

Serenity in style



Singaporean designer Robert Cheng tackles his largest-ever project by infusing calm and elegance into this grand Hong Kong penthouse, observes CHARMIAN LEONG

Photography LIT MA/Common Studio Limited



Occupying the entire 30th floor of The Morgan in Hong Kong's Upper Mid-Levels, this penthouse apartment features an extensive terrace with views of the beautiful green expanse of Victoria Peak



RESIDENCE



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he mighty Chinese buyers can be both a bane and boon to designers who want their business but may balk at their less-than-subtle tastes. Singapore designer Robert Cheng however, saw it as neither when Phoenix Property Investors commissioned his firm to depict the interior of The Morgan penthouse. His Brewin

Design Office did as they'd always done: Go slow and create a calming space full of curated pieces for a unique space.

The penthouse sits atop The Morgan, a luxury residential tower designed by New York-based Robert AM Stern Architects on Conduit Road. Occupying the entire 30th floor of the building, it spans 3,962 sq ft, which includes five bedrooms (one of which has been turned into a study) and a 1,461-sq-ft private outdoor area from which to take in breathtaking views of Victoria Peak.

The view from the living room, however, was less than ideal. "The first thing we were asked to do was find a way to block the views of the surrounding buildings since the window facade faces north into the crowded city," he says. After testing numerous variations, he achieved this with remote-controlled vertical fins made of white oak. To further draw attention away from the concrete jungle, the other side of the room features 30m-long wallpaper by Brooklyn-based company Calico behind the fins. The abstract expressionist design, with its splashes of gold, silver and pastel colours, was customised by Cheng and his team. "We treated the whole thing like an installation. The fins envelop the living room like a skin so you don't feel the wall anymore," he explains.

In the same area you'll find the dining room, where a 73-piece blown glass chandelier by Apparatus hangs over a 12-seat dining table like an inverted bunch of balloons. No pillars or walls divide the space, and a palette of cream, pale blues and greens — inspired, he says, by the mountain and the tinted windows of the neighbourhood's 1980s-style buildings — unifies the overall aesthetic. The airy calm is punctuated by accessories in dark lacquer as an ode to Chinese art deco.

While the penthouse enjoys high ceilings, Cheng had a different idea for the master bedroom. "High ceilings feel luxurious but I felt it took away the intimacy you need in a master bedroom, so I lowered the ceiling by building a timber cube in the rectangular space; think of it as a room within a room," he shares.



The lift lobby (left) and its gallery-inspired entrance foyer serve as an elegant "bridge" to connect the outdoor and indoor living areas

Opposite page: Tones of the skyline and harbour take centre stage in the living and dining rooms, where blues and silvers contrast with burnt umber, blacks and natural timber



From left: Of the five distinctively themed bedrooms, the Guest Suite has a separate entrance, with direct access to the outdoor living and dining area; the Master Suite is given a sense of intimacy with bespoke silk wall coverings

"It's different from what you'd expect from many Hong Kong apartments," he admits, before adding that attracting Chinese buyers often involve lots of shiny metals, silk and giant chandeliers. "We wanted a juxtaposition with that type of typology with older, textured materials: Oak with rough finishes, butterfly hooks that latch onto cracks in gnarled wood, lacquers that contrast with the bronze, leather and exotic wood patterns."

The Tatami Room best exemplifies his desire for zero ostentation. The floor was raised to give the illusion of floor-to-ceiling windows, and earthy hues and a specially designed tatami-like fabric flooring set the stage for the unimpeded view of the greenery outside.

The building's architecture was another source of inspiration for Cheng, particularly for the outdoor space. Featuring its own living and dining area, the terrace houses a vertical garden that echoes the massive 12m-tall one found on the facade of the building.

This is Brewin Design Office's largest residential project to date, and it took 13 months to complete. "You have firms out there that can pound out a project in two months. But we don't see it as going on a shopping spree in Singapore and picking out whatever's available to fill a flat with," he says. Instead, he used that time to commission and build custom furniture as well as travel the world, sniffing out antiques and browsing flea markets for accessories to add personality to an empty residence that has yet to develop its own. "I like to blend new items with old and found ones. It's all carefully curated, but not heavily planned."

The biggest challenge here was simply maintaining a balance between Cheng's proclivity for minimalism and the Phoenix Property Investors' need for something more obviously opulent. "When its CEO saw some of the apartments we've designed here, he told us we'd need to dial it up for The Morgan because we were selling to the Chinese," he recalls. "Understated is not

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really equated to luxury here; every pillow in the room at The Ritz-Carlton in Kowloon is a different colour, for instance. So I had to find a way to present enough colours and materials for it to be glitzy, but not so many I'd have a hard time doing it."

Aside from consistently striving for timelessness in his designs, Cheng confesses his firm doesn't have a set vision or formula — and he prefers it that way. "When I was working under (architect) Calvin Tsao, I picked up the mandate that anything that comes to the table should be thought of as a design project, whether it's a doorknob, faucet or table setting for a gala dinner," he says. "So now we have the joy of not having to pigeonhole ourselves into a particular scale or speciality. We just like the idea of approaching design — any sort of design — in an intuitive way, and will take on anything that comes." /PL

With 3,962sq ft of interior space and 1,461sq ft of outdoor area — unprecedented for apartments in the heart of Mid-Levels — Brewin Design Office's Robert Cheng determined to combine intimacy and soul with a public expression

