

## new icons: universal design studio

text: rosena robertson

When it comes to designing cutting-edge retail interiors, no one does it quite like Britain's Universal Design Studio. Best known for fitting out Stella McCartney's London, New York and Los Angeles boutiques, Universal has also put its stamp on Korea's Lotte department store and the iconic Liberty of London.

Universal Design Studio was established in 2001 by Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby, of award-winning British design company BarberOsgerby, as a conscious attempt to create a clear division between their furniture and products work and their interiors and architecture commissions. "What they do tends to be much more of an artisan process, whereas architecture has historically always been about compromise," explains the third co-director of Universal, Jonathan Clarke. "I think it was quite important to them to separate out the two types of work they were getting into the work that could be really about them, and work which could be interesting but not really about them."

Clarke has been with Universal since its early days, and now that both Barber and Osgerby have gone back to spending the bulk of their time at BarberOsgerby, the responsibility for growing and developing Universal lies primarily with him.

Both businesses maintain a clear interest in similar things – that is, a strong focus on materials, details and pattern, and what Clarke calls a "crafted" rather than a mass market approach. "We're very much about testing materials which is very much what BarberOsgerby are about as well," he says.

The Stella McCartney commission provided the perfect outlet for Universal's design philosophy. The interiors of the New York, London and Los Angeles stores were originally meant to be almost identical, but the particular idiosyncrasies of each building meant that Universal had to tackle each project differently.

The New York boutique, located in the Meatpacking District, was conceived as a 'break from the city' – a place of calm, rest and quiet. "It was also about taking a fairly big store and giving it quite a light-handed touch," says Clarke.

The use of screens gives the store a simultaneously expansive and intimate feel. Light bounces down on the south facing side, and a water pool gives a sense of movement to the ceiling. "Then there's the motif [on the walls] that BarberOsgerby designed, which is a pattern that can either be a floral pattern or a hexagonal structure or interlocking circles. It reads in lots of different ways," says Clarke.

The setting for McCartney's London store was a listed Georgian townhouse that hadn't been touched since 1950. Universal had to work in close conjunction with English Heritage to make sure that they kept elements of the original Georgian design in tact.

"We had the idea of taking off a lump of the building at the back and putting in a simple glass box," explains Clarke. "The theme with the stores was originally 'abstracted nature'; we tried very hard to find a link in the concept. So we took the garden and basically removed a lot of the walls and all the old air conditioning, then encapsulated the garden in glass, so the store got beneficial use of the garden but it felt slightly abstracted."

The ground floor and the shop window are elongated, and the original skylight has been replaced with a huge new one that has the beautiful effect of framing a piece of the London sky. The link with the other stores is in the treatment of materials. "The tile reoccurs here, but it's a frost proof external version so it's slightly different," says Clarke. "The marquetry is all timber and mother of pearl inlay ... [it also] appears in the interior in New York but only in one of the fitting rooms."



Lotte department store, Korea



The LA store is housed in one of the only historic buildings in the city; a tiny, ivy-covered house on the corner of Beverly and Robertson. "We spent most of the money air conditioning it and putting a roof on it as it had really had it," says Clarke. "There's a great little English garden at the back. There's a similar treatment of materials but in a very subdued way."

It's not all about Stella, though. Universal have done five separate projects for the Lotte department store in Seoul, Korea, a family-run business that entrusted Universal with injecting some personality into its store layouts. Universal's first project for Lotte was a section of the store known as Eliden that showcases contemporary European designers in a multi-shop, curated environment.

"We created a tile and ceramic panel to deliver a pattern across the back wall, which is 50 metres long and against which product can be placed quite simply and quite beautifully," explains Clarke. "Then there are three compartments for which we developed another pattern that repeats itself with three different scales. In one place it's very fine and it's a line of glass, in another it's fretwork, in another place it's projecting fabric ... so there's this motif that starts repeating itself."

Unlike with Lotte, who gave Universal free rein to do whatever they liked, the Liberty of London project required them to subsume themselves to a degree. "The things about us are so played down you'll never even notice them," says Clarke.

For Liberty, Universal designed beautifully lit handbag stands featuring simple backing colours, and mirrored display plinths that create a 'vanishing floor' effect. A scarf unit, featuring a 5.8 metre long piece of glass, references the haberdashery stores of old. "It's really quite straightforward but when you look at it carefully it's really beautifully put together," says Clarke.

The project that Clarke says he is most proud of is the New York boutique for Scottish-born lingerie designer Catriona McKechnie. The brief was to design an interior that was neither provocative nor gaudy and that would make women feel comfortable.

Universal experimented with hard materials for the store. A side and back wall is made up of individually folded aluminium fins that are spray painted a slightly different shade of grey. The look is feathery and light, but on closer inspection the fins are as hard as the side of a battleship. The changing and fitting areas are clean and crisp, but also feminine. Opaque glass with layers of colour behind it has been used on one wall, and the display trays feature beautiful stitching and leather work.

Universal have 'taken it outside' with their most recent retail project, the exterior of H&M's Los Angeles store. The building is clad in folded aluminium, and it represents the first stage of the chain's new branding concept. "They asked us to develop something that was almost going to become iconic for them," says Clarke. "They wanted something that started to talk about them; something that would be recognised before the big red 'H&M'."

<http://www.universaldesignstudio.com/>



top: Stella McCartney, New York  
bottom: Catriona McKechnie, New York