

# ROOM

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**Power Penthouse** Nina Khan delivers top-floor flourishes **Pale Palace** Alexander Wong works wonders with white **Link Line** Peter Tay hooks up the old with the new

*Special Report:* MILAN  
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# PALES IN COMPARISON

Alexander Wong went through chalk, talc, ivory, snow, nimbus, magnolia, foam, milk and seashell before deciding on the "right white" for his client's space — an aerie in Hong Kong that is part *2001: A Space Odyssey*. MARC ALMAGRO sits down with the designer to discuss the value of colour in setting a mood.





Smooth surfaces, round corners and a predominance of curves turn this white house into an image of futuristic style and glamour. An interplay of shadows created by sculpted surfaces and recessed lighting cuts down the glare and makes various areas distinct. (Following page) A series of rib-like projections functions as a screen that mediates the open plan. Pebble tables in high-gloss finish are stand-ins for natural elements in this highly fabricated interiors. A suspended version of the pebble conceals a beam above the dining room table and forms part of the lighting fixture.

**W**HITE MONOLOGUE  
*a white entrance  
 a whiter space  
 the whitest of all rooms  
 one enters a place of light  
 and perhaps a lot more  
 is this an egg  
 or a pebble  
 or a piece of soap  
 are we underneath or above  
 in front or behind  
 on the outside or really inside  
 here, nothing is predetermined  
 here, forms & space are interpreted freely  
 ambiguity is the greatest form of freedom  
 freedom to explore  
 a freedom for the soul  
 you are happy with tears  
 sad with laughter  
 finally  
 you find your true emotions  
 your true self  
 and return to the very beginning  
 your true happiness.*

For other inspirations of a more tangible nature, they turned to modern sculptures by Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Anish Kapoor, palm leaves, pebbles on a beach, Ronchamp by Le Corbusier and classic black & white photography by Man Ray.

At just 1,700sqft the apartment looks and feels much bigger, but with the complexity of the work, particularly the finishing, the team took nearly 12 months to complete it. The apartment sits on top of a building somewhere in Hong Kong, but Alexander is keener to point out that its immediate environment is not reflected in the project. "The design is so uniquely overpowering already. Here, it may not be necessary to consider contextual issues – which is quite rare of course – but nevertheless, this project calls for a 'singular' and 'purist' approach."

Alexander is aware of the client's constant creative activities and his need for a space that does not hamper the process. This explains in part the creation of a white cocoon that serves as a blank canvas on which many outputs can be held up. "It is not entirely stark white," Alexander tells me, "but more like white with off-white, beige, silver, black, grey, bronze."

Alexander approaches every design process as a challenge both in terms of outcome and the processes that lead up to it. This preserves his instinct for invention and creation. For this project, he opted for the subtle and multi-layered that called for innovations in spatial treatment

**10** OUR CLIENT IS CONSIDERED A GENIUS – he is truly creative, versatile and multi-talented. It comes as no surprise that he is a top player in his industry." Architect Alexander Wong, in his cocktail of hard facts and hyperbole, describes his client to me. This is our second conversation, preceded by a long one over tea a couple of weeks prior, during which we posed for selfies as patrons of the hotel restaurant where we were meeting gawked at us, convinced perhaps that Alexander – who was balancing a blonde Mohawk on his head and changing hats from time to time – was some celebrity, and me, perhaps, a tabloid reporter. My friend Kelley Cheng introduced us. He was, she said, flying in from Hong Kong where his firm, Alexander Wong Architects & Interior Designers, is based. "He'll be here for a day; you must meet him – he is a genius." The Queen of Design said in a compelling, bare-naked sales pitch.

Our conversation covered everything – architecture, anarchy, agnosticism, social engineering, Chinese cinema, Hong Kong celebrities, billionaires and their taste in design, mind-control. Alexander steered the

conversation easily, punctuating his discourses with sips of tea from a designer thermos. Before long, he had to change for dinner.

Between then and now I communicated with Rocky from his office, with whom I agreed to run 'The White House', a stunning project that Alexander and his team completed in Hong Kong, in what would be the current issue of this magazine.

"Our client provided next to no-brief for us except (that) everything had to be in 'White' (or mostly white) in order to display his exquisite artwork, both figurative and abstract, including some avant-garde art pieces.

"So we tried many different ideas and, in the end, we decided that the best approach would be to create an 'Abstract Interpretation of Nature', an 'Abstract Beach' if you like, re-inventing 'Space' that allows Maximum Creative Energy to flow and, hopefully, in abundance," Alexander shares.

To start the creative process, Alexander and his team wrote a poem – instead of assembling the requisite mood board. Called the White Monologue it "encapsulates the essence and spirit of our scheme using the 'Poetics of Nature' as our inspirations."



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Partial enclosure afforded by a gracefully curved glass partition creates a pocket of privacy for the cigar divan (note the overhead air filtration system) without undermining the original open layout of the unit. (Following page) White gives way to bone, ecru and taupe in the entertainment room. The wall feature above the console comprises square panels that absorb and deflect sound and provide a sculptural interest on the otherwise flat wall. The walls of the pristine hallway derive tonal variations from natural and artificial lights.



as well as in fabrication of materials. Foremost examples of these in 'The White House' are the curved glass partitions that form a seating alcove as well as the curved translucent glass wardrobe next to curved glass partition in the bath area – the second with asymmetrical gradation in translucency. The curved glass indicates a fragile sensuality, the graduated translucency a modest piece. Poetic flourishes such as these elevate the mundane act of creating containments and barriers, demarcating lines and suggestions of space to something more poetic.

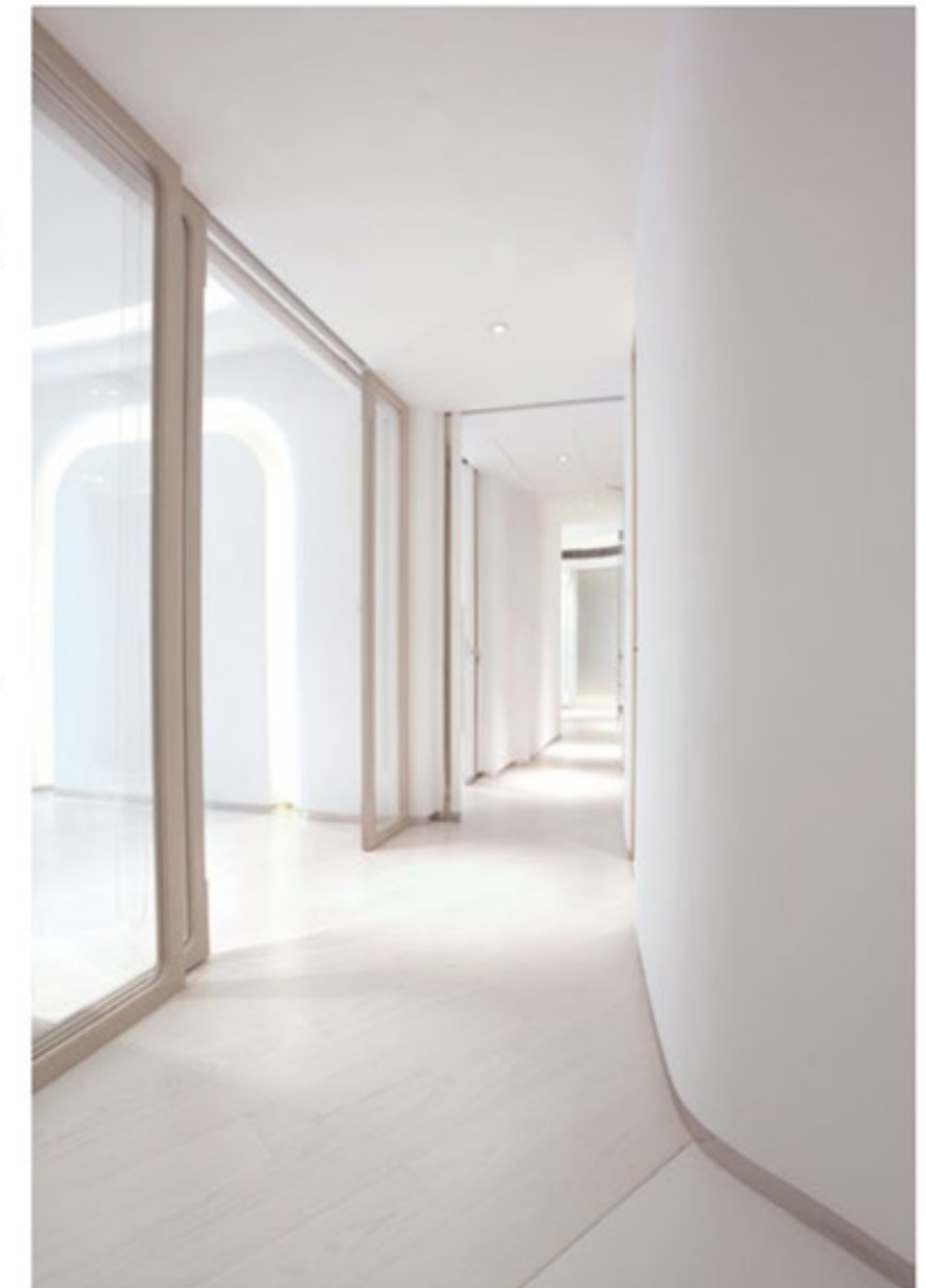
Elsewhere in the apartment, a series of arches in white resin plaster is finished in Armourcoat, while a huge white pebble with curvilinear tail-like element hovers overhead to conceal a massive straight beam right above living-dining area.

"During the design process, we discovered that what is private and what is considered public are highly ambiguous. Why should we hide parts of our home and expose other areas to our friends and close family," Alexander wondered. "In the end, we left everything exposed – naked, almost – but you still feel this sense of being very private inside because nothing is 'private' or 'public' anymore." He looks considers the paradox philosophically: Each of us as individuals is quickly transformed to our former, younger selves when we had no preconceptions of so-called 'real living'. This phenomenon does align with our design objective, which is, 'One can only and truly create in this sort of environment or in this state of mind'."

The entire apartment seems like a highly controlled environment, calling to mind a sleek laboratory in the manner of Kubrick, where lighting, acoustics, ventilation and services are highly manipulated, but Alexander assures me of the absence of "technology over art" or "art over technology". A symbiosis between the two is at work, he says, "it is of the two together, a new interpretation, a new relationship, but nothing is overt".

Artificial lighting is sparingly applied and natural light harnessed where possible. In reality, however, the entire space just seems to glow while allowing for pockets of subtle illumination.

"Nature is filled with the most highly sophisticated technology but we seldom think of Nature in this way, because it is so complex and layered;





it is entirely functional and utilitarian, as well as purely symbolic and elegant at the same time. You don't look at a leaf and think only photosynthesis, or a flower and say pollination, or an eagle and aerodynamics – but they absolutely involve technology and functionality. But technology in Nature is perfectly balanced and unobtrusive as to be completely unnoticeable."

Alexander makes emphasises that we technology in Nature is not of the 'push button'

variety, but one that is highly integrated and closer to what nature intended. He points out that the curved glass seating alcove is under an air-purifier for the enjoyment of tobacco. The swivel Smart TV is supported by a giant, fibreglass black pebble where the audio-visual equipment with remote control is housed. Meanwhile, the entrance area is screened off by an abstracted, fan-shaped Leaf that could easily be an organic-looking, bespoke heating

or cooling radiator for winter or summer – a possibility that is not pursued in this particular project. "Technology here is not Dyson, but more like Le Corbusier in his early Purism. Functions are updated with technology wherever necessary and appropriate." **ALEXANDER WONG ARCHITECTS AND INTERIOR DESIGNERS**, Suite 1701 17/F, Lucky Building, 39 Wellington Street, Central Hong Kong, Tel: (852) 2526 3017, [www.alexanderwong.com.hk/](http://www.alexanderwong.com.hk/)

The design of the space demanded several bespoke and custom elements that Alexander conceived specifically for the project. The gleaming vanity with curvaceous underside volume and the light-ringed mirror offer a unique element in the streamlined bathroom. Cupboard doors in the kitchen, meanwhile, suggest high-tech data files, the cut on their corner serving as door handles.

