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JULY/AUGUST 2010

Alexander Wong Creates Cinema as Art

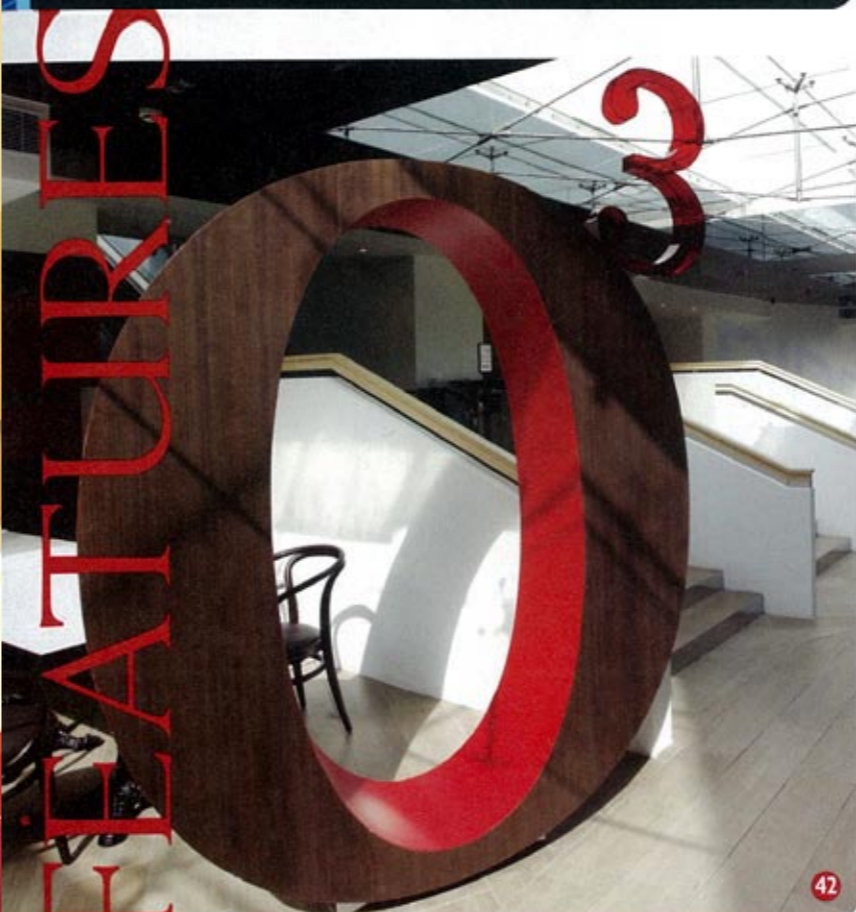
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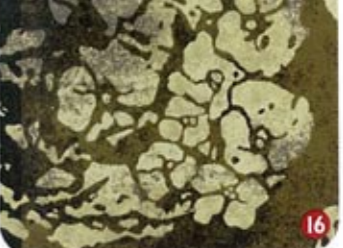
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The sign for the O³ oyster bar was inspired by pop artist Robert Indiana's iconic LOVE sculpture. The skylight opens up the low ceiling and floods the public atrium with daylight.

CINEMA as ART



Alexander Wong brings modern art to the multiplex—and to the masses—in his spacious and striking UA Cityplaza project.

Drawing inspiration from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and from the works of modern artists including Frank Stella and Larry Poons, Alexander Wong transformed a tired, Art Deco movie theater in a large shopping mall into a vibrant gathering place. The spare white box dictated by the client's budget became a playground for the imagination for Wong, the director on the UA Cityplaza project in the Taikoo Shing section of Hong Kong.

"Hong Kong doesn't have a good collection of modern art; cinema is the closest thing," says Wong, the founder of Alexander Wong Architects. "I thought, let's present cinema as modern art ... as unique and exciting."

The revitalized theater complex is a multi-functional space that is open to the public, with features designed to attract foot-sore shoppers, diners, art



ABOVE A coolly elegant entrance to the theater complex is welcoming without distracting from or clashing with the surrounding retail environment of the 150-store mall.

BELOW Besides being a favorite of the modernist pioneer Le Corbusier, the timeless bentwood-style chair is also comfortable. Guests can dine in or take out at O³, the largest restaurant in the UA Cityplaza.

lovers, event planners, party-goers, and movie directors, as well as those just out to catch an action flick. The bare bones of the space led to Wong's choice of modern art as a unifying motif. "We pared everything down and painted it white because we had no money," he says.

An all-white décor can be "kind of boring," notes Wong. "I wanted to pull it together, to justify it. The white, the spareness, the dignity, the skylight—these are



perfect for an art gallery. Cinema is art, so it complements each other. It works."

The budget-mandated simplicity also worked with one of the major design goals: to make the movie complex appealing without overshadowing the existing shops in the 150-store Cityplaza mall where it's located. As in any retail situation, the developer wanted the shops to be the attention getters. Though the entrance to the movie complex couldn't pop with glitz, Wong wanted to ensure that it fit into its surrounding environment. "The clean look fits the philosophy of the mall," he says. The refurbished UA complex is a "down-to-earth, back to basics, almost innocent approach to cinema and to mall design, which is usually fancy. This is clean, pure, spacious [and] filled with light. You don't feel as if you came into a space with no connection to the rest of the mall."

Cinema-goers, shoppers and the simply curious can pass through the UA Cityplaza's sleek, MoMA-inspired white façade to explore options for entertainment, dining and relaxing. "I wanted it to be very clean," explains Wong. "When you go into a cinema, it's a dark box. This portal is the antithesis of cinema. It's not dark, it's filled with light."

With its restaurants, sunken plaza, art and seating clusters, the UA Cityplaza's atrium is a natural gathering place. A huge skylight floods the area with daylight, marking another striking counterpoint to the dark auditoriums in which the movies are shown. The skylight and the mirrored beams surrounding it create drama while opening the potentially oppressive low-ceilinged space to the sky. Very little artificial lighting is needed before sunset, adding a green element to the project.

Just about every movie theater in the world boasts a concession stand, but this complex offers additional dining options, both for eating in and taking out. The main restaurant in the cinema complex, the O³ oyster bar is furnished

ABOVE Y-shaped supports in the Galleria are a minimalist version of bare trees. Glossy, diaphanous white screens highlight the geometric shapes. The rectangular metal boxes may be used to display sculptures and other artwork.

BELOW Plasma screens provide info and clips on the latest at the multiplex and spark up the white-on-white décor in the box office area.



with marble-top tables and white bentwood-look chairs, with red and brown walls inspired by artist Barnett Newman. A small café, Vanilla Sky, has molded white tables and chairs in a mid-century modern style, and a ceiling ornamented with oval mirrors (an homage to artist Larry Poons).

Choosing the right flooring presented Wong with an interesting challenge. Persistent budget concerns automatically ruled out certain materials, such as stone. Concrete was nixed as "not warm enough for a cinema. You should feel glamour, or at least comfortable," he says. Hardwood, too, was considered but rejected because of the negative impact of Hong Kong's high humidity on the material. Timber tiles turned out to be the solution.

The standard linear wood flooring layout, however, didn't seem exciting enough for the large public space containing the atrium and dining areas. Again, Wong turned to a master of modern art for inspiration. This time the solution was presented by the work of Frank Stella, who often employed strong geometric patterns in his paintings. "The site has a lot of angles, so we created the pattern of a Frank Stella painting on the floor," says Wong. "It complements the art, it's subtle ... it works perfectly. The diagonal [pattern] cuts across toward the main atrium area, adding something very taut and exciting to the space."

Hong Kong art gallery owners provide photos, prints, videos, and paintings for display throughout the complex, including in two designated gallery spaces leading to the main theaters. Stainless steel risers lighten the look of the steps to the Tunnel Gallery. Wood trim accents warm the space, which Wong describes as a way to "add a bit of color without adding a color." The L-Shaped Gallery is



LEFT With their clean lines, the molded mid-century modern-style tables and chairs are practically works of art in themselves. The Vanilla Sky café is a welcoming gathering place for movie-goers and shoppers.

BELOW Timber tile floors in the Galleria are laid out in triangular patterns as an homage to the geometric works of artist Frank Stella. The Tunnel Gallery leads the way to two of the main movie theaters.

accented with a giant geometric beam, from which the space takes its name. The Cityplaza movie complex also contains spaces that can be rented for private events such as meetings, conferences and parties. Guests can gather in a private lounge area before moving into a pair of intimate, 16-seat auditoriums—known as the Director's Club—for screenings. The appropriately hued carpet in the Mark Rothko-inspired Crimson Room lounge area is a nice contrast to the gleaming white tables, chairs, bar and decorative wine rack.

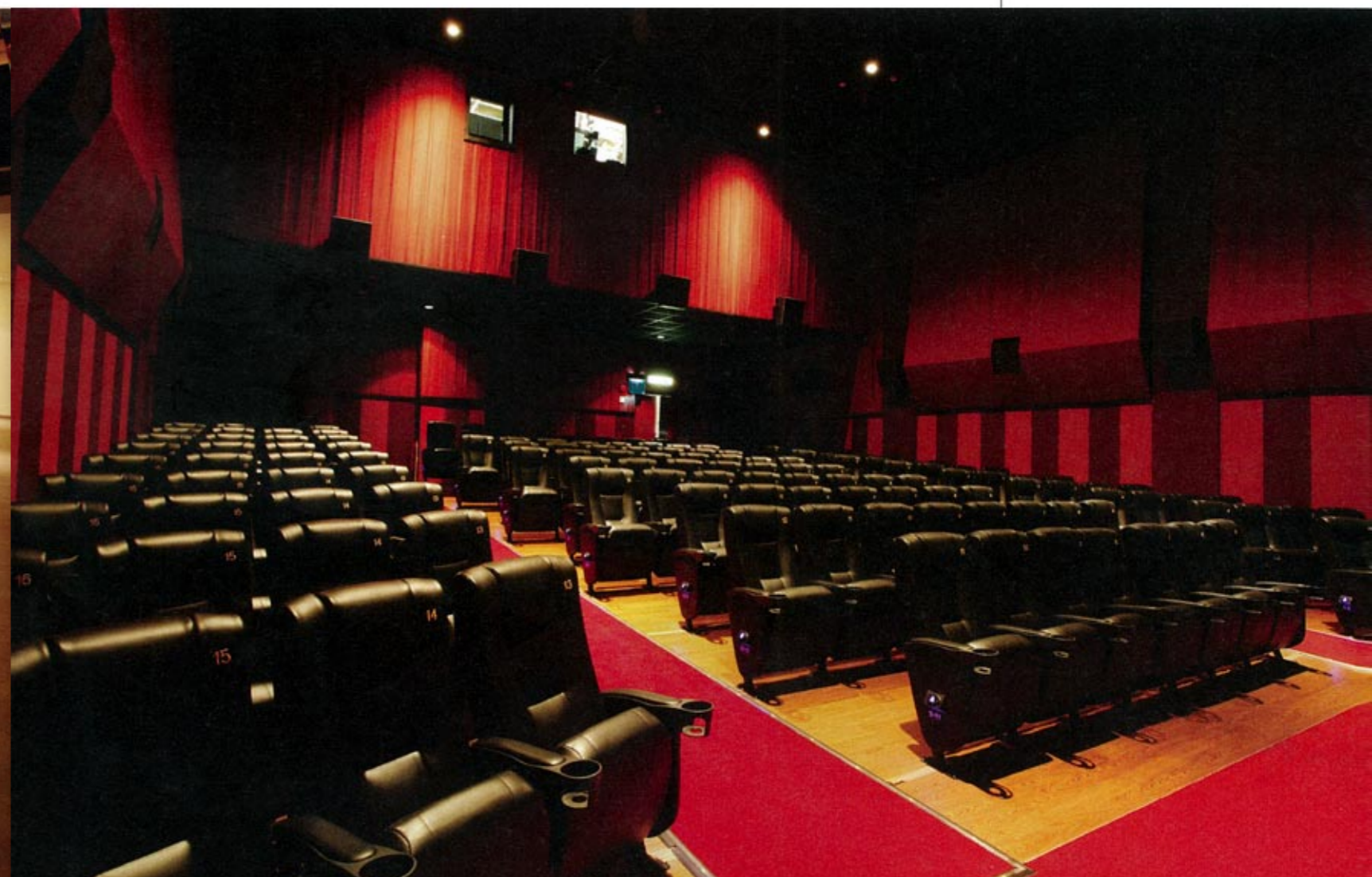
Though the theater complex just opened in mid-May, Hong Kong film industry professionals are already gravitating to the Director's Club. Directors are renting the space to screen their new projects. They also find it a welcoming space for getting together with a few of their peers to view avant-garde, foreign and classic movies and discuss them afterward. Instead of the standard-issue movie seats, the intimate Director's Club is furnished with comfy oversized armchairs and couches. Vintage curtains and plush-carpeted floors blend at-home comfort with movie-star glamour.

The movie complex also has five regular movie screens, plus two VIP theaters—all showing the latest blockbusters. In contrast to the spare, white public spaces, movie-goers enter a more traditional cinema environment once they surrender their tickets. (An employee is stationed at the door of each theater. "You can't wander from one cinema to another, like you can in the U.S.," notes Wong.) The theater walls are draped in vibrant red velvet, which matches the carpet. Cushy high-backed black leather chairs that bring to mind the traditional La-Z-Boy recliner complete the decor. "We wanted to make sure



ABOVE The L-Shaped Gallery draws its name from the massive beam in the middle of the space. Hong Kong gallery owners provide the art that is on display throughout the complex.

BELOW The five main theaters are decorated with warm red velvet draperies and cushy black reclining seats. Project director Alexander Wong views cinemas as "galleries of the senses."



the chairs were comfortable, but not too comfortable—what if it's a boring movie," laughs Wong.

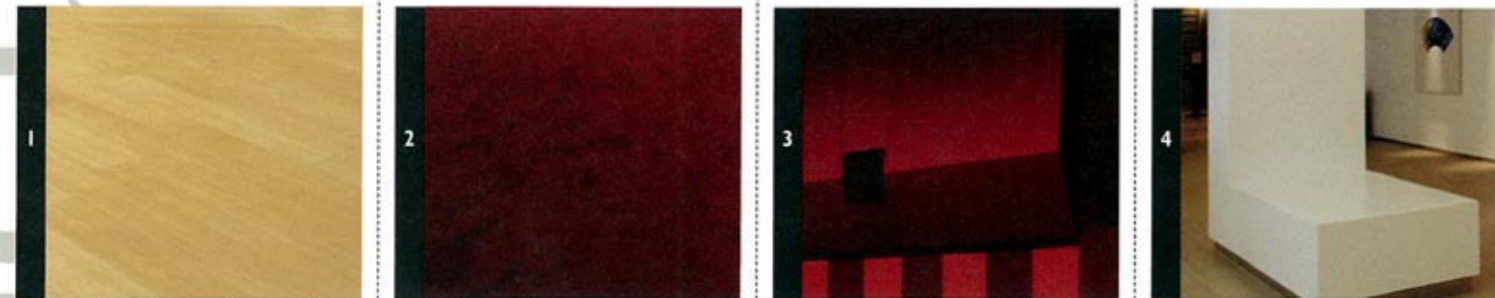
Besides its function as an up-to-date movie theater, the UA Cityplaza is introducing a new dimension to the Hong Kong entertainment scene. Visiting art galleries isn't generally part of the cultural and social life of most residents of the island, according to Wong. But he believes that the art displayed in the UA complex may put modern art on the radar of movie-goers and mall rats. "It's exciting when you see how people respond [and] how they react," he says. With such an inspirational public space, it's certainly possible that Wong's artfully designed complex will raise the profile of fine art among the population of this vibrant region of Hong Kong.

Elzy Kolb is a White Plains, New York-based freelance writer, editor, and copy editor. Her writing has appeared in The New York Times, Westchester Magazine, TheStreet.com, and other industry publications. She can be reached at elzyk@yahoo.com.



Reflective surfaces and bold geometrics are softened by the flowing shape of the trough sinks and surrounding counter and cabinet, which bring to mind the sculpture of Constantin Brancusi.

Additional photography is available in our digital edition at www.interiorsandsources.com



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