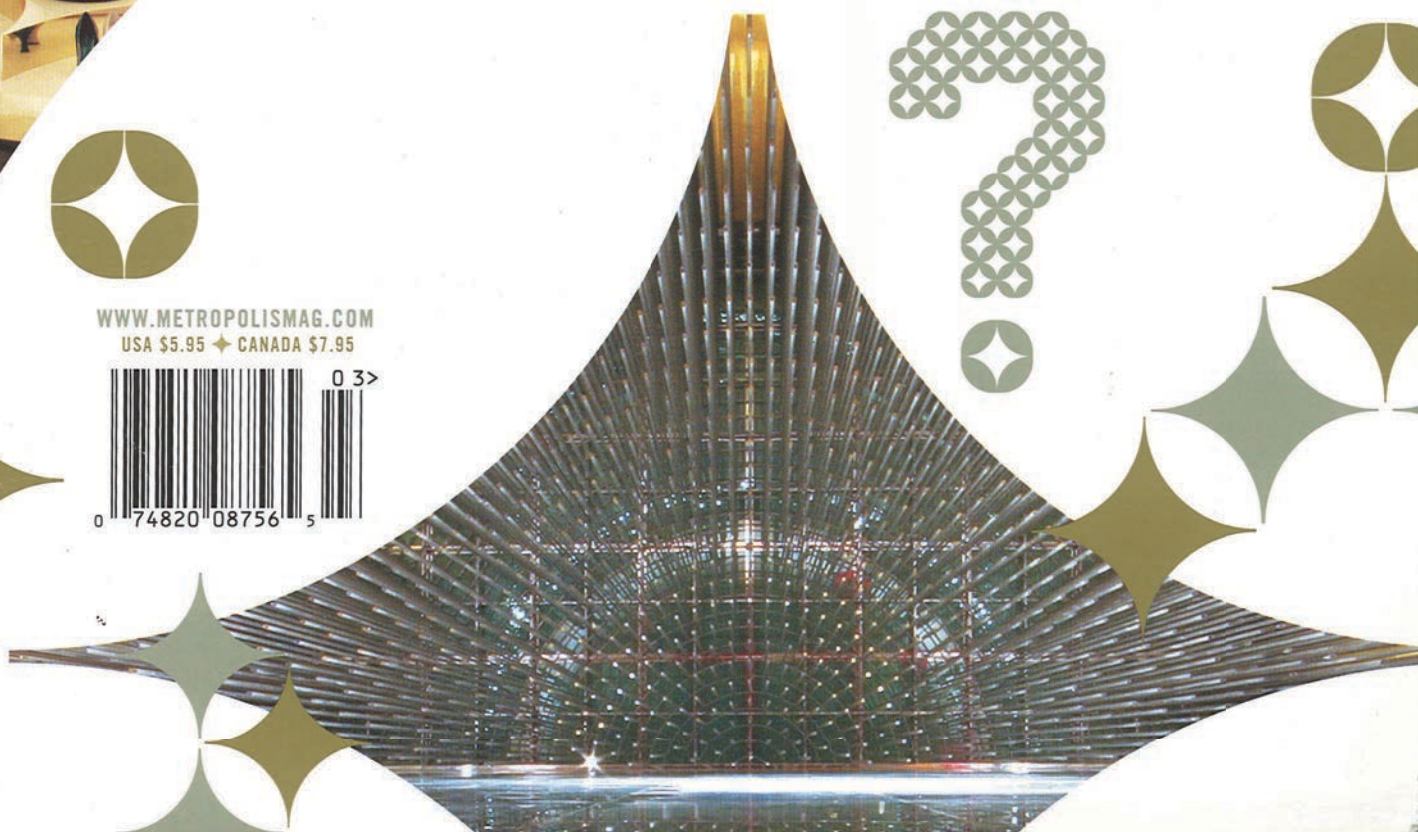
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Features March 2006

Louis Vuitton's renovated flagship store on the Champs-Élysées, designed by American architects Eric Carlson and Peter Marino, is embroidered with latticework screens composed of 110,000 diamond-shaped pieces of metal that evoke the classic Vuitton logo.



Photography by  
Jimmy Cöhrssen

EAST  
MEETS  
WEST  
on the Champs-Élysées





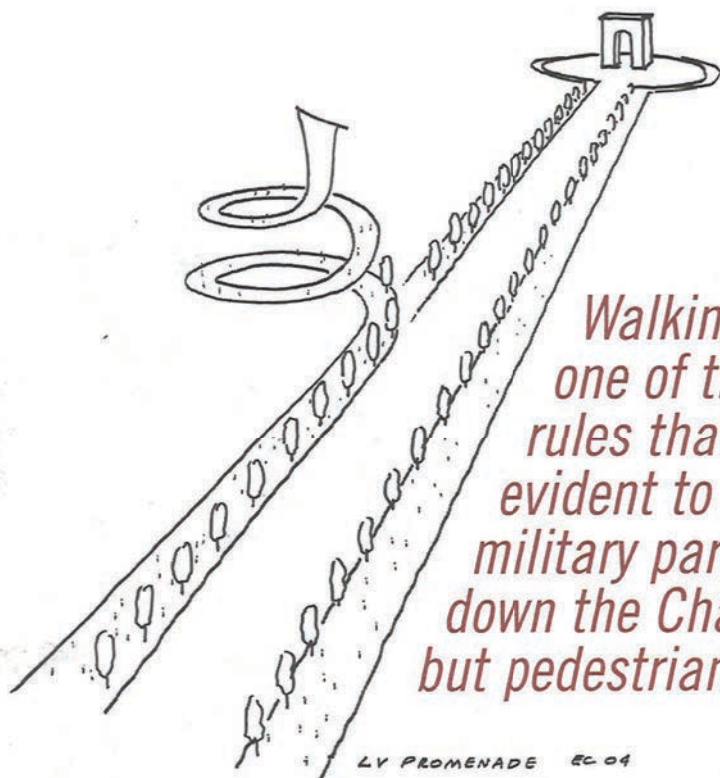
By Véronique Vienne

Targeting Asian tourists,  
Louis Vuitton's new  
Paris flagship defies  
French expectations  
of luxury.

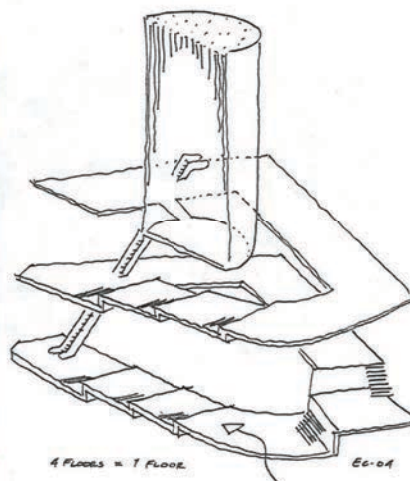
**Louis Vuitton did not open** its glitzy new Paris flagship last October for the two million Parisians that are a mere minority in the City of Light, but for the approximately 25 million tourists who mob the French capital annually. Though the mega-emporium happens to be situated on the Champs-Élysées at the corner of the chic Avenue George V—a five-minute stroll from the Arc de Triomphe—its real location is a pricey piece of real estate in the imaginations of people worldwide for whom Paris is first and foremost a shopping destination.

Opposite: A four-story escalator carries shoppers directly to the top of the store through a fiber-optic work by Tim White-Sobieski. A detail of the lattice-work screens (right; embedded with crystal) that are employed throughout the store.





*Walking down breaks one of those unspoken rules that are self-evident to every Parisian: military parades roll down the Champs-Élysées, but pedestrians stroll up!*



So un-French is the concept behind the newly restored 161,000-square-foot store (Vuitton's largest) that a Parisian woman might mistake it for a *gallerie marchande*—a shopping arcade. The layout violates French expectations of what a Champs-Élysées luxury store looks like. There is no sense of height, no grand stairway to ascend, no vaulting inner courtyard, and no uplifting vistas—no indication that luxury is “aspirational,” about rising above the masses.

“What Vuitton customers now demand from a shopping experience is to be swept off their feet,” says Eric Carlson, the American architect who designed and supervised the renovation. “We no longer expect shoppers to walk up to the top floors to see products. In fact, we eliminated the very notion of floor levels, replacing it with a succession of terraces in a spiral pattern.”

In the retail world getting people to visit the top floor of a store is the number-one concern. Assuming

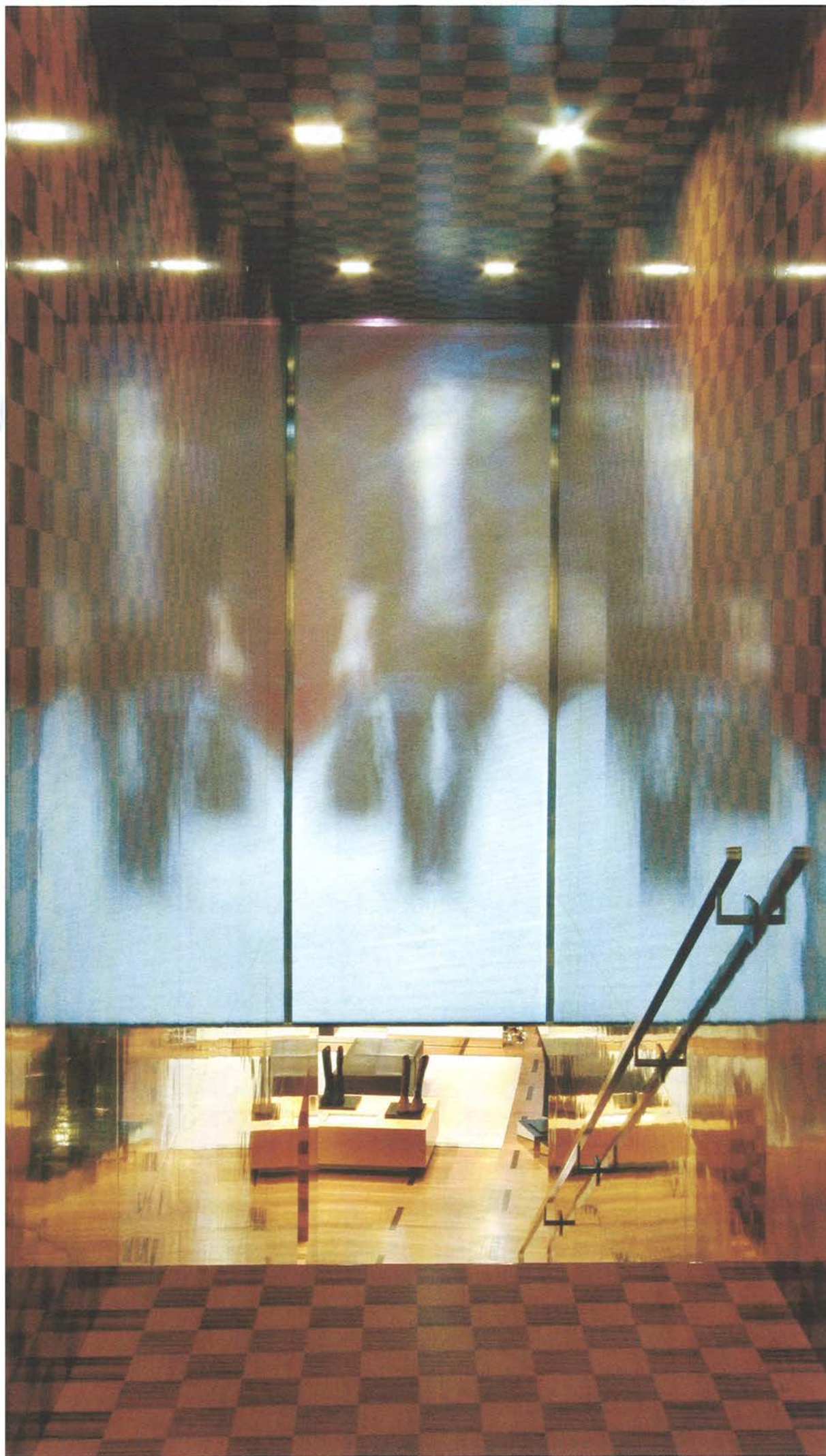
that customers would rather walk down than up, Carlson adopted a labyrinthine “promenade” scheme, routing shoppers through a circuitous downhill course that ensures they will have a leisurely opportunity to experience Vuitton's products in all their variegated expressions tucked into niche boutiques along the way. The result is counterintuitive. Walking down breaks one of those unspoken rules that are self-evident to every Parisian: military parades roll down the Champs-Élysées, but pedestrians stroll up! Plus a theatrical stairway suggests that in such a luxurious environment you might choose to rise to the occasion. Marc Gobé, author of best-selling *Emotional Branding*, believes that—like the American woman—the French woman is partial to the grand staircase, where she can see and be seen. “Centrally located stairs in stores are not only decorative, they also provide a stage for customers who want to flaunt their fashion flair.”

In doing away with the idea that status is synonymous with uphill grandeur, Carlson and the rest of Vuitton's in-house architecture team (about 30 full-time employees) created an antithetical experience: the layout of the four-story emporium is like that of an amusement-park ride. A trip up the 65-foot-high tunnel-like escalator tucked away in the back of the store is much like the ascent to the top of a roller coaster. Though not exactly a nose-dive, what you experience next—which could indeed be described as “being swept off your feet”—is a disorienting loss of control, like being swallowed inside a glittering vortex. To get back **continued on page 80**



Clockwise from top: sketches by Eric Carlson; the shoe alcove; the ready-to-wear department; and a view of the facade looking up the Champs-Élysées.





Clockwise from right: a runway video projection reflects against the walls at the narrow stairway entrance to the men's department; the stone-patterned ground floor with anigre-wood inlayed Vuitton flower logos overhead; a corridor leading to the elevator vestibule by the men's department; and a view looking back toward the checkerboard entrance.





Metal rods hang from the skylit ceiling of the five-story central atrium inside the luggage department.



Three views of *First Blush*, October, 2005, an LED light installation by James Turrell, above the stairs in the leather-goods department (below and right).



A black-as-night elevator installation, *Your Loss of Senses*, by Olafur Eliasson, shoots customers up to Vuitton's seventh-floor art gallery, graced by stunning views of Parisian rooftops.



you to where you want to go. No fun house would be complete without its goose-bump moment, and the Vuitton flagship is no exception: as you go around a bend you eventually discover the central attraction, a secluded skylit atrium bristling with slender metal rods that seemingly hang in midair, transforming the hollow space into an enchanted grotto. But for the ultimate thrill you must line up with other shoppers in the atrium to take a 40-second sensory-deprivation ride in a claustrophobic pitch-

*"My specialty is to keep the human scale of the products," Marino says. "I don't want customers to feel like they are in a train station."*

to the ground floor you must proceed through the descending terraces—each a store within the store, a unique concept by Carlson and interior designer Peter Marino, who believe in breaking down large retail spaces into small intimate areas specifically tailored to highlight the products they contain. "My specialty is to keep the human scale of the products," he says. "I don't want customers to feel like they are in a train station. I like to give people a choice between a semi-enclosed feeling and a more open one."

The convoluted layout offers escape routes: you can bypass entire sections of the store and take diagonal shortcuts—hidden stairs or hallways—that might or might not get

black elevator—an installation by Danish artist Olafur Eliasson—to the building's seventh floor, where an art gallery will soon open and you can recover from the spooky ride up by admiring the stunning view over Paris's rooftops. Other art installations throughout the store by legendary American artist James Turrell, described in a Vuitton press release as "an architect of light," and video maverick Tim White-Sobieski, an abstract "painter of motion," call on the latest technology to instill the place with a video-game atmosphere.

Shopping the Vuitton flagship is fun. But in France (and let's not forget that Vuitton is one of the oldest French brands) *continued on page 117*

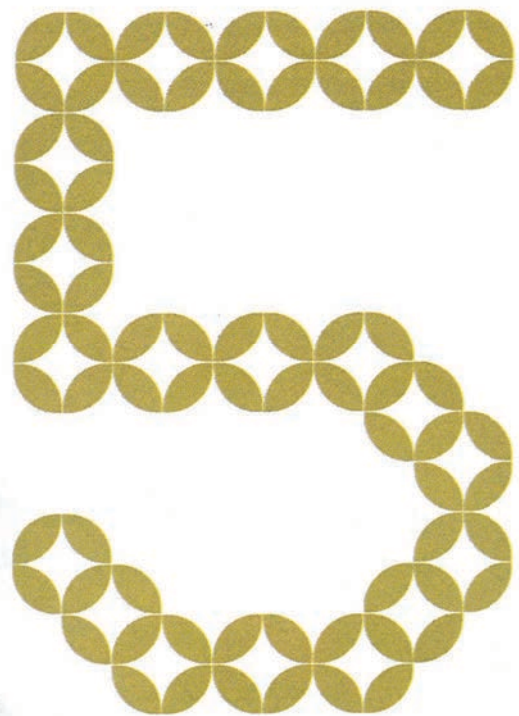


Above, from top: Patterned sunglass display cases in the accessories department, where the floor is peppered with abstract interpretations of the Vuitton logo (middle); a rendering shows the stepped progression through the space.

Opposite page: top and center, courtesy Louis Vuitton Malletier/© Jimmy Cohlsson; bottom left, courtesy Louis Vuitton Malletier/© Stéphane Muratet



# HOW TO WRAP



# JEWELS

No need for Japan's fashionable consumers to swarm the Champs-Élysées to be suffused by the Louis Vuitton experience: since 1978 the Parisian brand has been practically colonizing the Land of the Rising Sun, in addition to opening hundreds of stores elsewhere around the world.

## NEW YORK

Jun Aoki superimposed a patterned glass facade over a part of the existing building on Fifth Avenue and 57th Street to produce different levels of transparency during the day and at night.



## RAPPONGI, TOKYO

Aurelio Clementi, Jun Aoki, and Eric Carlson designed Vuitton's Rappongi store (left), which opened in 2003 and features a main space animated by fiber-optic floor videos and the changing reflections of its metal skin.

## GINZA, TOKYO

The white marble terrazzo facade of Jun Aoki's 2004 store for Vuitton in Tokyo's Ginza district is embedded with translucent marble squares of various sizes that create a sparkle of lights and virtual windows at night.



## KOBE, JAPAN

Philippe Barthelemy and Sylvia Grino's 2002 design uses the classic LV Damier pattern to reference traditional Japanese timber latticework.



## OMOTESANDO, TOKYO

In 2002, Jun Aoki created a Vuitton store as an homage to the brand's origins as purveyor of high-end luggage, conceiving the facade as a collection of trunks of various sizes, proportions, and textures.