

Chan's Encounters

Travelling the world and meeting people from different walks of life has shaped the artistic beliefs of Candice Chan, founder of J Candice Interior Architects

The receptionist at the front desk of J Candice Interior Architects reaches under her desk and presses a hidden button. Obliging, the door leading to the company's conference room slides open. If it wasn't for the fact that the entire wall was made of glass, it would seem as if the concealed entrance to a superhero's lair had suddenly manifested itself.

Within the bright white room, with its trendy back-painted glass and green tree-filled view over Kowloon Park, I am confronted with another oddity. A miniscule desk, barely half a metre wide and not much more than a metre long, is set in the middle of the room, hardly filling a space more traditionally reserved for a large conference table. A single chair has been placed on either side. When I sit down, I can't even fit my knees underneath the table. Instead have to cross my legs and turn at an awkward forty-five-degree angle. Is this some sort of rite of passage in the world of interior design that I'm clearly unaware of?

From the corner of my eye, I see Candice Chan approaching the dividing

glass wall. The receptionist dutifully reaches under her desk and the door swiftly glides open once again. Tall and incredibly slim, 26-year-old Chan owns and runs this fledgling company. During the previous week's photo shoot at Shore, the palatial restaurant and bar situated in L Place in Central, Chan easily pulled off glamorous for the cameras, just as she does whenever she is snapped at events about town. Today her hair is tied back and she is dressed more casually, looking much more like a typically busy interior architect. This is a more than appropriate look for Chan. On an average day, she might spend the morning travelling around Kowloon or the New Territories, whilst meeting with clients and landlords. Typically, the afternoon sees her returning to the office to manage her team and conjure up designs for the numerous projects the company is committed to.

She takes her place on the opposite side of the table and immediately turns her attention to the room's peculiar selection of furniture. She says: "Sorry, I've just moved into this office so it's kind of empty right now. We have this huge conference room, but no table. I bought a table in Bali—it's ten times cheaper than in Hong Kong—but it's not here yet."

Chan established J Candice—the "J" comes from her mostly unused first name,

Find out who Chan would choose to renovate her own house and what her dream project would be by watching the additional online video interview at www.igafencu.com



Leopard print one-shoulder dress by Gucci Cruise collection; Maxi Diamond Game bracelet in yellow gold with diamonds; Violet Fantasy ring and Diamond Juliet ring from the Chocolate Fantasy Collection, all by Wellendorff



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Jacqueline—in 2009, setting up her first office in Central. For the first six months, she worked alone, meeting personally with all her clients and landlords. She was simultaneously the messenger, the account manager, the designer and, in fact, anything else that was required. She says: “I dedicated all my hours and all my time to work. I worked until four in the morning and then I’d be up again at nine, going to meetings. I’ve lost ten pounds since setting this company up. The most challenging part was finding the balance between my work life and personal life. It took six months for me to learn, but now it’s much better. Now I also have my staff to rely on.”

Chan was born and raised in Hong Kong and is the daughter of Michael Chan, the well-known chairman of Café de Coral Holdings. She went to primary school at the prestigious Maryknoll

Convent School in Kowloon Tong, before switching to the Canadian International School of Hong Kong for her middle and high school years. She demonstrated an early talent for drawing and excelled at art, music and sports, much preferring these subjects to more technical subjects, especially maths. After high school she moved overseas and studied interior design for four years at Syracuse University in New York, graduating *summa cum laude* with a bachelor of fine arts degree.

Instead of heading straight back to Hong Kong, she stayed in New York, working for a firm that specialised in

refurbishing old buildings in order to create new and usable spaces. She was involved with several high-profile projects, including the resurrection of a former Broadway theatre from the 1900s on 48th Street, the conversion of a decommissioned fire station into a chic, modern building for a radio station and the re-invention of a dilapidated warehouse as a stylish new recreational centre, complete with galleries, a bar and a restaurant.

These historically focused projects have had a noticeable impact on Chan’s own stylistic leanings. She says: “It’s still a little early for me to place myself in a certain

“Go to different places and broaden your horizons. To truly understand design, you have to go out and feel it, experience it and touch it”

2 White dress with black strap and belt by *Bottega Veneta Cruise collection*

3 White printed dress with leather strap by *Gucci Cruise collection*

category or to identify my own particular style, but I am especially attracted to a more modern-classic look.

“The first company I worked for specialised in revamping historical buildings and this both inspired me and introduced me to the notion of giving new meaning to old, historical spaces.” Asked if, one day, she would like to return to those sorts of projects, she says: “I would love to, definitely. I think it would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to revamp something like an old, historical church.”

Such a project would, unfortunately, be rather difficult in Hong Kong, a city known for its preference for tearing down old buildings rather than re-inventing them. Chan says: “I see a lot of old places torn down here. I recently passed by an old residential building from the 1950s. Someone bought it and then tore the whole thing down. I found that devastating. I would love to see more work go into revamping, keeping the old shell of a building and doing something new with it.”

Since starting her company, Chan has worked on some 30 different projects, most



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of them relating to restaurants dotted around Hong Kong. She has worked with a number of well-known brands, notably Oliver’s Super Sandwiches and Spaghetti House, on several of their outlets. She has also contributed to a number of stand-alone projects, including Congee House and ME.N.U. in Tai Wo, as well as a Spanish restaurant, Viva Ana, in Wanchai. Aside from restaurants, she has also dabbled in office space, spa, retail and residential projects.

She recently completed a project for Café de Coral in Taikoo Shing, which saw her take the fast-food restaurant into its “fifth generation” of outlets. Moving away

from the restaurant’s recent penchant for a dark, sleek image, the fifth generation has seen the introduction of natural materials, such as stone and veneers. For Chan, there is also an additional significance to working with Café de Coral, one that relates to her initial desire to become an interior designer.

She says: “When I was younger, around 10 years old, my father would take me to these dusty, dirty construction sites. We would walk through the half-built Café de Coral shops and he would ask me what I would do with the space. From then on, I knew I wanted to be an interior designer and I knew I wanted to have my own firm

by the age of 30. Working with Café de Coral now, it feels like coming home, as though I'm doing something that's truly close to my heart."

Being the daughter of a successful businessman comes with its obvious advantages when setting up your own company, though Chan maintains that she doesn't overly rely on her father. She says: "I can always turn to him for advice and I know he'll give me guidance, especially in terms of business. I've learnt a lot of things from him. He's very hard-working, he works seven days a week and I've learnt that dedicating all your time and effort to your business is very important. In terms of the design aspect, though, I do my own thing. Design is very personal and you don't want to be sidetracked by other people. You just want to have your own style and thoughts and follow them through."

As with many naturally talented designers, those thoughts and ideas tend to come easily to Chan. After listening to what clients are looking for, she finds that she is normally able to walk into a space and that "the ideas would just jump into me". She attributes many of these ideas to past experiences and, in particular, to her extensive travels, which have provided her with a deep well of inspiration to draw on in Hong Kong.

She says: "I like countries that have a very long history, countries where you can see prime architectural examples of buildings with a rich historical past. Whilst I was at college, I travelled around South America, visiting places such as Argentina and Peru. I like those kinds of exotic locales. Vietnam, Cambodia, Beijing—all

of these are great sources of inspiration. I find Japan especially inspiring. I've loved Japan for a very long time. I love the contrast of the old buildings and the modern touches coexisting in the same place. You can walk past an old temple on the street and then there's a modern skyscraper right next to it.

"Whether you're based in New York or London or anywhere, if you love design you have to go and explore, you have to travel. Go to different places to broaden your horizons. Design is not something you can learn from a book, no matter how much you read or how many pictures you see. You really can't experience that kind of feeling. To truly understand design, you have to go out and feel it, experience it and touch it."

She likens the interior design scene in Hong Kong to the fashion clothing scene—it changes every year and every season there's something new. Across Asia she notices that changes in taste take place more rapidly than in the rest of the world, but she says that there is also a tendency to follow the leader. She cites the example of back-painted glass, the material that makes up two walls of her conference room, as a new trend in Hong Kong, but one that is rapidly becoming ubiquitous. She says: "In New York, everyone has their individual characters reflected in their space. Different people have different tastes. In Hong Kong it's like someone sets the trend—something

“In New York, different people have their own different tastes. In Hong Kong, someone sets the trend and then everyone follows suit ”

becomes the most stylish—and then everyone follows suit."

She is currently working with both Oliver's Super Sandwiches and Spaghetti House on creating new, younger aesthetics for both brands, as well as a secret project, Cooking Mama 360, out at the airport. Her long-term goal for the business, though, is to set up on the mainland in either a first- or second-tier city. Rather than this being a financial goal, she is motivated by other factors entirely. She says: "For me—and I think for many designers in Hong Kong—China appeals because there is a much bigger space to work with. The interiors are bigger, the ceilings are higher—you have much more freedom when you work to that kind of scale.

"I'm working on a spa at the moment in Hong Kong. I have 600 square feet and I have to fit five rooms into it, including a pedicure and manicure section, as well as a nail-polishing room, a consultation room and a spa room. In Hong Kong everything has to be small and multifunctional. It's very challenging."

Although it's still relatively early days for her business, I ask Chan what has been her greatest success has to date. She takes a few moments to think, before saying: "Let's see...for now I would have to say moving into my new office. That would have to be it, but I wish you would ask this in 20 years time." Memo to self... ■



Floral printed chiffon dress by D&G Cruise collection; Princess necklace in white gold with blueberry rondel; Starry Dream earrings in white gold, both by Wellendorff