

## MEET THE DESIGNER

# POINT DESIGN: RETAIL DEFINED BROADLY

Point Design is a firm that designs retail space across the globe, and across the entire spectrum of the retail world. They have recent and successful projects in North America, Latin America and Asia. They create environments for traditional retail stores of all shapes, sizes and price points as well as banks and the complex systems of malls. With offices in New York City, Buenos Aires and Manila, Point Design is truly an international firm.

Much of the firm's philosophy and approach is evident in the design and attitude of its newest office in Buenos Aires. President Diego Garay explains, "The design of our office in Buenos Aires reflects Point Design's attitude—hard working but laid-back, intellectual but quirky, serious but fun. This is how we think and work as a design team. We believe that being laid-back at times is important to being creative. We are young, casual, and playful but we maintain intelligence and professionalism in our work and in how we relate with one another. This kind of attitude also keeps our design output smart, effective, fresh, fun, and sensual in terms of its look and feel."

From the very beginning the collective experience of Point Design's founders amounted to years of experience in retail design—most of it gained from their years working in WalkerGroup. Diego served as the Creative Director and Regional Vice President at WalkerGroup/CNI for more than a decade, while Point Design's managing director Allen Felsenthal was managing director at WalkerGroup Pacific for nearly 20 years. Says Allen, "Diego and I have known each other for years. We grew up in WalkerGroup in the '80s and early '90s. Under Walker we worked on projects in South America, in the U.S., in Europe and in Asia. We gained a broad range of retail design knowledge. We'd like to think of Point Design as a small firm with big firm expertise."

After leaving Walker, Diego and Allen went their separate ways before being reacquainted in early 2000. "I've always liked Diego and liked working with him," says Allen. "I worked with him on projects in Hong Kong over the years so we're good friends. It was an easy relationship." Within this easy relationship the current creative dynamic of Point Design was born.



*Point Design's ongoing work with SM Department Store—designing new stores and remodeling existing ones—has helped position the retail giant as a leader in both the Philippine and Asian markets. This 30,000-square-meter SM Cubao Department Store was remodeled to follow the more sophisticated design direction created for their flagship Ortigas store. SM Store in Cubao engages customers with its unusual use of colors, patterns, materials and lighting, and offers a flexible circulation plan that can adapt to the the Store's changing needs.*



*Point Design's newest office in Buenos Aires reflects the philosophy of the firm—playful and casual; quirky and intellectual. Located in one of the city's trendiest neighborhoods, the spacious, light-filled loft has great views of the surrounding area and simple, clean lines. The open plan invites everyone to move freely around the space and offers the flexibility and room to accommodate set ups for clients and sit-down meals for the team. It has become the perfect backdrop for the team's daily interactions. Complementing the simple furnishings, and adding some creative attitude, are several novelty items and decorations. There is a red BMW toy car, a vinyl Astroboy figure, and an iconic Keith Haring barking dog graphic.*

Although Point Design is a New York based firm, it's mainly an Argentinean company with 90 percent of its designers, including Diego and principal architect Leandro Artigala—who joined the firm in 2000 and became principal in 2005—being Argentines.

It's natural to look to these specialist in retail design for answers to the elusive and difficult questions faced by to-day's retailers: what makes a successful retail design; what turns casual shoppers into loyal customers. "Retail design is as complicated as, if not more complicated than, the other design disciplines," says Diego. "There's a tremendous amount of information that you need to digest in order to come up with an environment that makes the merchandise look good, the shopping experience easy and fun for customers, and the store a shopping destination that keeps its appeal for several years."

Leandro adds, "At this time when everything is fast-paced and 'instant,' convenience is very important. The same thing applies in retail environments. While several factors come into play in reference to winning the loyalty of customers, comfort and convenience are two of the most basic, yet important, characteristics that a retail environment should have. Making your customers feel frustrated is the fastest way to lose one! Therefore a store environment should be able to give its customers what they want—let them find what they want fast; allow them to find their way

around the store or mall with great ease; and make them feel comfortable and feel good about themselves through the overall look aesthetics of the setting." Far easier said than done. How does Point Design consistently design stores that fulfill those needs?

Key to their success is problem solving and paying attention to the technical and practical issues and the client's needs from the very start of the project. "We try to be very good listeners," says Diego. "And, we try to read between the lines because not all clients are able to verbalize what they want. In design language, a simple comment may be equivalent to a ton of information. They only tell you that they like this store, or they feel comfortable in that store, but it already gives you an idea on what to do with the colors and finishes, the materials, the lighting."

Leandro adds, "Not all clients are created equal—some clients already know what they want, others need to see options to be able to decide what they really want. It is also important to ask the right questions. And that's what we do, especially at the start of every project. We ask questions to get the client talking. And, since design is a visual exercise, we also communicate through visual tools: drawings, photos, colors, etc. Clients may not be able to explain what they want but they can certainly tell you what they like, or do not like, when they see it."

After the process of evaluating and identifying the client's needs is completed, the design solutions begin to take shape. "Being so thorough at the start of a project ultimately spares the client from the painful experience of constant revisions," says Diego. "First, we focus on solving technical and practical problems, addressing how to turn a space into a truly effective selling machine. Next we can go on to consider aesthetics. When we design a store, it is all about creating a platform for the merchandise to sell. If you have a gorgeous store but it doesn't sell, you've failed your mission."

The organization of the firm contributes to its ability to fulfil the needs of its clients. Instead of segmenting its workforce into specialized compartments, everyone in the firm is capable, and understands, the various elements relating to the design of a store, mall or bank. Each employee does, however, have their strengths. "As much as possible, the work assigned to each designer is consistent with what he or she is best at. That system allows us to work as a team where each member brings something to the table," says Leandro.

One of the advantages of Point Design's size, and what makes them unique, is the principals' willingness to allow the designers to present to the clients. "You don't learn unless you stand in front of a client," says Allen. "What's good about that is that the client gets to know everyone. However, at the end of the day, the client knows who spearheads all of this. Nothing passes through without Diego or Leandro viewing it and making comments."

Point Design's thorough understanding of retail extends to all sectors of the retailing world, and includes specialty stores, department stores, supermarkets, malls, banks, identity, and all price points from high to low. The firm's experience in one segment adds to its understanding and sophistication in all areas of the industry. Allen explains, "Whether it's a mall, a department store, a shop, a supermarket, or a bank, they all have one thing in common—they sell products."

Therefore, as designers, our goal is to make it easier for the customers to like the merchandise, to find the products that they are looking for, and to finally select and purchase." Leandro continues the thought, "In order to achieve this, you need to know who the customers are. That way, the design will be able to speak in the language that the customers will be able to understand. This formula applies to a mall, a store, a supermarket, and a bank. These four are very similar to each other, the main difference would be the products they sell, and the format and size of its operation."

With offices on three continents, Point Design also has extensive experience in diverse locales. But even across wide spread markets, Allen finds commonalities. "Every store is designed to create a balance between efficiency and aesthetics to satisfy the different shopping styles of its customers. Some customers, especially men, tend to shop by way of finding what they need as fast as possible, while others, particularly women, shop through their senses. This is consistent across different cultural backgrounds and markets. Depending on the customers' experience, they'll come back and will keep coming back."

And so, the subject circles back to the challenges of keeping customers coming back, of building loyalty and creating a future for retailing. "Online shopping has now become an integral part of retail," says Leandro. "But I don't think it will totally replace the physical store. The challenge now, however, is to make the customer's trip to the store pleasant and worthwhile. Aside from giving them an exciting shopping experience, the retail environment must be able to maximize their time, allowing them to shop fast if they want to, or to shop slow, and enjoy every moment spent inside the store."

Creating environments that fulfill the diverse needs of shoppers, and keep them coming back, is truly Point Design's specialty.



*Point Design's concept for a new high-end mall in Jinan City, China proves that good design doesn't always have to be expensive. The 21,000 square meter shopping center aimed to achieve a clean, sophisticated retail environment while still being mindful of the project's conservative budget by exploring different materials and finishes, and combining them with fun, chic graphics.*



Point Design's international experience is invaluable to retailers looking to expand into new markets. The Argentinean brand, Etiqueta Negra, which means "black label," is just such a retailer. Recently they opened a flagship store in the ultra-trendy Soho section of New York City. The designers successfully juxtaposed the brand's sexy, smart and stylish identity with the look and feel of the century-old building the store would be occupying.

"Etiqueta Negra is known for its modern take on masculine, equestrian and sporting style," says Leandro. "In Argentina, Etiqueta Negra's stores have a very formal, polished character. For their flagship store in New York however, the store interiors took a different direction with a more vintage industrial look. The design was inspired by classic cars—the favourite things of many men.

The founder of the brand, Federico Alvarez Castillo, is very passionate about automobiles and an avid car collector. This appreciation for beautiful cars has played a central role in the design and aesthetic of Etiqueta Negra as a brand from its inception. It was only appropriate to integrate the vehicles into the design of the NYC store."

In addition to the cars, the store is decorated with vintage leather luggage, racing helmets, black and white photography and handmade riding boots set against a background of dark wood panelling, iron beams and industrial lighting. The resulting store is well-balanced in terms of its iconic elements and merchandising.



*Point Design takes on projects large and small, including the complex world of shopping centers. SM Lanang Mall in Lanang, Davao in the Philippines was conceived as the first upscale shopping mall in the province of Davao, in the southern part of the Philippines.*

*The master plan for the mall, done by another consultant, featured a huge atrium in the middle of the mall. Although the client wanted to maintain the large size of the space to be able to accommodate large events, Point Design felt that it was necessary to add some “monumental” features in the atrium to provide a visual break in the central void. Leandro devised some “big ideas” to add to the atrium that would be proportional to the space.*

*One of these ideas is the “slab café”—a cantilevered coffee shop that seems to float in the atrium. Aside from becoming a design attraction, the slab café is a premium leasable space for the client. Another of Leandro’s ideas is the sculptural stairs located at both ends of the atrium. The mall seating, the orange zigzag benches, was also supersized to follow the proportion of the atrium.*

*The people of the region love color. Therefore, bright shades of red and orange are incorporated into the flooring, ceiling and louvers at the fountain court. To balance the bright colors and make the palette look more modern, whites and grays are used as a base.*



Good design, is good design, regardless of the price point. Moscow's TSUM department store— and the design Point Design created for the retailer—have become well known in the retailing world, and are a good example of Point Design's ability to build upon its success. "Our work in TSUM allowed us to showcase what we can do and it has led to other opportunities to work with other retailers. One of which is SM Department Store," explains Leandro.

Diego adds, "Teresita Sy-Coson, head of SM Retail, had seen our work in TSUM and she liked the simplicity of it. She thought that the fixturing was beautiful. However, she emphasized that SM is nowhere near TSUM. SM doesn't sell Prada. She got inspired with the elements of the design, mostly with its simplicity and the efficiency of the design."

Today, Point Design works extensively with SM, designing the company's department stores, supermarkets and specialty stores.



When Point Design first became involved with Centro Department Store it was a newly-established store that was hoping to become a popular shopping destination among young Indonesian, but it was missing a brand identity that would make it truly effective with its target market. For its fourth store, Centro sought the expertise of Point Design to update its brand image by refreshing the logo and creating an exciting retail environment that would be cool, modern and fashionable.

In addition to adding color and textural contrasts to avoid monotony, Point Design chose to commission a young artist, Karin Shammah, to develop an art concept for the entire store.

Asked why this decision was made, Leandro answered, "When we came into the picture, Centro's main issue as a new department store was to be able to stand out and get noticed, attract their young B+ target market, and to attract the better brands that they want. We intended to use graphics not only to 'decorate' the store interiors, but also as a tool to address all three design goals. We figured that compared to digital graphics, hand-drawn graphics are more spontaneous, young, fresh, unique, inspiring, and more sophisticated, the same characteristics that we wanted to create for the store in order to achieve our design goals."



*In keeping with their philosophy that a bank is as much as retail space as a boutique, Point Design approaches the design of banks from the users', or customers', point of view. The goal is to have the customer understand exactly the sort of product or service available. Says Leandro, "Compared to retail banking, BDO Private Bank and Platinum Signature cater to a different set of customers: the wealthy and the famous who wants to have a different calibre of customer service. These two banks provide customers with an extra special treatment." Diego adds, "Both banks were designed to become synonymous with upscale banking that includes traditional global banking services, private meeting rooms and executive lounges offering news, internet access, fine art and refreshments and personalized attention."*

*The interiors of BDO's premiere branch in Zuellig Tower and BDO Private Bank, both in Makati City, Philippines, are rich, elegant and inviting to their upscale banking customers. Impeccable service is the product - as it should be in any retail establishment - and that product is conveyed through the design.*



