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DESIGN VISIONARY

**Candice Chan, Award-Winning
Interior Design Guru**

September 2020 HK\$25



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Video

D *esign* *Perspective*

*Candice Chan, Founder of J
Candice Interior Architects, on
the inspirations behind her award-
winning interior designs*



As the founder and creative director of J Candice Interior Architects, Candice Chan shares her unique views on Hong Kong's interior design scene, the benefits of the female perspective and the trials and triumphs of balancing motherhood with a successful career...

Can you describe your journey to becoming an interior designer?

I was pretty much born and raised in Hong Kong and spent my childhood until high school here. After graduating, I enrolled in New York's Syracuse University, majoring in interior design. I then moved to New York City and worked for a mid-sized architectural firm which specialised in historical preservation work. I worked there for three years, and that was my first job as an interior designer.

I still remember my first day there, when my advisor asked me to meet her at an old Broadway theatre in Manhattan. Everything was under scaffolding and we had to walk up a staircase to reach the top. Once there, I saw that we had reached the theatre's ceiling, and there were all these artists

doing restoration work on the crown moldings and paintings... It was stunning to see all of that in action, and it made a big impression on me.

Did you always know you wanted to be an interior design?

I think I did once want to become a shoe designer or an animal trainer or something to that end when I was a child, but by the age of 13 or 14, I naturally gravitated towards interior design. I think what really steered me towards that passion was seeing my parents – who were in the F&B business – launch new restaurants. They'd always take me along to construction sites and ask me what I imagined the space would look like, and I would immediately conjure up everything from colours and textures to how customers would interact with the area. I even told myself that I would have to set up my own design firm by the time I turned 30.





*“It’s not just the visual aspects
of travel that inspire me, it’s the
emotions and atmospheres as well”*

And did you manage to fulfil your childhood dream?

Actually yes, and even earlier than my target age! When my husband moved to Hong Kong 10 years ago, I followed him back here and decided to launch my own business – J Candice Interior Architects.

What is the driving philosophy behind J Candice Interior Architects?

Well, being led by a female designer, we offer a different point of view. In general, we’re great listeners, so we really emphasise listening to the client’s design brief to get a true understanding of exactly what they’re looking for. Also, as a woman, the ego enters the equation a lot less. Rather than putting our own personality into a project, for example, we’re dedicated to placing the client’s interest in the foreground and following their exact vision.

Where do you find inspirations for your designs?

Well, we have a very broad portfolio – commercial properties, F&B, kindergardens, hotels – we like doing all sorts of things, and travel is pretty much the main source of inspiration for these designs. It’s not just the visual and physical aspects of things I see abroad, but it’s also the emotion and atmosphere they evoke. For example, my husband and I visited a tango club in Argentina years ago, and I still remember the energy, the thrumming music, the vibrant dancing... and this is something I’ve drawn upon when creating spaces like that now.

Of all the designs you’ve worked on, are there one or two that are particularly close to your heart?

Yes, definitely. Where we are right now at the private boxes of the Jockey Club Happy Valley Racecourse is a great example of a personal creation that I’m especially proud of. The boxes have a stunning view of the racecourse and parade ground, and it’s a place where you can really entertain your friends and family, have great pet encounters and so forth. Those who know me know I love to place a few bets, so this project really allowed me to work on something that personally connects with me.

Another special one would be redesigning the Mandarin Oriental, Hong Kong’s cake shop. It’s a place where my now-husband and I used to while away



plenty of afternoons when we were still dating, so it really resonated with me emotionally to be able to envision a new concept for the space.

What are some upcoming projects that you're looking forward to?

We're currently building the Radison Red Hotel in Guangzhou, which is a 10-minute walk from the Guangzhou train station. It has 180 rooms and includes restaurants and function rooms, all of which we're designing so that's super exciting for us. We also have a few upcoming F&B outlets at the soon-to-open Grand Lisboa Palace in Macau. In particular, we are working on a 20-seat Japanese restaurant to be led by a Michelin-starred chef from Japan, and I'm thrilled to be helming that design as well.

You've received a plethora of awards over your career, most recently including the Asia Pacific Interior Design Award by the Hong Kong Interior Design Association. Which one means the most to you and why?

It's always an honour to receive awards, and it's a great recognition for the entire team. Having said that, I don't set out to chase awards, I'm more content when I walk into the office everyday and make a living out of doing something I love. If I had to choose an award, though, it would be the first one, the "Most Promising Young Lady" award I received. I received that accolade when I'd just started out, and it was hugely gratifying to have someone else recognise my talents when I still wasn't certain of how much I'd eventually achieve. It was definitely a major confidence booster at the time.

What are some of the challenges faced by Hong Kong interior designers compared to their international counterparts?

In Hong Kong, the major challenges that interior designers like us face is probably space limitations. Everything is on a much smaller scale than you'd find elsewhere because land is so expensive here. Also, there's not much variety in the layout of space or landscapes. It's rather repetitive.

Ultimately, this means everyone emphasises things like storage areas and space efficiency, rather than opting for a more innovative approach. In a way, it limits our creative capacity, but it also has the happy benefit of making us more adaptable and flexible in our designs.

Can you share a major obstacle you've faced in your career, and how you overcame that?

This year! 2020 has been a challenge for everyone in Hong Kong, for everyone in the whole world. A lot of projects we'd undertaken were put on hold once Covid-19 hit at the beginning of the year, including several F&B outlets, and some were even cancelled because of the economic situation.

"Covid-19 pushed me to take on different types of projects, so it was something of a blessing in disguise"

It was obviously tough, but I just tapped into a different mental zone and set out to find new opportunities instead. At the time, there was a sudden influx of residential projects, maybe contributed to by the fact that people who were stuck at home suddenly decided that it was time to renovate and refurbish their houses. In the past, I was a little reluctant to venture into the residential side of design, because I was afraid I'd get too attached to those kinds of projects, but Covid-19 was just the push I needed to get my feet wet. The past few months has seen us pick up several residential ventures and learn new things, so it was a bit of a blessing in disguise.

As a female business owner, do you find it difficult to balance your career and motherhood?

Definitely. I have three little ones at home aged seven, four and one-and-a-half, so they need my attention constantly. Obviously, I make sure that I meet all my work responsibilities, but as a mother, you don't want to miss out on any milestones, especially when they're so young. So I try to attend all their school activities and ensure I'm home for dinner every day. Growing up, my parents had a similar rule, and I really enjoyed having that time to talk with my mum and dad, so I want to encourage a similar atmosphere with my kids. Playing with them and watching them grow is really my biggest hobby right now.

Finally, if you could visit any place on Earth, past or present, when would it be and why?

I once saw a photograph taken by legendary Swiss photographer René Burri in the '60s of two monks in Kyoto bowing to each other, and there was something so romantic and organic that really made me want to be there. I think the world today is so full of technology and bright lights and so much constant stimulation that you can never really switch off.

Thank you. 📍

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