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Shohei Shigematsu

In conversation with ANNA JOHNSON

Shohei Shigematsu, a trailblazing architect and partner at OMA, is renowned for transforming urban landscapes with bold, innovative designs. From prestigious cultural spaces like the New Museum expansion in New York to visionary retail projects, his work blends functionality with an artistic edge. Shigematsu's latest collaboration with Louis Vuitton brings this philosophy to select areas of the brand's flagship store on 57th Street, New York. Tasked with designing two key elements—a striking stacked trunk installation in the atrium and the elevator lobbies—he reimaged iconic Louis Vuitton trunks into dynamic architectural sculptures. His interventions mark the renewed store experience, in a display of harmony between architectural ingenuity and luxury craftsmanship. With striking geometric forms that capture the rhythm of a bustling city, Shigematsu created a series of towering sculptures for the store's 5-story atrium. Constructed using iconic Courrier Lozine 90 trunks, the installation introduces fashion and architecture as equals. In this interview, he shares the creative process behind the store's transformation and how architecture can elevate the shopping experience beyond mere transactions to meaningful encounters.

ANNA JOHNSON. Let's go back to the very beginning. Can you tell us about what initially drew you to architecture and how your background influenced your design philosophy?

SHOHEI SHIGEMATSU. I was born in Japan in the early 70s as a second baby boomer. At that point, Japan's economy was in decline, but the post-war generation of my parents believed Japan would continue to grow and modernize. I think architecture, for me, was a symbol of rebuilding, but also a possibility of a different experience of cities than the traditional sceneries of Japan. On the other hand, architecture is not just about designing and building. It's also about engaging with specific conditions or an issue, identity, person, and place, like how this Louis Vuitton project was conceived by engaging with observations we made from both the building and the brand. The process is quite rewarding because it's different or new every time.

A.J. That's really interesting. So, would you say that looking toward the future is a key part of your design process?

S.S. Architecture—the visual image of skyscrapers and science fiction cities—could be a symbol of the future, or at least it was for me

growing up. Of course, I understand now that it's not entirely true, but for me, it was a symbol of moving forward as a society. And I enjoyed witnessing and observing that kind of change and growth.

A.J. You're something of a cosmopolitan. You were born in Fukuoka and have lived in many places throughout your career. Do you think those diverse cultural experiences continue to influence your designs?

S.S. Definitely. But, there are two sides to that coin because I started working as an architect around 1998. It was a key moment in architecture with globalization coming into force in many domains. A lot of architects started to build, not within their own city or country, but everywhere. I think the internet really accelerated exchange and expansion across very different cultures. In Japan, it was difficult for the post-war generation, such as my parents, to be in an international environment because they were focused on rebuilding the country and their means were limited. Globalization made it possible for my generation, and in some ways, I was carrying the wish of my parents' generation to see, learn, and work with other cultures. I think that context impacted my attitude towards

different cultures and being more open to their values and ways of thinking. At the same time, globalization was also a difficult environment for me to be more immersed in, and connect with, a place or community at a more personal level that resonated with my own identity. In the early days of my career, for around 10 years, I worked on grand urban districts and giant buildings in China, Russia, and the Middle East. I started to feel a bit like a nomad. I didn't have a cultural anchor or a place where I could say "I live here and I know this place very well". I decided to move to New York in 2006— and as I found better grounding and made it my home, I realized creating new roots in the places and people that relate to my own identity is just as important as experiencing different cities and cultures.

A.J. I think that the internet really enables us to see the world through the eyes of the well-traveled without going anywhere and it is a real privilege. Does that feeling of being without roots come through in your designs?

S.S. I'm a Japanese architect, but my background isn't something that I consciously think of when designing. One might say there

is a “Japaneseness” that comes through in some of my projects, but it’s not an intentional style or narrative. I think there is a power of specificity in architecture. I enjoy the process of designing from specific conditions or trying to contribute different expressions or narratives for each design. If you have a different client, climate, identity, site, and typology, each building will be different, reflecting more of those specific conditions and less of your personal style.

A.J. When Louis Vuitton approached you to design the sculptures for their New York store on 57th Street, what were your first thoughts about your vision for the space and can you share how different your earlier sketches are to the final product?

S.S. We always start with extensive research. We had access to Louis Vuitton archives in Paris and spent weeks there trying to understand the Maison’s identity from its history, traditions, and past efforts leading up to today. I think the key thing to note about Louis Vuitton is that its origins and evolution have always been rooted in innovation. Before Louis Vuitton, the typical trunk used to have a vaulted top. When the mode of travel shifted from ships and trains to automobiles, Louis Vuitton invented the flat-top trunk that could be stacked and transported more efficiently. It sounds so simple now, but at the time, it was a real innovation and that became the core DNA

of Louis Vuitton, but one that continued to evolve. Then, many other trunk makers started to copy this. In order to distinguish their trunks from other copycats, they invented their signature patterns. First was the red stripe, then the Damier, and then came the classic monograph we associate with the brand today, and the patterns continue to evolve. We wanted to maintain this sense of innovation as it’s a core part of the brand’s legacy. I was asked to design a new exhibition and rethink the communication of Louis Vuitton’s history. I thought we could playfully destabilize this core

part of their identity. From this idea, we conceived the Trunkscape, it’s a tunneling archway built out of trunks, using a core element of the Maison’s identity in a new expression. People are so used to trunks being stacked. The Trunkscape instantly communicates the strength, lightness, and stability of the trunk itself by using them as the building blocks of architectural structures.

A.J. What was the creative spark behind the tall, zigzag structure? Did its form draw inspiration from architectural principles, cultural references, or perhaps the dynamic energy of New York itself?

S.S. I was interested in creating an unknown scenery. We also looked at artist sculptures, like the work of Constantin Brâncuși, a sculptor who had these kinds of single modules extended toward the sky. It’s very simple but quite slender and surprising. The towers are like columns that are not imposing on the retail space. We framed the towers so that you don’t instantly see how tall the sculptures are until you get up

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close... and realize they reach all the way to the ceiling.

A.J. You’re a partner at OMA [Office for Metropolitan Architecture] based out of the New York office. OMA has worked with Prada in the past. What’s your take on this meeting of worlds between luxury fashion and architects?

S.S. What’s great about OMA and Prada’s collaboration is that it was one of the first moments a major fashion brand collaborated with an architectural firm. OMA was able to design a store, but also really collaborate as a creative counterpart where they designed fashion shows, sometimes even products, ad campaigns, or

events. It was much more than just a typical architect and client relationship. I try to approach projects with fashion brands collaboratively and holistically. It’s important to consider the diverse facets involved in creating the identity of a brand, but also understand the fashion industry from multiple vantage points. I was fortunate to design exhibitions for both brands and museums, collaborate with artists and create artworks of my own, and spend time researching the different cultural shifts in society. These experiences greatly influence how I approach work in fashion. A deeper collaboration really allows us to see the industry from different perspectives to understand it. The opportunity to work with Louis Vuitton on multiple projects, from exhibition to retail, confirms the importance of experimentation and fluidity across typologies.

A.J. What kind of emotion do you hope to elicit in the viewer when they approach the 90 Lozine trunks soaring 16 meters toward the ceiling—a striking interplay between craftsmanship and verticality?

S.S. We wanted to enhance the store and draw attention to the verticality of the space. The atrium itself is a focal point of the store that acts as a gathering space. We hoped this would naturally draw people up to the different levels of the store and see the sculptures from different vantage points. Fashion always has a sense of playfulness that

architecture doesn’t always get to achieve. We wanted to translate that energy into the architecture.

A.J. This project involved working with delicate and precious pieces, requiring both artistry and precision. Were there any unique challenges in handling these iconic trunks? How did you approach the logistics to ensure their secure and harmonious arrangement, balancing stability with visual impact?

S.S. I’ll tell you a secret. There’s a structure penetrating through the center of each.

A.J. Was this your idea from the beginning?
S.S. We looked at a variety of different towers, including cylindrical structures where you can enter and look. We realised

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All Clothing by LOUIS VUITTON Men's

they would be too imposing in size and disconnect the central space and people from the rest of the store. Another idea was to create the towers entirely out of metallic trunks to reflect the activity of the store surrounding it. In the end, we thought it was nicer to show the diversity of the trunks and Louis Vuitton materials.

A.J. Close to the heart of many luxury fashion brands is handmade craftsmanship. How do you ensure that this ethos comes through in architectural design?

S.S. Although the trunks used for the installation are replicas, each piece was fabricated to spec at the factory in Asnières. It’s where the brand was born, and craftsmen continue to create the trunks today. It was quite impressive to see the entire process.

A.J. It’s fascinating that you had the opportunity to visit the factory and witness the craftsmanship firsthand. How did experiencing the making process up close influence your design approach for the store?

S.S. It’s essential when you really want to understand a brand as a multi-faceted entity. There’s so much value in learning about the brand through conversations with the different specialists involved, from archivists to craftsmen to sales staff.

A.J. How did your collaboration and interest in Louis Vuitton as a brand evolve?

S.S. I always enjoy going to fashion shows, both men’s and women’s, to help me understand their current philosophy. It helps me marry their archival innovation with their modern

image. I like the way they use the show, looks and exhibition as forms of communication, and I always admire the diversity of their approaches. We’re involved in several different projects with Louis Vuitton all over the world. We have an overarching relationship with the brand. Designing not just a one-off spectacle but multiple projects allows our approach to evolve with our deeper understanding of their history and contemporary contexts.

A.J. Our issue theme is discovery—what we’ve found and uncovered. Could you tell me what you’ve found recently?

S.S. I would love to say I have found the love of my life.

A.J. Oh, how nice!

S.S. But... [laughs] I didn’t.