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Keeping Luxury Above Water

DESIGN ELEVATES HIGH-END WATCHES IN VENETIAN FLOOD DISTRICT

by Gail Deibler Finke

FOR the new U-BOAT store in Venice's famed Piazza San Marco (St. Mark's Square), the project team faced all the usual design challenges for a luxury store... and then some!

The interior had to be able to accommodate seawater that can rise up to 60 cm (nearly 2 ft.) inside the store. Italo Fontana's precision watches had to be showcased in a space of medieval proportions—only 18 sq. meters (about 194 sq. ft.). All materials and fixtures needed to be transported to the store by boat. And in Italy, what might typically take 60 days from finished drawings to installation can stretch to 180 days for various reasons.

Brand-right, local flavor

The team met those challenges, creating a space that's both brand-consistent and localized. The store shares design sensibilities with the retailer's flagships in Florence, Milan, and Rome, with additional touches to make it uniquely Venetian, says designer Alessandro Luciani.

"Venice is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and it is unique," says Nicola Evoli, chief of international operations for fixture provider Grottrini. "It's not every day that such a prestigious project happens in a location and in a city where every single part of the wall, floor, ceiling, the square, the portico, has a history of hundreds of years and culture."

Istria d'Orsera, a stone used in Venice since the 13th century, sets the stage both inside and outside. It's practical, as well as iconic. "Corrosion is high due to the seawater, so for the outdoors we used inox (stainless) steel, marine wood, and Istria d'Orsera," Luciani explains. "Inside, the floor and lowest edges of the walls are covered by Istria stone, and the ceiling is Venetian plaster."

A special plaster mixed with powdered marble and burnished to a brilliant shine, Venetian plaster creates an iconic luxe look and withstands salt in the air. Complementing the stone and plaster is wall cladding repeated from the U-BOAT Florence store: red silk velvet and rosewood, a material included in the U-BOAT brand of finishes.



The U-BOAT watch store façade takes its visual cues from the historic San Marco building and St. Mark's Plaza. Istria stone, ubiquitous in Venice, is both iconic and practical: It has been used to withstand the frequent floods of seawater for more than 800 years.

Risk-minimizing collaboration

Luciani handled the overall design and production, handing off the fixture and furniture production to Macerata, Italy-based Grottrini, which also acted as general contractor. "It's a delicate task because of the quality required for luxury finishes, and the assembly and shipping included," he says. "Grottrini maintains and preserves its family tradition of seriousness, professionalism, and human relationships. They have a good technical team."

Grottrini's Evoli says the company enjoys collaborating with Luciani, whose inventiveness is coupled with technical expertise. "Alessandro is demanding," he says. "He is highly valued in the design community for his attention to details along with creativity and no space for compromises. Having a good understanding of technical feasibility and having our lab and our facilities available to his experiments is also rare in our industry."

The Grottrini team worked closely with him, to ensure that each piece brought into the tiny space would fit perfectly, Evoli says. The collaboration also helped the team anticipate the adaptations that would be needed for a location that was anything but standard.

Grottrini's previous work in Venice had familiarized the team to the logistical challenges of transporting all materials and furnishings by waterways, difficulties increased in this instance by the delicacy and fragility of glass, fine leather, and polished galvanized metal.

"There is always a big risk [handling such pieces], but in this case, everything went really well," Evoli says. "The painstaking work of evaluating all phases of work, done in the beginning, helped minimize the risks."

The company's dedication to teamwork and collaboration ensured that the on-site work realized the designer's intent as much as the pieces crafted from detailed drawings in the workshops, he says.

Weather-resistant luxury

To ensure that everything fit in the small irregular space, some pieces had to be built or customized on-site.

According to Grottrini, the main practical design challenge was creating suitably luxurious fixtures that could withstand occasional floods of saltwater. Suspended showcases covered in ponyskin kept the precious merchandise off the ground, and the stainless-steel construction of remaining furniture weathers maritime exposure. All pieces are raised at least 60 cm from the floor.

The only space in the store for consulting with sales associates, looking at and trying on the product, and completing the payment transaction is a custom table with stainless-steel legs. Evoli says watches are brought out on "wood and leather" trays that are as much temporary displays as they are containers; they're the only displays in the store not encased in glass.

The virtues displaying the watches required a special emphasis on lighting, Luciani says.

"The U-BOAT brand caters to an international clientele that wants an exclusive object with high technological and stylistic value,

FEATURED MEMBERS

U-BOAT | Piazza San Marco, Venice

Size: 194 sf

Completion: August 2015

Design: Alessandro Luciani Designer

Fixtures and General Contracting: Grottrini

Retailer: Italo Fontana

Photography: Francesco Giobbi

one with a "Made in Italy" design and culture," he says. LED lights and special dimension optics illuminate single details to showcase each watch. In addition to spotlighting the small product, the adjustable lighting turns the interior of the store into a lit jewel box, one that customers can walk inside.

Future plans

Italo Fontana opened the store in August with a statement affirming its commitment to Italy. "Italo Fontana's U-BOAT branded boutique in the heart of Venice opened in one of the most beautiful and

Luciano looks forward to working with Italo Fontana on future stores, some of which are planned for China, other parts of Europe, and the United States. "It's been a relationship of high esteem, friendship, and confidence," he says of the longtime collaboration.

"He is always in action, researching new and original things to propose. It's a stimulating relationship; every time, we try to change something."

renowned squares in the world, pushing forward the retail development of the Italian portfolio of stores," the retailer stated.

Gail Deibler Finke is a Cincinnati-based writer specializing in design topics.



Clockwise from upper left: In the historic San Marco building, shops have a small footprint, but a huge impact; with only one show window, storefronts are dwarfed by the architecture. The "X stone" used on the lower part of the store's façade continues inside, where it climbs partway up the walls. Rosewood, used as a branding element in U-BOAT stores, complements the opposing red velvet, matching its rich smoothness but not its softness. Glass cases are suspended from the walls, another concession to seawater that can lap or flood into the store.