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Interview: Callin Fortis

(Birmingham) - An interview with Callin Fortis, founder of US-based Bigtime Design, on his conceptual design for the new £5 million Gatecrasher Birmingham.

Callin Fortis, founder of Bigtime Design, is an internationally acclaimed designer famed for big nightclub projects that impress even the A-list celebrities. Known for designing and branding the award-winning series of Crobar nightclubs in the US, Cal has now cast his conceptual creativity towards the new Gatecrasher Birmingham. He explains why this “modern day Coliseum” is amongst his best projects to date and defines the notion of “the sociology of good design”.



Could you explain the concept for the Gatecrasher project?

I see Gatecrasher Birmingham as a modern-day Coliseum of sorts, with a Duomo level of drama matched with the sex appeal and sizzle of the Palladium. I am a big fan of Roman architecture. In terms of the way the Romans were able to organise masses of people for events, and have people be manipulated over and through space, the Coliseum is brilliant. The Gatecrasher concept is somewhere between that and the notion of club design being akin to a rollercoaster, where people are taken on a ride.



What were your first impressions of the Birmingham site?

It was overwhelming. There are very few naturally palatial spaces in the world and that was certainly one of them. It was a little daunting at first, particularly because it had a nature theme in its prior incarnation as The Works. So when I initially looked at it, it was a tad overwhelming – I’m not used to seeing spaces that are so large, overwhelming and themed. But it was just so dramatic and I was unbelievably impressed.

The Birmingham site is a truly amazing space. As a designer who in the past has been given the reins to making mega-space manageable, to receive the gift of this space, which is a clear span with very few columns, tremendous volume and ceiling height, it’s a designer’s dream. There are few spaces in the world that evoke an emotion simply through experienc-

ing their base architecture alone, but this is one of them. Typically when one thinks of space in emotional terms, rarely does one think of space that can house a premiere, world-class nightlife theatre. History tells us that classic places for entertainment and theatre are basically architectural remainders from our past.

How did the concept evolve during the planning process?

Do to the sheer size of the venue, which was somewhat daunting in the preliminary stage, we literally broke the site down graphically into little spaces colour-coded within the overall footprint. Someone in our studio printed a large-scale plan with all the areas toned specific colours. From there we began to name the spaces. Through the concept stage, which is really a storyboard done with words as opposed to lines on paper, a singular theme emerged. That of

the building itself being a terminal - a terminal as a metaphor for nightlife. A terminal that represents departure, arrival, meeting new people, experiencing new places. What became present was Gatecrasher: departure nightlife. As in life, good design is about the journey, it is about the experience and emotion one can evoke by involving the user in the experience through space. A modernist goal became omnipresent in the new Gatecrasher. If we can take the patron on a trip, a ride with destinations unknown yet to be explored, then we have succeeded in our design.

You've said Gatecrasher is among your best work to date, can you enlarge on that?

I am a big club, big space designer. Simply put, there are very few nightclub designers that can make sense out of large spaces and create intimate and exciting spaces that live and breath. Scale is something you feel. Manipulating scale is not something you learn in school, it is an instinct and an experience. I have created award-winning designs (Best Interior Design, Best Renovation) in several US cities (crobar New York, crobar Chicago and the Cameo Theatre in Miami).

Crobar NY was a crowning moment in terms of a complex space with a complex story. New York was recovering from a year of mourning after September 11th. We created a space and an experience that got New York back out, back to the dancefloor and back to social play where everyone was equal. Gay, straight, black or white. The dancefloor unites all people. This is the universal language that crosses all borders – no passport required. Though much more of a political message and a dissection of the human spirit, Gatecrasher Birmingham has all the fun, the play, the whimsy and certainly more sublime bells and whistles than, I would venture to say, any true nightclub in the world. The new Gatecrasher deserves to be a piece of nightlife evolution and an expansion of its past, which is regarded worldwide as one of the founders of true clubbing as a lifestyle. I am proud and honoured to have a part in the future of this world class brand with a respectful nod to its past.



You've talked before about the notion of "Sociology of good design"...

Especially in big nightclubs, designer often creates borders, walls and rooms that all tend to be homogenised. My philosophy is that that the nightclub is a place for everybody to be equal, white, black, straight, gay, male, female, high income, low income. On the dancefloor, you don't care if the person next to you makes 10 per cent of what you make, or if their clothes cost 10 times what yours did. It doesn't matter because it's the one place where everybody can mix. So I always try to take a more of a social approach to how I develop a space and keep the borders between the spaces very transparent.

Is there a common design DNA to the key international projects you've worked on – the consistent threads of design innovation or creativity?

Yes. What I try to do is manipulate space, especially in places that have so much volume. It's a trick that Steven Holl, one of my mentor architects, develop – the notion of taking standard details at human scale, and then multiplying them by 10 to make the user feel like they are participating in the event, as opposed to just looking at it. In all my music spaces, everything is human-scale times 10, like the disco mirrorball for example. You see it and think :it's a mirrorball. But then you go, Oh it's huge!

Architecture and design are distinct disciplines, how do you ensure they synergise in your projects?

If the architecture has integrity, then the design will be a natural progression from it. If the architecture is in place and, say, I were to be hit by a bus before I finished the design, the initial intention would mean that of the functionality of the place will be equally as good whoever finishes it. That's key. For example, Crobar Miami has those big Art-Deco fin structures around the dancefloor. I designed them in an off-white Art-Deco concrete style. However, once they were in place, if someone decided they should be painted in zebra stripes, the fins would still function the same way. It wouldn't have mattered.

Light and colour are key to your design aesthetic. How do you manage and coordinate them?

We know that when people are in the space, they want to want to be entertained by the environment, so the environment must provide entertainment. Elements of the design fuel each other. Nightclubs can be monochromatic and dingy, and one problem is that a lot for nightclub designer and architect under-light – they think darker is better. But light and dark are relative to one another, so if you have one area that's light next to another that's comparatively underlit, the second areas will still seem very secluded, and the people who don't want to be seen will still have a place to go. At the same time, the whole the club is providing a sense of drama.



What is your personal – rather than professional – experience of some of the clubs you have designed?

I find myself absorbed in the experience and we've had some classic moments. One special moment was when Puff Daddy discovered house music at Crobar Miami. He got on stage with Erick Morillo to play the saxophone. Erick was spinning a sexy house beat and Puffy was standing in front of him playing the sax, then two of Puffy's singers got up and started singing along to the music. To watch people in the space with their eyes glued to the ceiling, it doesn't get any better than that.

You made a big splash with the launch of The Cameo Theatre in Miami...

It was a big event, though not as big as the Crobar in New York. Miami is a village compared to New York. It's also kind of the "American Riviera", so that became the theme of the night. We had 3,000 people all dancing and standing on banquettes...

Your clubs attract lots of celebrities. What do you perceive as their expectations from a club? How does they differ from regular guests?

People typically think celebrities want to have their own space or room, and that they want to be shuffled in through the back door. In reality, they want to feel secure enough to have their own space, but they want to be in it – they want to feel connected.

Which celebrities have guested at Big Time Design's projects?

Regular customers of ours are Puffy, Adrian Brody, Boy George, George Clooney – he loved the place - Jennifer Lopez and Roberto Cavalli. And Harrison Ford. You'd never think Harrison for was a nightclub guy, but he loved Crobar and he would have a blast. And Matt Damon married one of the bartenders from Crobar Miami!

What is your ultimate aspiration for Gatecrasher Birmingham?

That the club is the rebranding of a concept that already has so much integrity. We always looked over the water to you guys for inspiration – fashion, music, nightlife, everything. To have an arena as big as this with someone like Simon driving it, that would be my biggest smile.

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