

Mexico City's Iron Palace

El Palacio de Hierro's Polanco flagship is a celebration of culture and luxury.

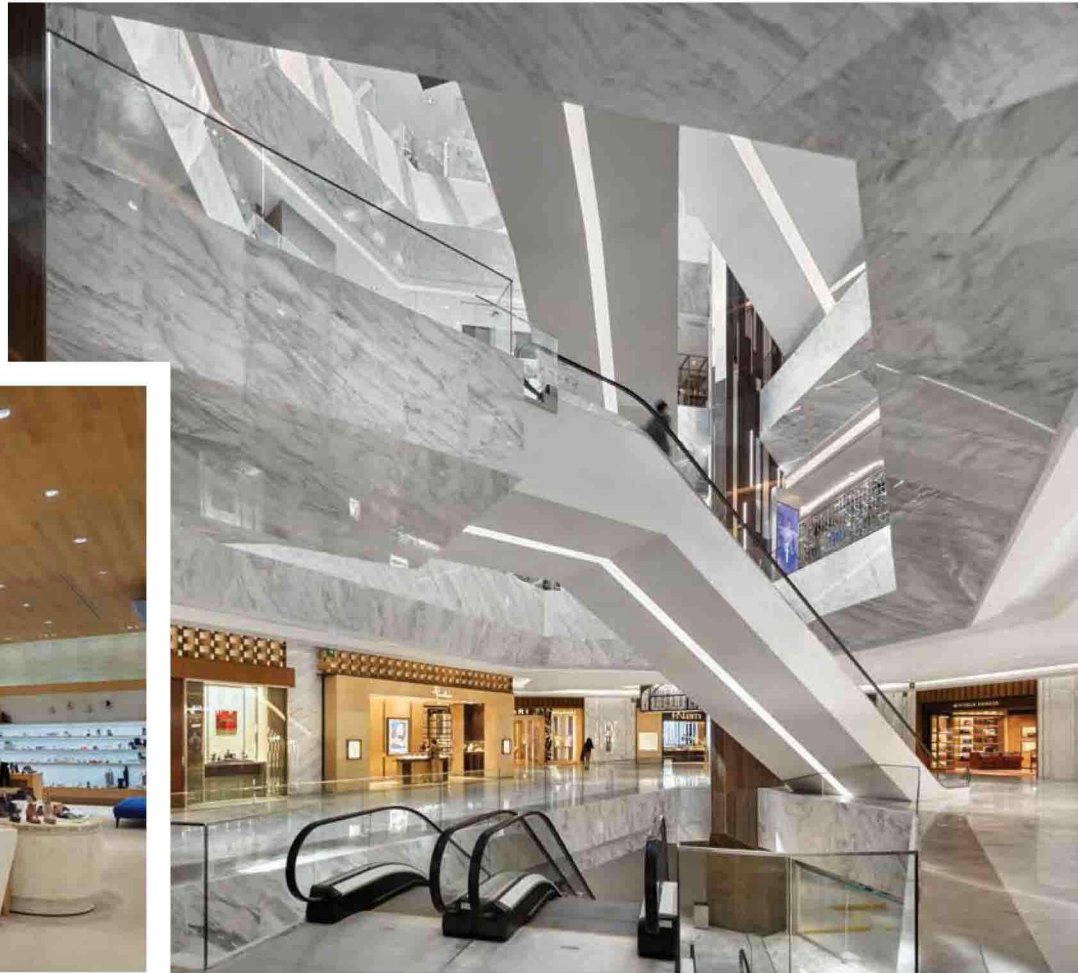
By Eric Feigenbaum, Editorial Advisor/New York Editor

A TRUE HERITAGE BRAND IN THE HEART OF MEXICO CITY, the storied department store reportedly got its name from the local denizens who asked while the location was being built, "What is this 'palacio de hierro' (iron palace)?" Constructed in the early 1890s, it was one of the first iron-framed buildings in Mexico. The original owners of the venerable establishment were French entrepreneurs who brought luxury goods from Europe into the country's capital city, and what followed was a 125-year legacy of luxury retail in Mexico City.

The project in the city's Polanco neighborhood was so expansive that the current owners partnered with Gensler (San Francisco) and TPG Architecture (New York), two design firms who had previously worked with the Mexican retailer, to design the 500,000-square-foot

colossus. The enormity of the project was the biggest challenge: How does one create consistency, interest and move traffic through such a large selling center? The solution was a nod to urban planning, with its concept built upon the tenets of effective city design, providing landmarks, portals and sections of neighborhoods.

Due to the scope of the project, the work was divided between the design firms by floor. TPG processed the ground and first floors, while Gensler developed the second and third. Mexico City itself, as well as the brand's longstanding history within the city, served as the aesthetic inspiration. Each section of the store has its own character. A "store-within-a-store" approach blurred format lines, capturing the energy of specialty stores and injecting them into a department store configuration.



Unifying its wide range of brands with a cohesive selection of materials, the department store carries a seamless look throughout that's unmistakably El Palacio.

The goal was to captivate the mobile, drive-to-store, family-focused customer who wants to enjoy an all-day shopping experience, so understanding the demographic was paramount. Developed in the 1920s, Polanco is an affluent, multicultural district. It is home to the highest-priced street in Latin America, Avenida Presidente Masaryk, considered by many the city's equivalent to New York's Fifth Avenue. The neighborhood's tree-lined avenues are grandiose with older, high-end Spanish-style homes alongside modern residential and commercial developments.

In homage to Mexico City, and as a mechanism for dealing with the enormity of the project, the decision was made to create a journey, breaking the space down to reflect elements of the city. "We wanted to get people to connect and orient themselves in this grand space," says Alec Zaballero, design principal at TPG. "Toward that end, we placed bread crumbs of enticement; references to recognizable Mexican monuments,"

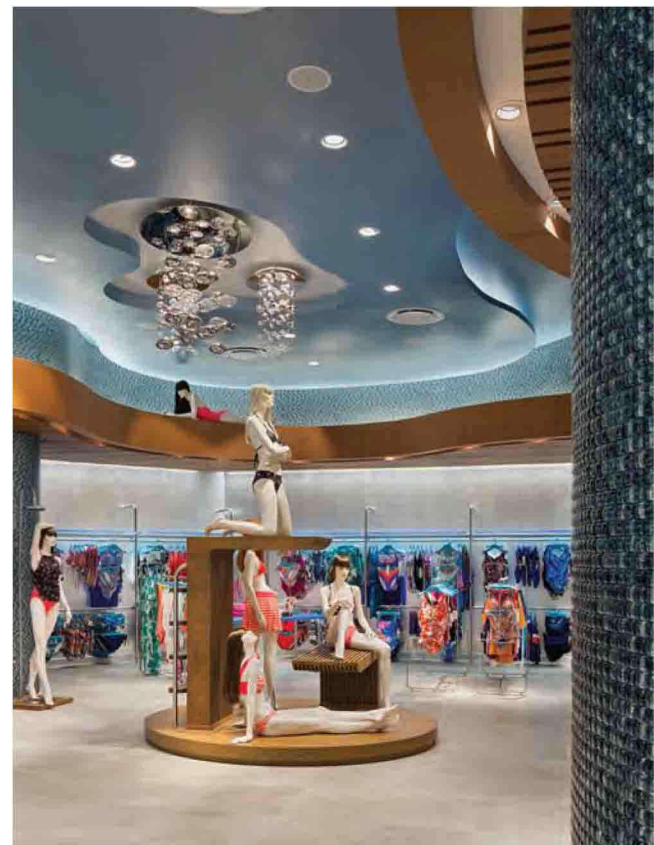
The ground floor, housing luxury shops, cosmetics, handbags, watches and jewelry, was inspired by La Reforma, the main avenue running the entire length of Mexico City. The first floor, inspired by Lomas de Chapultepec – the Beverly Hills of Mexico City, with

PROJECT SUPPLIERS

RETAILER
El Palacio de Hierro,
Mexico City

DESIGN AND
ARCHITECTURE
TPG Architecture,
New York
Gensler,
San Francisco

*For a full list of suppliers,
go to vmsd.com.*





Urban planning principles, including open “avenues” and roundabout-style circulation paths, were applied to help shoppers navigate the department store’s vast floor plan.



rolling hills and historic gardens – houses high-end women’s and children’s departments. The second floor was inspired by the Roma la Condesa neighborhood, a hub for creativity and culture, much like New York’s SoHo or Paris’ Latin Quarter. The men’s department lives in this area as a cool and hip guy’s club. The third (or top) level, housing the home goods offerings, was inspired by the suburb of Jardines de Pedregal.

The store’s tribute to Mexican culture begins on a great “avenue” or main aisle, whose first enticement along the way is a replica of the historic Puerta de los Leones. The journey continues as customers are led past other revered, replicated landmarks, such as Fuente de la Diana Cazadora and the iconic Columna

de la Independencia. Kate Russell, design director at Gensler, calls it “a modern interpretation of Mexico City’s existing urban landscape.”

A grand atrium serves as a hub of connectivity, allowing sunlight to filter through and highlight the sculptural nature of the space’s crisscrossing escalators. Clad in Carrera marble, the escalators fly by one another as they harness the simple magic of exciting vertical circulation.

“We wanted to celebrate Mexico’s proud heritage and architecture,” says Michael Gatti, principal, Gensler. “Palacio de Hierro is a pure Mexican brand, and the Polanco store is a stage for a luxury destination, much like Rodeo Drive, Paris or Rome.” ▴