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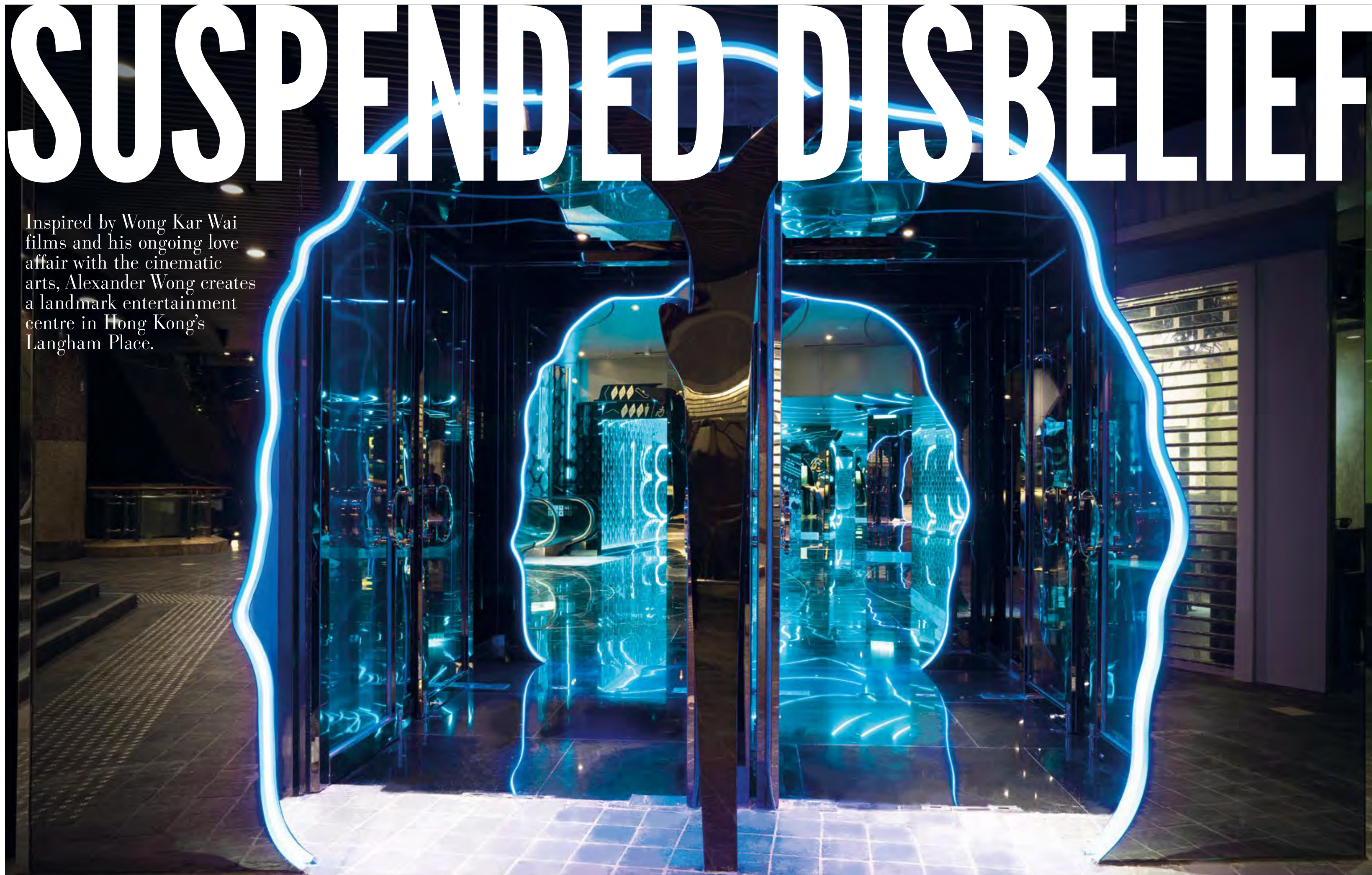
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SUSPENDED DISBELIEF

Inspired by Wong Kar Wai films and his ongoing love affair with the cinematic arts, Alexander Wong creates a landmark entertainment centre in Hong Kong's Langham Place.



IT USED TO BE ALL ABOUT THE MOVING IMAGES – people simply sat in the dark motionless, only their brains working as they followed the story told in lights and sounds. But as Hong Kong practice Alexander Wong Architects Limited (AWAL) has proven time and again, the entire cinema complex is a complete experience that is unleashed and amplified by structural elements and design choices.

Surely there are architectural acoustics and digital cinema systems to calibrate, as well as projection sightline versus seat angle to adjust, but there are also seat comfort and climate control, ease of passage through aisles and between rows, incline of bleachers and height of risers that help deliver cinematic magic. From the time a paying patron decides to watch a particular movie, a number of sensorial cues can be aligned to enhance his experience: From the till to the lobby, the refreshment stand, the passage to the darkened hall, the comfort rooms – all these need to be designed to contribute to a unified and lasting impression.

When AWAL took on the Cinema City project at Langham Place, they thought they knew what was required of them. After all, among other non-residential projects, they have successfully completed massive cinema complexes. Their client, Pegasus Entertainment, was very supportive and trusting from the start, but as the designers had to work on the first flagship New Cinema brand at Langham Place, a branch known for the highest box office returns record in all of Hong Kong, there certainly was pressure. It didn't help that the client did not provide a brief and left the decisions in their hands.

Alexander Wong's personal experiences as a moviegoer certainly have some bearing on the Cinema City project, but in reality he started

with 'Carmen Futura' based on Wong Kar Wai's *As Tears Go By*, his breakout film in 1988.

"As Tears Go By is called *Mongkok Carmen* in Chinese, and since Langham Place is synonymous with *Mongkok*, we started

"There are thousands of blue diamond-cut crystals placed on parametric champagne gold reptilian scales lining the walls. The ceiling with swirling patterns created by LED in azure or ultramarine blue are mirrored on the flooring."

whole design based on all the classics by Wong Kar Wai, who also happens to be a dear friend of mine. We included his *2046* (2004), his truly original interpretation of the sci-fi genre, as our



inspiration and, of course, his idea of creating sexual tension that is in just about all his films. Our *Carmen Futura* is deeply about desire but with a futuristic twist.

"There were too many considerations at the outset, but if I were to narrow them down to three these would be the highlights of the complex, including 'Cloud Atlas Tunnel', 'Gravity Restroom' and 'Rose Futura,'" says principal Alexander Wong. The team didn't stray far from the project to obtain inspirations – in fact, they mined the rich resource that is the cinema.

"'Cloud Atlas Tunnel' is a fantasy space we wanted to create – something totally crazy glamorous and sexually charged with an out-of-this-world feel, like a passageway to a futuristic fairy tale, if there is such a category of literature or storytelling.



(This page) The black and white comfort room alludes to a number of visual references from the lampposts in *Bright Lights*, *Big City* to the duo-tone Ascot scene from *My Fair Lady* and the cartoon renditions of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* as well as the futuristic cool of *A Space Odyssey: 2001*. (Previous pages) Wong has always insisted that going to the movies is a total experience that begins at the till. To support this, he has created a space with cinematic double-entendres and visual referencing.



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'Gravity Restroom', the second highlight, features sci-fi street-lamps above futuristic hand-wash basins. "Actually, when we first met with the client, we were shown a very similar concept from another design company. We were extremely alarmed because we actually created this totally original design but for another cinema project that eventually went to another company. Someone clearly stole the idea from us and presented it to this new client."

They contemplated going to the lawyers, but in the end decided to focus their energies on creating their original design. "It was very much like finding your baby whom you thought was lost!" Wong enthuses.

"The third highlight, 'Rose Futura', is actually an entrance to the cinema that is located on the 8th floor of the shopping mall. We designed it in the shape of a giant abstracted rose outlined by ultraviolet blue LED. The idea here is to wait for your beloved at this futuristic portal with a blue rose in hand before you go in together."

For AWAL, designing a cinema is not hinged on rules. "But if you really want some guidelines, we have what we call the 'Four Vs': Variety, vitality, visual excitement" and en vogue. These are only a starting point; without layers upon layers of meaning hidden in the design to be experienced spatially, it would be like watching a boring movie."

Wong, who saw his first movie in 1965 – it was *The Sound Music* – admits to being an avid moviegoer. At boarding school in England, where teachers cultivated their appreciation for films in the hopes of turning them into

Kubricks and Coppolas, and in New York where he once lived, Wong developed a taste for Hollywood blockbusters as well as esoteric films. From being awed by a visual feast, he progressed to being moved by tight and compelling storylines – elements that show up from time to time in his works as a designer.

"I love movies and the making of movies, which is a real labour of love for everyone involved. I have many friends in the movie business and some have the most persevering characters – amazing stamina in facing challenges on a daily basis – a bit like an extreme form of what we go through in architecture and design. I usually have great respect for films and watch them in awe when they come out looking great!"

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