

'I can't imagine what I would be doing if I hadn't done this'

BY JANETTE EWEN

The words exotic, inspired and reflective have all been used to describe Vicente Wolf's chic interior designs, but they can also be applied to the New York-based design star himself.

Named one of the 10 most influential designers in the United States by House Beautiful and recently inducted into Interior Design magazine's hall of fame, Wolf is known for his sensuous, internationally inflected rooms and A-list commercial and residential clients. A passionate traveller and photographer who pours his "mental filing cabinet" into his work, he brings a similarly global outlook to his product designs, which include, most recently, a limited-edition crystal collection for France's Baccarat.

For a man at the top of his field – his résumé also includes two books and several furniture lines – Wolf is remarkably grounded, as he proved during a recent stop in Toronto to launch the Baccarat collection at studio b. Despite the showroom's sumptuous air, he spoke to Globe Style about the end of extravagance in interior design – and how that may be a good thing.

You have a lot of wealthy clients. Is the economic slowdown affecting how they decorate? I don't know a single person who isn't affected by what's happening to the global economy. But I think it's good to pull the reins back and start to be more concerned about the world and less about wanting more and more and more. There is a definite slowdown in frivolous consumption, but the core values of good design will never waver.

How has it affected your own designs and outlook? Funnily enough, my business always increases when there are economic problems as we are a proven entity and always take a less-is-more approach. We're not about extravagance, but rather about adhering to solid design.

Like much of your design work, your collection for Baccarat draws heavily on your experiences and travels. Does the process of designing something so personal ever exhaust you? Yes, it can be a draining process, but in a positive way. I can't imagine what I would be doing if I hadn't done this – I have no high-school [diploma], I'm dyslexic. What I have is a wonderful thing.

What drives your wanderlust? It's the freedom. When I'm in New York, I'm putting out. When I'm travelling, I'm taking in. It's really a regenerating process: I am taking care of myself, pampering myself with what I see. It fills my mental filing cabinet with inspiration. And the bigger your filing cabinet, the more you understand space and design.

What's your next adventure? I am just about to go to Easter Island, then Namibia, Indonesia and back to New York. I have wanted to go to Easter Island for years. There is something so spiritual about the place.

You have recently become well known for your other passion: photography. How has your time behind a camera affected your design work? It was my design work that got me into photography, yet it has completely changed how I see spaces, colour and light. I now look at spaces as vignettes. I see colour in a different way. Previously, colour was very subtle in my designs, but photography has opened me up to a stronger use of it.

I have heard you talk about your "rule of three" while designing. What is that? I always work in threes, from measurements to the arrangement of objects: one object is chance, two are tchotchkes and three constitute a collection. The Vice and Versa candlestick [for Baccarat] is made up of three unique parts that can be used solo or stacked in various ways. I like that the person using them gets to be a part of the design process.

Crystal was a new medium for you. What was it like working with it? Working with crystal is very exciting; it is so alive. It's like every piece is filled with thousands of little lights. My candlestick was first designed on paper, but it was so different when I saw it realized; it came to life. It has also been fun to photograph the pieces; the light was so interesting to work with.

® Vicente Wolf's Latitude Collection for Baccarat is available in Canada exclusively at studio b in Toronto (www.studiobhome.com).

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Wolf admits designing is tough. KEVIN VAN PAASEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL