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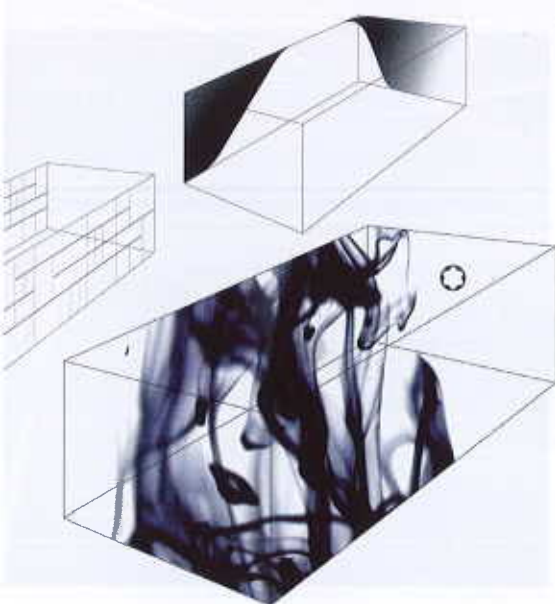
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blanc, Hamburg / Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance



pen maker Montblanc has just opened its latest store, its European flagship, in Hamburg, the company's hometown. Designer Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance had the challenge of translating the brand's detailing and narrative into its latest retail environment, ready for a roll-out through its other stores. *Johnny Tucker reports*



5 steps involved in just the making of a nib of a Montblanc pen — so how do you translate that kind of detail and precision into a retail environment?

With designer Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance, the challenge was to play with some broad brush strokes, or to imitate some broad pen strokes. Sweeping glossy, lacquered panels — 'the gesture' — delineating element of the brand's new European flagship store in Hamburg.

One may question why the flagship has opened in Germany, or even why Germany at all. Despite its rich industrial heritage, and Mont Blanc itself was born in the Alps between France and Italy (Montblanc's brand is actually German. What's more, Hamburg is the hometown, with the factory just outside the second-largest city in Germany.

Founded in 1906 as the **Simplo Filler Pen company**, Montblanc wanted to make the best pens they could. The Montblanc name came along three years later, and the snow-cap logo was trademarked in 1925. The name was chosen to identify with the highest peak. Since then Montblanc has become a worldwide brand, now owned by Meisterstück (which also owns Cartier) and has some 100 franchises around the world.

Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance, whose work ranges from restaurant interiors, through furniture design, such as Bernhardt and Tacchini, to architecture, has been working with Montblanc for some time. He has recently completed a number

of projects moving outwards from pens and now has nine distinct, but related, luxury product categories, which also have to come together in the retail environment, while maintaining their individuality. Continuing the broader 'pen strokes' analogy, the lacquer panels play off against white 'paper' walls. Duchaufour-Lawrance has also introduced a smoky American walnut to soften the black and white palette and play on the luxury theme. With the bespoke furniture he has created, which has an assured lightness of touch, oozing quality, he has contrasted the wood with satin brass detailing for edging and drawer handles, while the surfaces are a charcoal-grey linoleum. 'I used the wood to help create a connection with home to promote the customer's personal relationship with the brand,' explains Duchaufour-Lawrance. 'The wood is also about the craftsmanship. It's a luxury wood without being too much. The brass is also a luxury reference without being too overt.'

So essentially the retail concept is about the large, if subtle, brand statements, then the fine detail, plus the organisation of the product into very specific areas. The project has also been about distilling this environment, in order to turn it into that kit of parts that can be rolled out across a portfolio of retail environments that vary from the big-city stores, down to very tight footprints.

Retail merchandising rules have been developed, such as you must enter through watches, and leather goods must always be visible from the entrance or through a window. It's all made for an extremely complicated product and for retail footprints that

take in such factors as how you go about segregating types of customer — a comfortable distance between those coming in for a £10 pen refill and others looking to browse at watches, which start at around a grand and shoot up to some eye-wateringly expensive models. There's also the psychology of elements, such as stool versus seat. A long, expensive purchase requires a relaxing comfortable seat, yet apparently people who haven't committed feel more comfortable on a stool — less pressurised.

In the next couple of months, Duchaufour-Lawrance will be handing over the design guidelines and his legacy for the roll-out, that will be applied at a rate of around 60 stores a year. He explains the essence of what he has done: 'I wanted to talk about the ink and the handwriting and the snowcap — which is such a strong symbol. That's why I wanted to create "the gesture" in the environment. The essentials are that we always need "the gesture" and a balance between the white and black, because I don't want to have black stores. The balance is due to the categories normally: for instance in watches we have the black resin, with leather goods it's white and wood. We usually try to open the stores with the black gesture on the left with that finishing just behind the counter. The ink appears on a screen at the entrance, which is the first time Montblanc has done something like this without it having an advertisement on it.'

In conclusion, the new concept is described by Montblanc thus: 'The luxury Maison expresses its core values in a new immersive retail experience embracing the European craftsmanship, heritage