

PRESTIGE

HONG KONG

AUGUST 2011 | HK\$50

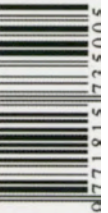
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Exclusive Interview

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SPEED WITH STYLE

ISSN 1815-732



017719151735005



THE FRENCH WINDOW

Simply Does It

Ed Ng of AB Concept teaches CHRISTINA KO the ABCs of good design

I'M SET TO meet Ed Ng, one of the two partners at design firm AB Concept, at the French Window, a Hong Kong restaurant that he helped to create. If this were a game of spot-the-designer, it would be a very easy game to win.

Amid a sea of light greys and pale wood, of dark suits and discreet ties, there sits a man wearing a bright mustard blazer, a blue checked shirt and a graphic pink-and-white bow tie. His classic burnt-orange Hermès Birkin aside, the entire ensemble is Tom Ford, and custom-designed by Ng himself. When it comes to style and self-expression, interiors are just one part of a much larger equation for Ng.

While his personal look might be described as flamboyant, Ng's interior work is not, however, and he eschews any suggestion that AB Concept might have a look of its own. "Every time someone asks me about our signature style, I don't know how to answer,"

he says. "I hope that in 20 years I still won't have an answer, because I try to keep myself away from repeating. [With new projects] I hope to give my audience and client the anticipation of wondering what kind of new idea we will come up with. If they know what kind of wood I love to use or this colour scheme or atmosphere, then maybe it will be time to retire."

So, though Ng and AB Concept's other partner, Terence Ngan, acknowledge firms like Japanese powerhouse Super Potato for creating iconic and oh-so-Potato looks, you'll never see AB Concept stamped all over a project. The common thread running through its work is one of clean comfort born of effortlessness, whether it's in the impactful use of negative space and white lines in Hong Kong's Green T. House, the bright natural light and sturdy wooden curves witnessed in the lobby of Pacific Place III, the zen warmth of the spa at Shangri-La

Tainan, or the graphic modernity of Xiao Nan Guo restaurant in Beijing.

In short, AB Concept can bling it up or strip it down. Coco Chanel famously suggested that before leaving the house, you should take a look in the mirror and take one thing off. Ng and company live by that motto, and try to keep everything as easy as ABC.

"We cannot create beauty," the designer says. "Beauty exists in nature, and we have to discover it and reveal it. 'Creating' beauty means you are trying too hard. We do aspire to effortlessness. It's simple lines with the right form and the right proportions. You feel very confident, you feel...nice. You have to be selective and stop yourself from putting everything in one picture. You need experience. You need effort to be effortless."

The AB Concept philosophy appears to be working, and the world's hospitality brands are battling to get its design team in on their new projects. The firm's first resort commission – for the W Retreat & Spa in Bali – earned it a trophy at the International Hotel & Property Awards this year.

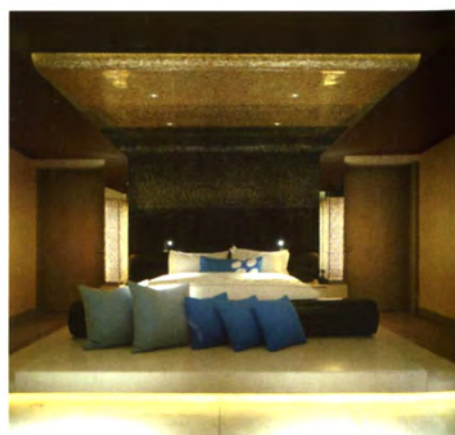
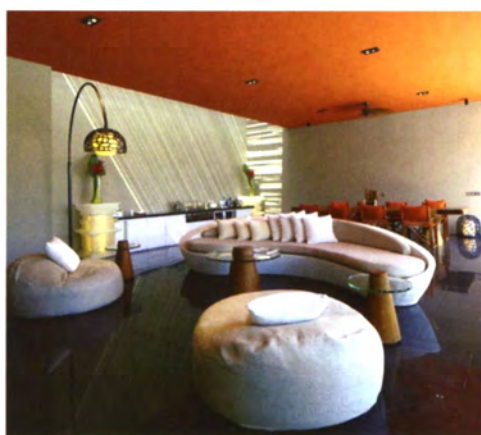
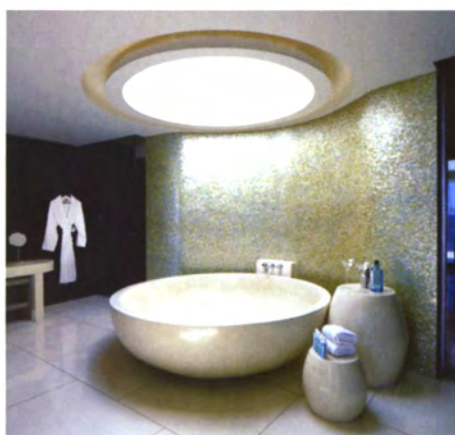
"I feel grateful to Starwood and the property owners," Ng says. "They needed a brave mind to appoint someone who's never



TERENCE NGAN AND ED NG



W RETREAT AND SPA, BALI





done a resort, but that's how you get a fresh approach. A lot of Bali resorts use traditional carvings and wood. We've stayed away from the literal, but still wanted people to say, 'Wow, this is so Bali.' We spent a week going to resorts so we could do something that's nothing like what we saw."

While intricacies of projects may differ from client to client, the origins of the design process remain constant. "The first thing we consider is a story, a narrative," says Ng. "If we don't have a narrative, it's like a director doing a movie without a script. We can't just say this table is nice, that chair is nice. In a movie, what's the rationale behind the casting, the costumes, all of that? They might be beautiful, but without a reason behind the choice, the whole story will fall apart. Our narrative is created through images and key words."

When Henderson Land commissioned AB Concept to design luxury residential property The Gloucester in a prime Wanchai location, one of the key words was "hip," which is a far cry from the usual brief assigned by property developers. "The property eco-system in Hong Kong is really strange," says Ng. "Everything has to be

“AB Concept is very simple. We want it to be straightforward and basic. It means starting from the beginning”

'grand.' When working on the design [for The Gloucester], we tried to stay away from glitzy marble mouldings. We've built a pool on the roof.

"[Henderson] could have asked us to do a really extravagant penthouse and stick the pool on the ground like most complexes do, but because we had such a strong story and rationale – a fabulous acrylic-front pool that looks out onto the horizon, like you're one of the fish – the owner accepted it. Owners are beginning to understand this three-word motto: 'Design Can Sell.'"

Ng's home is a good example of that approach. While he might be tempted to fill his living space with amazing designer

finishes and materials that he comes across in his work, the look is decidedly the opposite. "It's one colour – beige – and one type of wood," he says, explaining that the focus is on his own belongings: on his furniture, his toy collection and his colourful wardrobe.

"AB concept is very simple. We want it to be straightforward and basic. It means starting from the beginning. Everything we do, we try not to have preconceptions or an agenda."

With a number of upcoming projects, Ng and Ngan will need clear heads and strong concepts to differentiate them all. On the books already are the Mandarin Oriental Singapore slated for this year, the Shangri-La Jing'An Shanghai and Guiyang New World Hotel next year, W Beijing and Grand Hyatt Wenzhou in 2013, and Jumeirah, Jeddah for 2014. And then there's a personal residential project for an unnamed tycoon, as well as the possibility of an airline lounge.

"A lot clients come and they like us because we don't come with [preconceived] ideas," says Ng. "We consider all factors and the brand, and what the brand is going to be. We put everything together, and start with the ABCs." ■