

Fashion's Master Builder Anthony Faglione On How a Store Is Born

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Anthony Faglione is the owner and managing member of **teamCIS**, a construction management and general contracting company with a focus in luxury retail. Most commonly, though, he's known as **Fashion's Master Builder**. Though he came from a modest background—he was born in five-story tenement home in Bushwick, before it was cool—he's gone on to act as a point-person for the development of some of Manhattan's finest high-end stores, as well as the Fashion Week runway stages of **Calvin Klein** and **Ralph Lauren**.

Most recently, he oversaw the construction of the first **Halston Heritage flagship** on **Madison Avenue**, which marks a dramatic turning-point for the storied brand. In the interview after the jump, see exactly how a store comes into being—or as he puts it, the span "from the time you put the pencil to the paper to the time that you actually turn the key to open the store."

Tell me a little bit about your background. You were born in Brooklyn, correct?

I'm a first-generation Italian American. I was born in Bushwick during a time when it wasn't hip and cool to live in Bushwick, in a five-story tenement home. Our bathroom was in the hallway and our bathtub was in the kitchen. Typical to the cold water flat that you see in some of the old TV or movie scenes.

What does one go to school for to become "fashion's master builder?" What was your path to doing what you're doing now?

I've been in construction all of my life, and I've been working since I was 13 years old, part-time after school. At some point, probably around 15, I realized that construction was where I wanted to be. Soon thereafter, what was important to me was to be self-employed. So I just put a lot of passion and a lot of time in that area. I have an architectural background but not an architectural degree.

I've worked for engineering companies, but mostly I've worked as a worker with my hands. I started out as an electrician, and then from there I went to work for construction companies and doing estimating and project supervision and management. From there, when I became self-employed, I learned very quickly to be a master of all trades.

Do you feel that going that route has given you more flexibility to experiment in different areas?

I think that the architectural community has done itself a disservice, meaning that it's very difficult for an architect to be successful in the construction business. One shortfall, if I had to just give my opinion, is that there's no formal internship that allows an architect to work with their hands so that they understand the things they draw on paper and how they need to get built. If they had that type of an internship, they'd be able to better understand as they design things how they come together in a practical form.

For me, being of very simple working-class parents, it was important to make a living. Although school was important, it was equally important (or maybe in some cases more important) for me to get the experience and earn a living.

When you're designing a store, what is the first step that you take. How do you approach that?

Well technically we're not designers, we are what I will call "detail designers." So what we do is, the retailer has their own design and has their own concept, and we collaborate with the concept with the designer and the architect on how the details of the materials will come together. This is where I believe—as a master builder and someone that has the experience that has done this with my own hands as well—we bring the experience to the table, allowing the vision of the design and the concept to come to reality in the most effective way.

Can you tell me about the Halston Heritage store that just opened on Madison? What was your part in that?

We collaborated in the design build of the store. This is the first flagship that Halston has, and budget was very important to them. We had to figure out a way to take a new concept and a new design and bring it into an existing location—changing the things that needed to be changed to allow the concept and the design to be what it wanted and needed to be. But at the same time, we had to stay very focused and sensitive to the budget and schedule.

On average, how long might that entire process take? How long might you be working on one particular store?

Depending on the size of the store, and depending on the conditions of the existing store *and* depending on the designer and the retailers wherewithal, a process can take anywhere from 16 to 26 weeks, and sometimes maybe even 9 or 12 months. There are many factors, like size, budget, conditions, communication, etc.

One of our favorite pastimes here at Racked is stalking stores when we know they're about to open, and we always wonder what causes a store to go past its projected opening date.

Well our projects don't go over schedule because we're very sensitive to that. I say this all the time: people can make a simple thing difficult, and people can make a difficult thing very simple. I find that [it's best] when there's a collaboration and everyone truly has the same focus and is pushing in the same direction, and you allow a master builder to take the responsibility of orchestrating the architect.

We're not talking about the design, the design is finished—we're talking about the architect that's needed for the local municipal consent, the engineering that's needed so that when you turn your lights on they stay on, and when you put your heat on the store is comfortable. Then you have code consulting and permit consents. Working in New York, landmark is also a very big thing that you have to worry about and take serious, and understand that that has a process and that process takes time.

So it's really about the orchestration and making sure that you understand all of the elements, and that one person is held responsible for managing that entire process. What we find in most European brands, and even some American brands, is that you do have a designer, and then you might have a construction manager, an architect, an engineer, a contractor—and everyone works for themselves and there isn't one person that's managing that entire process. What happens is everyone has their own agenda, and the agenda is usually the accounting sheet, and "when I have the time and when I have the information I'll pull it together."

You don't have a big force that's pushing from behind and pulling from the front and creating that vacuum and explaining, "No guys—we have a schedule, we have a budget, and we're going to do everything and anything possible to make sure we meet that." Because *the* most important thing to a retailer is what I call "the catching factor." If a store doesn't open on time, then the retailer's return on investment changes and then it becomes a different accounting situation.

I can't imagine why there wouldn't be someone overseeing everything.

You'd be surprised. A lot of chiefs, but not enough Indians.

So you've also worked on runway stages. Are you still doing that?

Yes, we've done the **Ralph Lauren** fashion show since 1996.

Do you prefer working on stores or runway?

I like drama, but not the drama that makes us all sick. Good drama. When a designer has a dream about something it can be exciting. But then it's up to the designer that that dream is not just a fictitious dream that's way out there and completely unattainable. That it has some roots to it so that it can become reality.

What do you find are the biggest challenges with working on runway stages?

We've done the shows for Ralph for the past 17 years, and **Calvin Klein** we've done since 1995 to 2003, and then there have been some other ones from **Helmut Lang** and **Narciso Rodriguez** and some other smaller events. The production company that we work with is very talented, and the people that work for them are extremely knowledgeable in what they do, so therefore there really isn't much drama.

You would think that the fashion show would be more drama because there's much less time and planning and building, and the retail store would be *less drama* because there's more time and more budget, but really we find—and that's not to say it's true in all cases—that it's quite the opposite. Our fashion shows (and I hope to say this without jinxing myself) run really well every season.

Over the past couple of years a lot of Fashion Week has gone digital, and the argument accompanying that is perhaps you don't even need to go to the shows anymore, since it's all so easily accessible so fast online. What are your thoughts on that?

Well being a purist, I believe that if something is tangible you can feel it. We sit here together, and if I had a photograph of you, it would give me an opinion but that opinion would be limited. Now that I got to meet you and we're sitting together and you're tangible to me, I believe there's more that I can get out of it than a digital photo.

So I think that there's a right place, a right time, and a right situation for whatever the goal is. If the goal is that you have a major buyer coming in to buy your product, I don't think you want them buying from a screen. You want them to see it, feel it, and come to a distance where they can almost touch it. That's where the excitement comes into play.

It's sort of like watching a ball game. The best sports game that I've ever watched, regardless of the outcome, has been when I've been at the stadium and I've watched the game.