Digital Dior

Looking back to envision the future, Dior researches how its traditional aesthetic essence can be transformed into digitally rendered forms.

Words **Tracey Ingram**
Images **courtesy of Labvert**

Dior and Labvert

Research

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Thomas Mick, Dior's retail design director.

Until recently, Dior cosmetics and fragrances had a merchandising team but no real spatial-design department to speak of. That all changed when Thomas Mick – who studied design and holds a master's degree in business administration – took the reins as retail design director. Researching how Dior's iconic brand elements can be transformed into new digitally rendered forms and 'codes', Mick currently heads a team of young talented in-house designers and architects. Sometimes he calls on external partners such as Labvert, a Vienna-based studio, to help develop the architectural appearance of the brand. All involved are following Mick's directive and clear objective: 'To consistently evolve the design and aesthetics of the brand, Parfum Christian Dior; to be closer to couture; to take a laboratory-like approach to design by using new technologies; and to answer one fundamental question: If Christian Dior were alive now – with access to the latest technologies – what would *he* do?'

What changes did you instigate at Dior? Thomas Mick: I entered this job with the objective of doing something new. I had to begin by studying the history of the brand to understand what its founder had in mind. What was his overall vision, and which methods did he use? Retail design isn't just about slapping logos on things; they should come into play at the end. Above all else, retail design is about creating appealing, high-quality spaces – spaces with a quintessential atmosphere that is related to the brand and is able to tell the story of the brand. Retail design is about telling a story.
What did you learn by studying the brand's history? Design is based on a good idea that's continually developed – something that's maintained over years and improved upon without leaving behind its roots or its essence. I had the good fortune of being able to look back on a long tradition. In the 1940s, Christian Dior revolutionized how women dressed. While Coco Chanel was still putting women into suits, Dior invented the post-war New Look, which emphasized the female form with extravagant fabrics. That's the legacy of the brand.
 Dior was also one of the first fashion designers with a holistic approach, and he developed a specific language of forms – or 'codes' – that carried through to other brand elements. The shape of a dress, for example, could also be found in that of a fragrance bottle.
Did you also study the evolution of other brands? Definitely, and there are many strong examples of brands and products that have undergone this process. Let's take for example a Cartier watch that was designed in 1917. In 2010, nearly a century later, it looked almost the same. A few details were reworked without questioning the basics – its shape, its statement and its essence.
 Because this clear visual evolution is something we wanted to achieve, we set out to continuously and systematically reinterpret the codes to reveal something new.
**How did you go about it?** I wanted to stimulate an internal creative process within the new design department, and to work with more external talent. The exercise is about bringing the codes or motifs alive through contemporary means with an outlook to the future. Take *l'ovale*, for instance, or *le cannage*, a typical Dior motif. Make it start to move and bend and it will suggest new forms, shapes and environments. In the end, it starts to build a scaleless architectural concept based on a single element. The absence of scale is important, because the results can then be used for anything, from small product displays to sweeping façades.
Why use external designers? It sparks a dialogue that pushes the internal creative process. I wanted to develop conceptual studies with a partner, and I knew Labvert was up to the task. Often you'll find a studio of architects, product designers or artists, but seldom do you find all three in one. Labvert's multidisciplinary approach is important for retail design, which is about constant reinvention.
 Labvert has a modern approach to design and is capable of picturing future shapes and forms. The team also has the capacity for rapid production. They're perfect sparring partners, and our constant exchange produces great results.

Dior's Six Key Codes

Retail design director Thomas Mick dissected Christian Dior's work – obsessions, techniques and aesthetics – until the brand was left with a set of influences to guide it: a series of spatially relevant 'codes'. *Le moulures* is derived from the moulded panelling in Dior's first boutique. *Le noeud,* 'the bow', embellished both his fashions and his fragrance bottles. *Le cannage* was developed as a decorative motif and *le pied de poule* as a pattern on clothing. *L'ovale* is reminiscent of a medallion and symbolizes femininity; you can find it in clothing details, shop displays and products. While less architectural, *l'étoile*, or 'the star', was Dior's talisman and therefore holds symbolic significance.

Le noeud. Le moulures. L'étoile.

Le pied de poule. L'ovale. Le cannage.
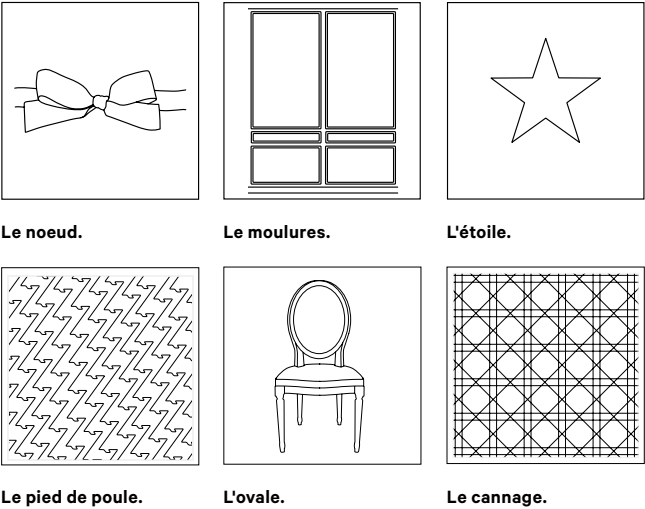
We couldn't achieve this type of work by sending out a brief. I'm not even sure what that brief would look like. Instead, I called the team with a precise idea: here are our codes, and I want your creative input and your technologies to transform them into something contemporary, futuristic and inspiring.
What do you do with the results? We're in the comfortable situation of having more ideas than we can currently translate into physical designs. While they're very conceptual, they can actually be constructed; they're not concepts that work only on a computer screen. We've already built some prototypes in specific materials – glass, for example – that can be used as details in boutiques, as display units or as façades. They can be anything we want. We pick a result, mould it using a certain material, and we have a product. Even better – we have an *exclusive* product.
 You can continue this exercise ad infinitum. New shapes will keep emerging. The design can always be reinterpreted and placed in a contemporary context. It's almost like we're staging a classic play in a modern way.
Why is retail space so important? In my opinion, a space sells more than a commercial ever will. It's one of the foundation stones of luxury retail. We must constantly reinvent ourselves without diluting our profile. This is easier when you can fall back on a solid basis.
**You don't think the future of retail is online?** Online business is important and growing, but a luxury brand like Dior, a *maison,* still needs a physical space, too, even when some customers shop online. If you enter a well-designed interior or stand in front of a sculpture – something built by man – it's so much more powerful than seeing it on a computer screen. It touches your feelings and your senses, evokes associations and becomes a memorable experience. People need a scale they can touch, especially for a product like fragrance. They need to smell it, to feel the bottle. It transports them to another world.
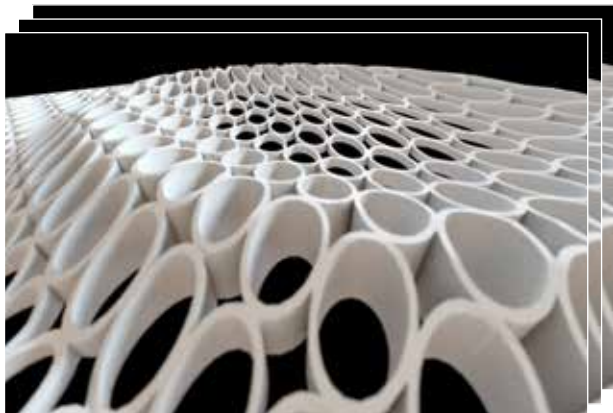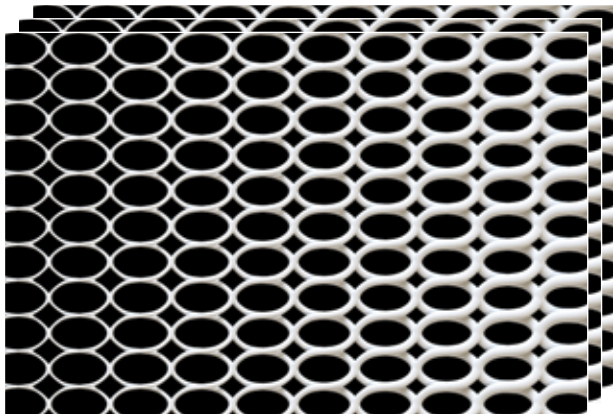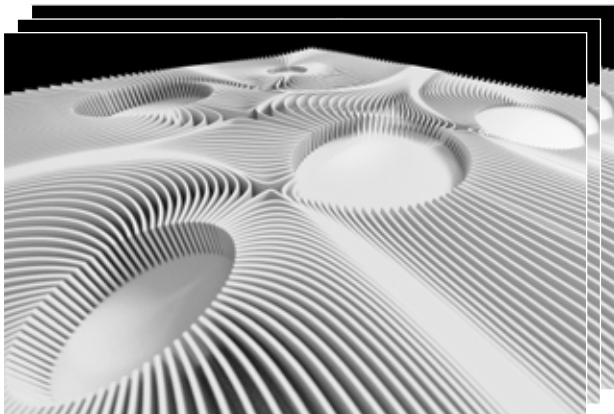dior.com

'Retail design isn't just about slapping logos on things'
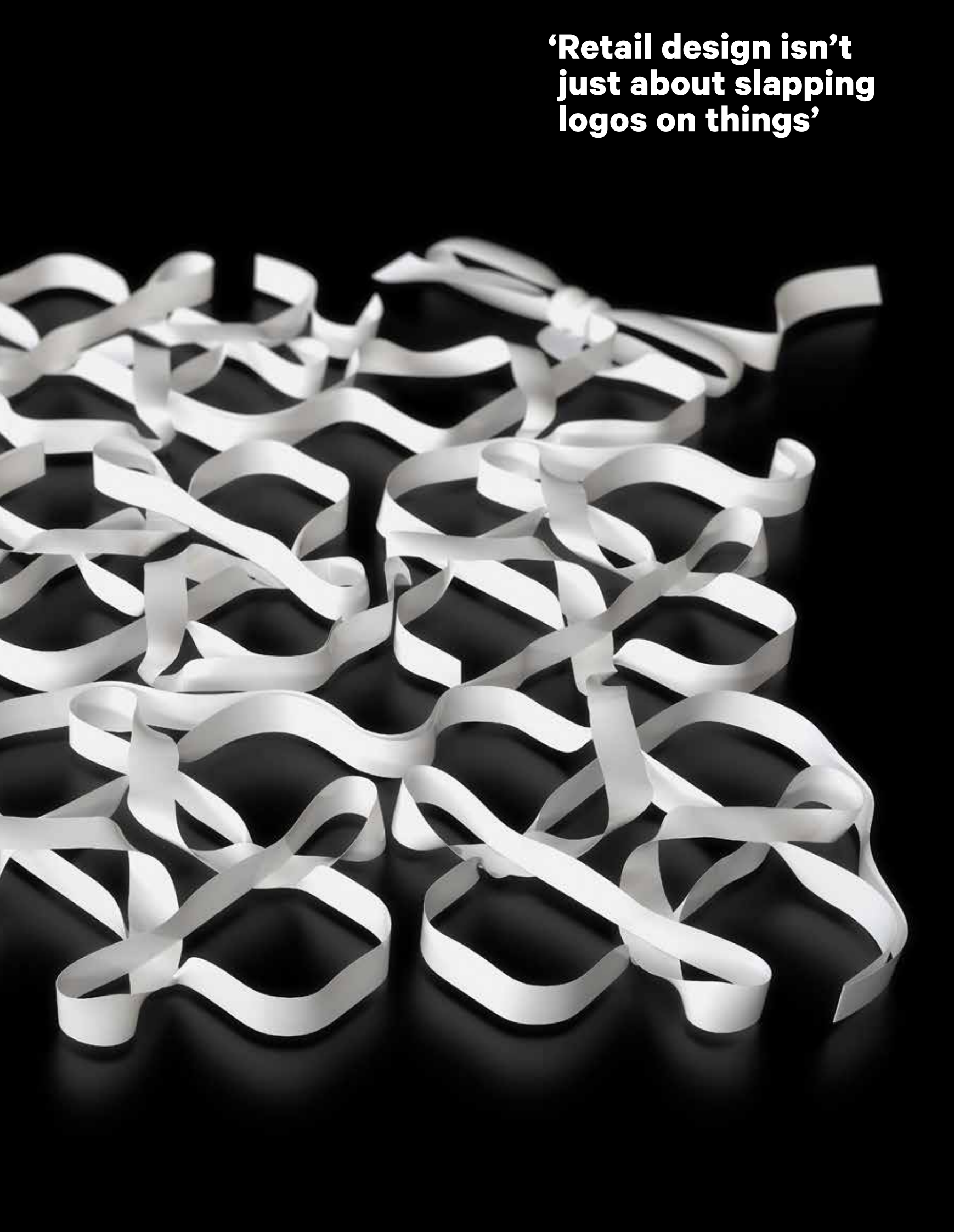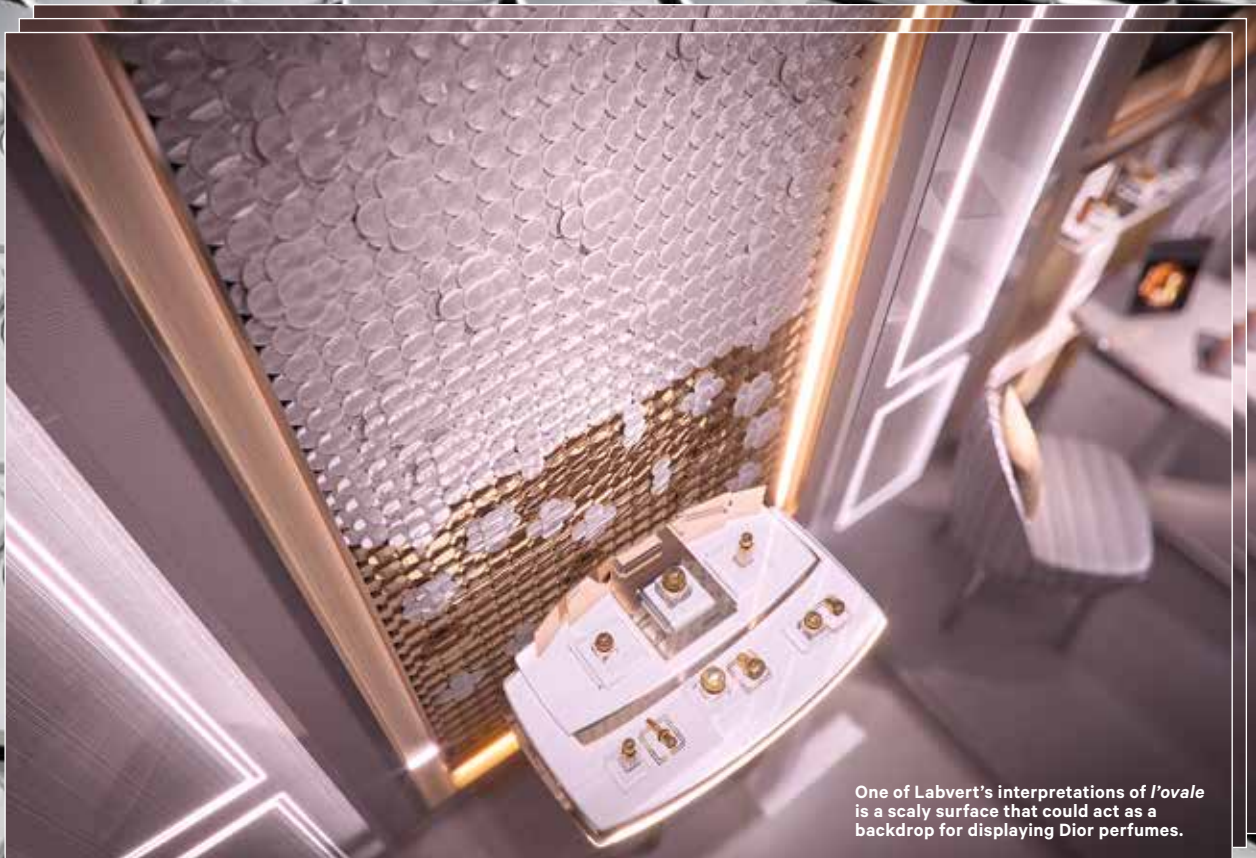
One of Labvert's interpretations of *l'ovale* is a scaly surface that could act as a backdrop for displaying Dior perfumes.

L'ovale

One of six codes that define Dior's artistic direction, *l'ovale* is reminiscent of a medallion and symbolizes femininity; you can find it in clothing details, shop displays and products.

Code Conductors

With the aid of computers, Labvert answered Dior's call to transform the brand's iconic elements into 'something contemporary and futuristic'.

Stephan Vary of Labvert.
Photo Alexander Chitsazan

T rained as both architect and designer, Stephan Vary of Vienna-based Labvert seemingly stumbled into the world of high-end fashion retail. Within six years he was in with the big guns: L'Oréal and Giorgio Armani. Now he and his team collaborate with the designers at Christian Dior perfumes and cosmetics to twist, warp and contort a set of iconic brand elements into conceptual studies and potential spatial scenarios using computer-generated design and fabrication. Vary can't show me many of the physical spaces that have eventuated from these conceptual studies, because they're simply that: *studies*. But we sit down with stacks of digitally produced drawings to discuss what he calls his 'most profound' work.

How do you combine the Dior legacy with technology? Stephan Vary: A lot of research is going into product components, textiles, et cetera – and their influence on clothing, on the final product, is evident. Basically, it's the same with spaces. We have to keep up to date with technology and determine how to use it. What Dior did in the 1940s was ground-breaking, so we try – yes, I know it sounds like a cliché – to keep the fire burning.

It's exciting to reinterpret things. Why do designers keep making new chairs? Why do bands release new music? We have to keep things moving and find new angles. But we also have to find a balance. Just because it's possible to create a futuristic ceiling with LEDs, that doesn't mean we should do it. You should always question the resources you plan to use and whether or not they fit the brand. That's where the codes come in. These motifs are very significant to the brand and its history. If we display a fragrance in a shop against a backdrop of *le moulures*, that code becomes a distinctive brand element, one that competitors also recognize.

You start with very basic line drawings of the codes. What happens next? It all happens in constant collaboration with Thomas and his team; we have conference calls every day. We were initially given a two-month time period, during which five of us had free rein to manipulate the codes. Some of us started sketching and others headed straight for the computer, because the nature of the desired manipulations lent itself to digital design. It's an ongoing process – we're working with repetition and pattern continually, so using computers makes sense. Certain operations, such as geometric distortion, are almost impossible to do by hand.

We basically follow a typical architectural discourse on object and field. In the art world, you have a similar conversation about a line becoming a surface and then an object: one-, two- and three-dimensionality. This is what we try to do, yet in a very loose manner. The results are supposed to be inspirational. They are compiled in a reference book that's there to flip through when a problem needs solving.

But materiality has been given to some of your studies. Yes, that's the next logical step: translating playfulness into solutions. Material selection is very important, and we explore many possibilities.

'We offer theoretical ideas about what these studies could become'
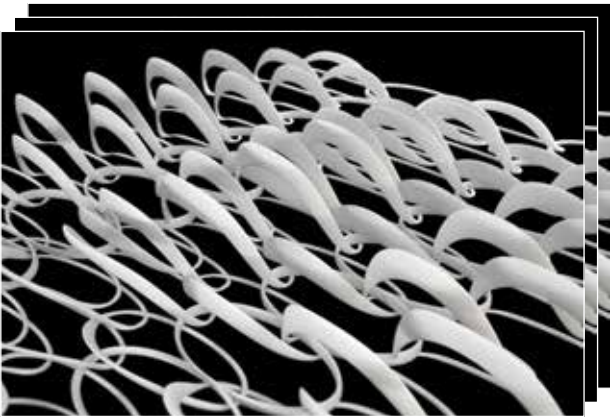
Labvert collaborates with designers at Dior, reinterpreting iconic brand elements as spatial concepts with the use of digital design.

Working with a glass company to make a wall, we tested how big and thick the tiles could be.

When you're at the computer, there's no scale, no weight, no material. You have to get out of the office to see how things actually work. Glass is a beautiful thing, but it's also a molten liquid that you pour into a mould, a process that presents certain issues. If we follow that process from the beginning, we're more likely to come up with new ideas. We might want to pour the liquid in a different way because the quality of the material asks for something other than simply being cast into *le cannage* pattern.

Sometimes we offer theoretical ideas about what these studies could become. One concept, which is linked to couture, is for a façade featuring a woven pattern based on *le cannage*.

Some studies remain relatively unstructured, while others become quite architectural. We dissected *le pied de poule*, or hound's-tooth check, into small Lego-like pieces. I'd like to do something like that in ceramic.

Would you say that you and your team are researching aesthetics and designing inspirations rather than physical spaces? It depends. As a traditional architecture firm with an engineering department, we are collaborating on a project in London's Covent Garden, where we have both creative and technical influence, such as producing detailed drawings and overseeing the build. It didn't include any of the codes we're looking at now, though. It was for a younger audience, and the codes mentioned here are used mainly to stimulate ideas that may be used in the long run for future projects. Additional designers are involved in other spaces. The client is also a very important 'author', because he tells you want he wants and how to organize it. But the results of our conceptual studies will be fed into physical stores over time.

How would you defend a critical view of the potentially arbitrary nature of manipulating images to achieve something else? What we do can be likened to making a painting, and paintings aren't judged in that way. The artist has reasons behind what he does. The marks he makes will be completely different to those made by another painter. When we work on a physical project we don't follow the same process as the one I've described here, but it's great to really be able to explore things with fewer constraints and preconceptions. The client can then add his own level of expertise. It's not as if these studies will be used tomorrow in a shop design; they're food for thought. The team constantly participates in discussions about every aspect of the brand: a flacon, a space, a . . . well, who knows? Armani is even designing hotels. Among all these elements, there needs be more than just a name that carries through. How do we find a common thread across different scales? That's the challenge.

With only three years' worth of inside brand knowledge, do you still feel as if you have the advantage of an outsider's eye? When we first started with Dior, we did a study that was supposed to lead to the design of a boutique – a cool and interesting proposal, we thought. They agreed, but didn't buy the idea. They're always looking for new ideas, but it's not as if we can do anything we want. Dior's take on retail is very different from that of other brands, which might open a shop with a different aesthetic in every city. It's like a game of Hot and Cold; you get 'hotter' over time until you find what you're looking for – and then you make something out of it. _
labvert.com

The shopfront study suggests how a two-dimensional pattern (based on *l'ovale*) can be manipulated to give textural variety.
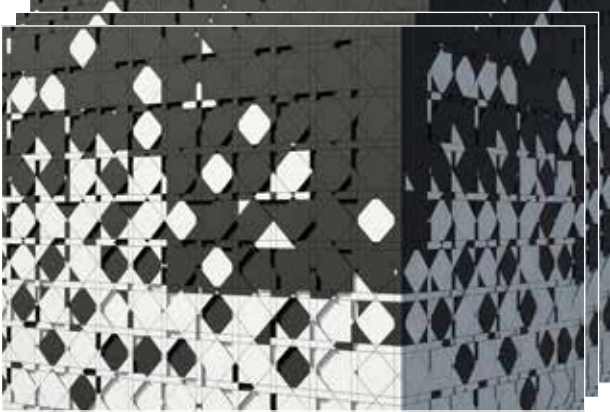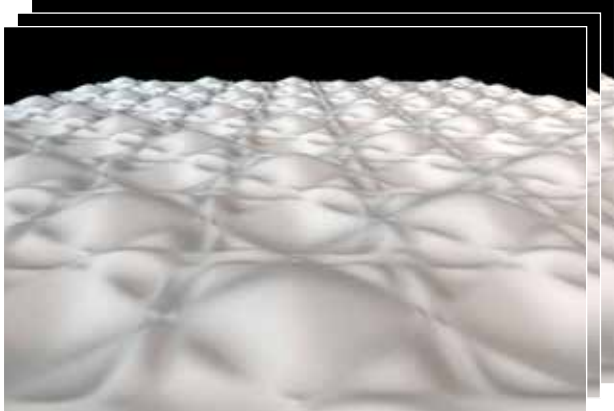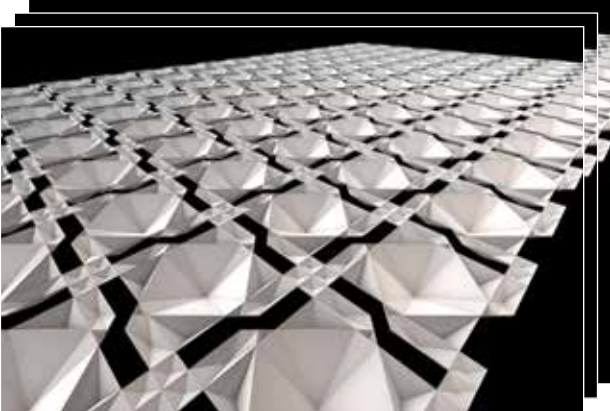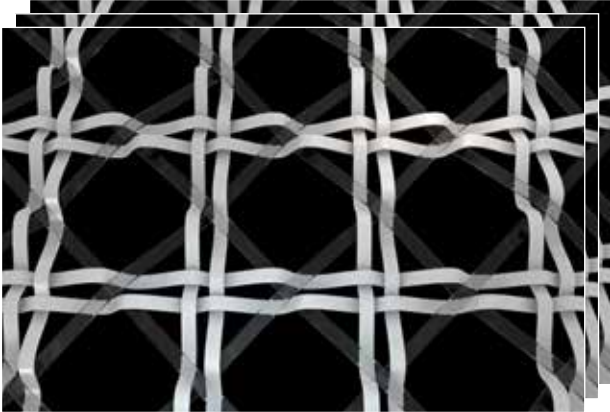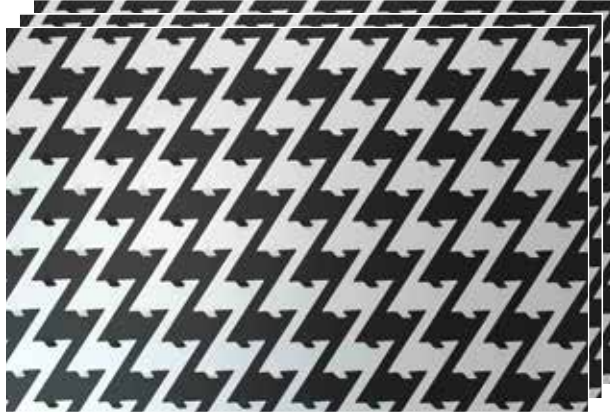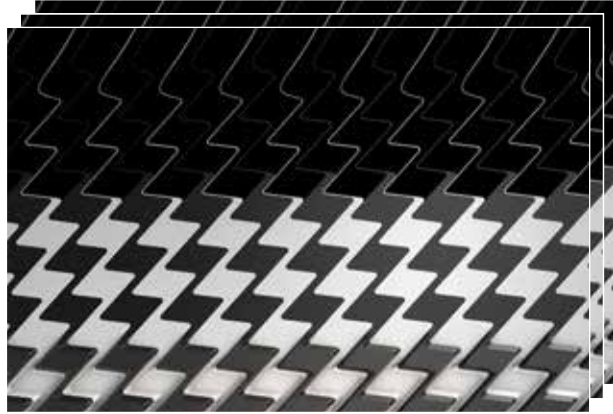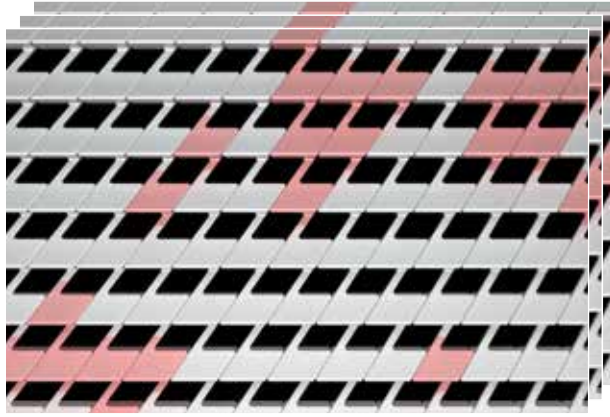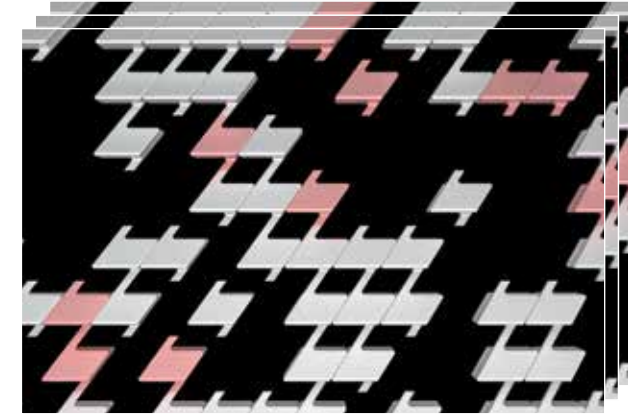
A patterned glass wall that divides space is one potential application of *le cannage* in a retail interior.

Le cannage

Dior developed *le cannage* (based on canework) as a decorative motif. Labvert came up with a concept for a façade featuring a woven pattern based on *le cannage*, thus linking architecture to couture.
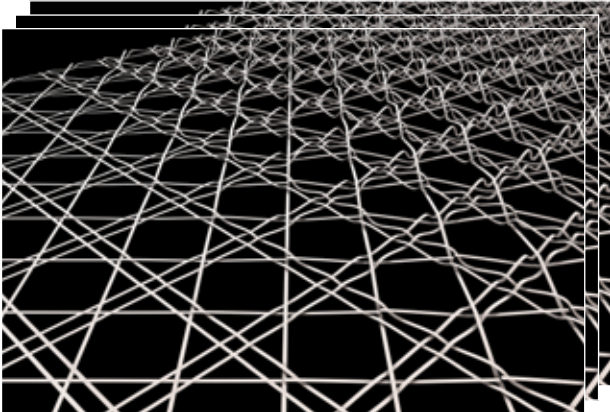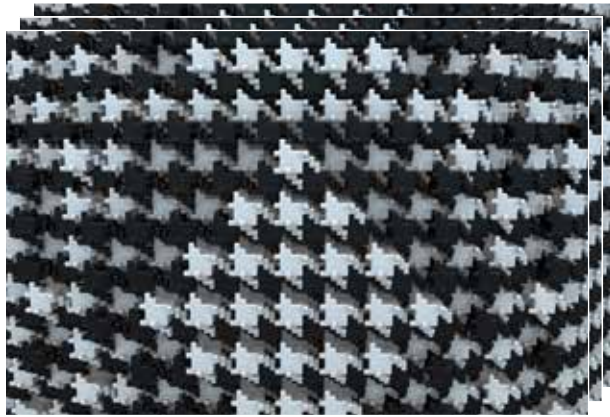
Le pied de poule

Le pied de poule, a pattern used for clothing, is also known as hound's-tooth check. Stephan Vary and his team at Labvert dissected *le pied de poule* into small Lego-like pieces, which Vary would like to apply to ceramic.

Labvert's study shows how *le pied de poule* might be used as a continuous surface pattern over the flooring and fixtures in a boutique.