

Visualizing cinemas' future

A cinema designer discusses the movie theaters of tomorrow, which should create as much aesthetic appeal as the films viewed in them. **Gan Tian** reports.

Alexander Wong wants to visit Hong Kong's UA iSquare theater next week — not so much to see a film as to admire the theater he designed. The 45-year-old believes the old idea of a cinema as a place with seats and a screen is outdated. Movie theaters, he says, should be as visually appealing as the films viewed in them.

The UA iSquare in Tsim Sha Tsui goes beyond the basics to include the European-style Garden Room bar in a hall of the theater and the giant Jewel Box Office ticket counter, which looks like a luxury jewelry shop, replete with massive fake gemstones embedded in the walls.

"(UA iSquare) was conceived as an integral part of the vibrant Tsim Sha Tsui shopping area with its countless tourist hot spots," he says.

He says he hopes to fuse concepts from the Hip Hotel chain, known for its bold use of color and artwork displays, and of luxury jewelry shops as the essentials of cinema design.

"The cinema of the future is a modern-day pleasure palace or cathedral where people go and select artificial experiences they infuse with their own memories," he adds.

Wong studied architecture in Britain before transferring to Princeton University in the US for his postgraduate degree.

He created Hong Kong's Jehle House apartment complex in 2001, which was featured in more than 10 international magazines. Jehle is known for its "twisting" exterior and use of bright colors. Perspective magazine named it among the top five interior designs of the year.

Wong moved into cinema design in 2007.

Hong Kong's UA Cinema chain's general manager C.L. Chan stumbled upon Wong's design articles in Ming Magazine when looking for new designs for UA's cinemas.

Chan hunted down Wong and introduced the designer to UA's director Bob Vallone.

Vallone soon after approached Wong and his team about designing UA's Tuen Mun cinema.

Wong's inspiration for the Tuen Mun cinema came from Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland*. Wong designed a "rabbit hole entrance" — a circular porcelain main door. The entrance creates a surreal atmosphere, which Wong believes is especially appealing to Tuen Mun New Town area's youth.

"The design evolved organically from the study of dreams and fantasies," Wong says.

"It demonstrates an underlying multiplicity of meanings for filmgoers as opposed to the increasingly one-dimensional style



Hong Kong designer Alexander Wong (right) and the theaters he designed, including the "rabbit hole" entrance of UA's Tuen Mun cinema (top left), and UA iSquare in Tsim Sha Tsui in Hong Kong (middle and above).

of other contemporary cinemas. Here, the cinema is where their personalized versions of reality will be accessible."

This was the beginning of Wong's fascination with cinema design. He went on to design the UA iSquare in Tsim Sha Tsui in 2009. And in 2010, he designed the UA Cityplaza in Hong Kong's Taikoo Shing and the UA Shenzhen in Guangdong province's Shenzhen city.

He finds inspiration in everyday experiences.

The color scheme of UA iSquare's black-and-white concession stand, for instance, comes from black pearls and white popcorn. The ceiling features sable orbs and the round counter is studded with cream-colored spheres.

In UA Cityplaza cinema, the Director's Cafe has a ceiling Wong calls "Vanilla Sky", which features blurry murals that resemble American abstract painter Larry Poon's style.

Wong also put images of *Star Wars'*

stormtroopers and from the sci-fi flick *Tron* on the restroom doors in UA Shenzhen's Orchid Power Rooms hall.

He attributes his success to the increasing global popularity of IMAX theaters, led by James Cameron's blockbuster *Avatar*, and an increase in Chinese cinema visits.

Wong is bringing his futuristic cinemas to second-tier cities. He has plans for Zhongshan Mayflower Cinema City — aka "Avatar City" — scheduled to open in Guangdong's Zhongshan next July.

The cinema takes concepts, including depictions of flora and fauna, from the sci-fi flick.

Wong says there will also be color and shape elements borrowed from the works of German design guru Luigi Colani and Belgian futurist Vincent Callebaut.

Many worry Zhongshan is too small and reserved to accept such a flashy, futuristic establishment.

Wong, however, believes the rush of modern culture into smaller cities like Zhongshan

means locals will be receptive to new concepts like "Avatar City".

Wong incorporates a variety of inspirations and styles — and enjoys all modern styles that are "well executed" — but Futurism remains the lynchpin of his design.

"Recently, I've been admiring the work of a new generation of designers who are not necessarily trained as architects," he says.

Wong's upcoming projects are Beijing Mayflower Cinema City and Orange Sky Golden Harvest 66 in Jiangyin, Jiangsu province, which is an entertainment, retail and hotel complex.

Wong says there aren't many good cinemas on the mainland according to the "four Vs" he uses to evaluate movie theaters — variety, vitality, visual excitement and vogue.

"A cinema should be conceived of as a theme park," he says.

"It must have multiple layers of meaning and many surprises, so its designs can't be easily and quickly experienced by a few visits."



Christmas came much too early this year for me

By **WANG YU**

The afternoon in November I was walking through a supermarket in Beijing on a quick errand. That year grabbed a shopping cart when I was suddenly confronted by something that could have been described as a more straight-out-of-a-horror-film-than-the-*North Pole*.

Three Christmas ornaments were in a circle holding hands, smiling as a cartoon lady in a bathing suit and high heels

stood in the background. Each one the size of "cupping of the ear" came up the address in the song called "merrily" in a child's book. This with the supermarket during the month-long Christmas by what we

thoughtfully, knowing over the whole year was a party that spread into the whole hall of over the place. A year without for some time to the pole and between the greatest amount of Christmas was about a life and

home with a champagne.

I could not even in Beijing. It was the end and week of November. The holiday was a whole month and a half away.

I was on my way to the product section when I immediately stopped in my tracks. That was Christmas stuff. I remembered about Christmas stuff on display in a supermarket

in 2008.

Oh my God, what is the world coming to? Let me explain. During my first Christmas in China ten years ago, you would have known the holidays were approaching unless you happened to be a Walmart. There was no light displays, mall trees and coffee tables and being allowed down over the

best of resources were, quite frankly, a foreign concept.

Initially, that first Christmas season was from home was a relief, especially after seeing holiday commercials after work and before bed as they lit up my TV. I began to

enjoy something was coming from my annual Christmas routine. Christmas was the 1. To see that procedure would be an

excitement. To have something about having to show those holiday habits were really better than ever. With the need to produce that makes me feel at home. In

reality, the lack of things I could see was trying to make me feel a little more whole. To add to my holiday stress, however — the not really international city I was living in at the time in Guangdong province — was an really different from my 15th year when that I was beginning to wonder if I was a more part of the world when Christmas didn't exist. Come with the