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Image: Eric Carlson

He's designed residential buildings and retail boutiques. He's fitted out car show rooms and restaurants. He's realised museums and plazas and worked on shopping malls and mega installations. For **Eric Carlson**, it seems anything is architecturally possible

“They're like children,” says Eric Carlson, the former director of architecture at Louis Vuitton, on the subject of his design projects. “It sounds a little cliché, I guess, but it's very personal for us and we're very much involved – from the building, the interior and the furniture.”

If you're into fashion then chances are you've walked into one of Carlson's stores: Louis Vuitton's flagship on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, the neighbouring Céline in Avenue Montaigne, Tag Heuer in London or the Longchamp flagship along New York's Madison Avenue. And while Carlson's brood stretches beyond said four stores, perhaps it is Louis Vuitton's four-level 20,000-square-foot shopping space, which opened to much fanfare in 2004, which he is most revered for. “It was a learning experience for everybody – for me especially in terms of understanding how luxury works, and how the corporate French luxury world works, and I think very much so for the brand and the other brands that followed,” says Carlson, who co-founded the Louis Vuitton Architecture Department in 1997 before setting up his architecture studio, Carbondale, in Paris in 2004. “Architecture became a way to brag and give people an experience. Spaces were getting bigger, product lines were getting bigger and architecture, spatially (stairs,



Image: Louis Vuitton, Champs-Élysées

double volumes and external façades), became manners to express the brand and tools for communication.”

The decade that followed saw Carlson emerge as the pied piper of retail architecture, with luxury brands trailing the French maison and its starchitect. Carlson-designed stores popped up in Dubai (Paspaley), Tokyo (Tiffany) Germany (Escada), Shanghai (H.Stern) and Hong Kong (Longchamp), with pending projects as far away as Brazil. “There was a wave that added credibility to this retail world which had previously been ‘hands off, that's dirty, that's commercial’,” says Carlson. “But now it's a whole new realm that architects are hungry for. There was a lot of development and growth for me in that situation because we were building enormous amounts of projects, highly refined to [a client's] particular location.” And it is this “customization” that runs throughout Carlson's projects, be it personalised art murals (Longchamp on New Bond Street) or reinterpretations of a Parisian home (Louis Vuitton's Paris flagship).

“We go through a very complex research phase – and that phase is at least as long as the conceptual design phase, around five months – where we talk to everybody involved in the project. Whether it's a house, office or store, we talk to everybody from the president to the sales staff. It's about knowing everything and being informed, which has two dimensions to it: one is to be knowledgeable about it so that a design is responding to these nuances and complexities; the second dimension is that people, when you go through a design process, they need to feel part of it as they take ownership of these projects.”

The father-of-two is quick to point out that he's not limited to retail. “We've done almost everything,” he says of his previous projects. In Switzerland there's the Carlson-designed TAG Heuer 360 museum; in Spain the Plaza Ecija; in Tokyo the Celux club; and, returning to Paris for a moment, the glistening BMW showroom along Avenue George V. “I don't really discriminate. I'm more excited about the client who is interested in a project than I am typology.”

When it comes to business, Carlson is not interested in competing for contracts (“The superficialness of a competition will never really provide a really pertinent solution to this complex animal”); he doesn't really take briefs (“People latch on to one thing and you have to not latch on to one thing but many things and somehow coalesce them into one singular powerful solution with multi-facets”); and he loves difficult clients (“Because they have something to say”). Too, he's quick to compliment the “grey matter” holed up in the Carbondale HQ (“We have lots of respectful grey matter and brains to get ideas, generate thoughts, and to leave no stone unturned”); he believes wholly in the importance of the client (“I'm kind of like an architectural psychoanalyst of sorts without being presumptuous about anything other than trying to



Image: Longchamp, Hong Kong

get the right spatial solution for the client”); and he's nervous for architects who have delegated design and installation responsibilities to third parties (“By not taking on interiors and design, by abandoning these things, architects have been relegated to doing shells”).

What are his thoughts on design trends? Does a trend dictate a project? “I hate design trends. People want to know what's next because they want to get in there early and make money. It's titillating. We don't deal in trends, we create designs that people will follow; and our designs will become trends that people follow.”

Does he have a signature style? “Please, if I have a style then put me to death because it means I've basically started copying myself. The whole point is to do something original and not copy yourself or someone else. Why would you hire me if I was just going to copy someone else?”

As we approach 2015, what next for this American in Paris? “I would like to do something in a more landscaped context. We've done a lot of work that is urban and I would like to do something more in a resort setting. And airports – I would like to do a first class lounge.” In the near future, however, it is the renovation of a luxury shopping centre in São Paulo, JK Iguatemi, that has his full attention. “For the luxury shopping centre we created pockets of luxury within the public areas by designing islands domesticity in scale and ambiance,” says Carlson. “In Brazil there are no Avenue Montaignes so because of the weather and the crime everything happens internally. Shopping centres are an oasis in many ways – you can socialise, eat and shop. It's essentially a neighbourhood. It's a lifestyle.”

A lifestyle São Paulo is sure to embrace.



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Image: Louis Vuitton, Champs-Élysées