



STORYTELLERS

Ed Ng discusses AB Concept's design philosophy and how it translates into work on high-profile projects, such as the W Beijing Chang'an hotel and Cé La Vi Hong Kong. *By Jacqueline Kot*

Unlike some interior design firms, AB Concept co-founders Ed Ng and Terence Ngan chose not to develop a trademark style. Instead, they have adopted a storytelling approach to every project, resulting in a high level of customisation and a solid portfolio of clients.

How is AB Concept's approach to its projects different from other interior design agencies?
 We see ourselves as "storytellers of space." With every project we do, we try to find a story that we can tell through the design—it all depends on the emotion that we want to create with the space. The AB in our name stands for "architectural" and "bespoke." We felt that we

shouldn't develop a specific style. When you start with a certain style in mind, you are defined and limited by it. This makes it different from other firms in the market—we don't sell a signature look.

What are some of the latest developments and trends in design that you are particularly excited about?
 I feel we have reached an age in design where style is

not segmented into certain categories. People are open-minded because of the increased flow of information and social media, and trends move fast. It reinforces the belief Terence and I have that you should go for a story and not a style.

AB Concept does both residential and commercial projects. What are some of the common misconceptions on what should go into a design of a private residence that you have come across?
 With a commercial project such as a hotel or restaurant, you need to fulfil a brand image or meet criteria based on the owner's agreement. With a private residence, everything becomes subjective and personal. The home becomes

part of the heritage and legacy of the owner—and this is what makes designing a home so exciting.

We find with showroom flats in Hong Kong—because they are there to impress and increase sales—the showroom is often linked to a designer or luxury design brand as a way to upsell the property. But when it comes to what high-net-worth individuals want for their homes, we find that it is almost the opposite. They want comfort and relaxation; they may spend a lot on the carpet or a piece of furniture. But we feel that they care less about the brand and more about the comfort level. This is particularly true if the client wants their home to truly be a retreat and won't use it much for entertaining.

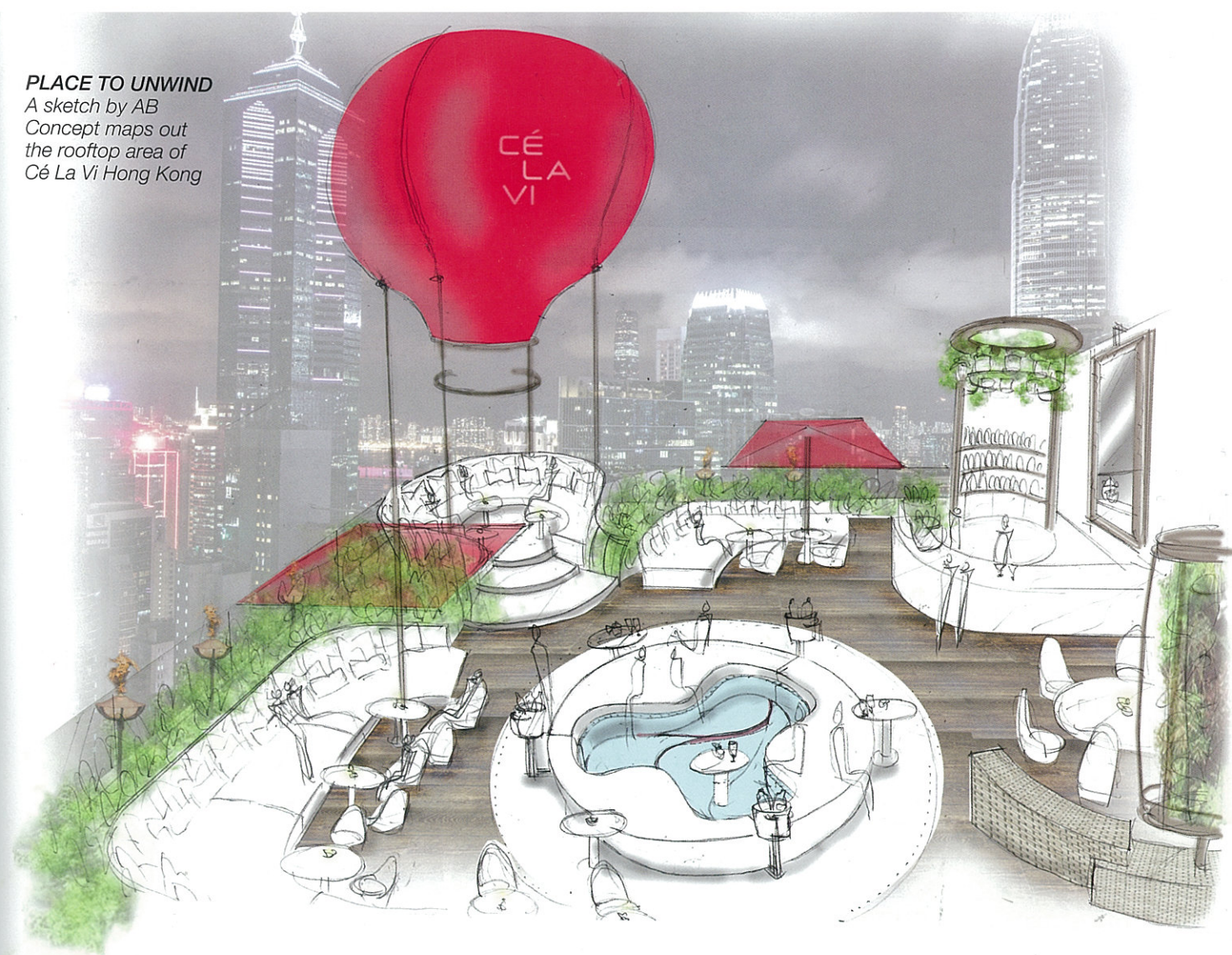


CREATIVE CYCLE
 From left: A sketch by AB Concept's team for Cé La Vi Hong Kong's dining area; AB Concept co-founder Ed Ng at the firm's stylish office in Causeway Bay



PLACE TO UNWIND

A sketch by AB
Concept maps out
the rooftop area of
Cé La Vi Hong Kong



Hotels make up a significant portion of AB Concept's portfolio of clients. How do you stay true to your company's design ethos of telling a story through the space while adhering to the client's brand standards?

It has come to the point where we don't mind whether or not someone can recognise if this was an AB Concept design at first glance. Terence and I want the decor to impress people first, and then surprise them by the fact that it was done by AB Concept. Therein lies the skill of how to tell a story with the space—it's all down to how we create the materials, furniture and lighting to tell a story. As we don't adhere to a signature style, we feel this makes us one of the few companies that can design both a W hotel and a

Four Seasons property at the same time.

A case in point is the W Beijing Chang'an, which we designed. How do you take a hip brand like the W and have it fit in a capital city like Beijing? One thing we did was to use a square configuration for the lobby, so it felt more opulent. We also kept repeating certain aspects of the decor, such as these dots of lights, throughout the property. These design elements are very characteristic to the city of Beijing.

What are some of the design elements that you and your team try to take into account when you are designing a restaurant?

When people are in a restaurant, they're sitting in the same space for a long time.

Their eyes will be wandering all over the entire room, so you have to place importance on the level of detail in the decor. People will notice such details because they've been sitting down for such a long time, and they will either appreciate or criticise it.

What was the design concept behind Cé La Vi Hong Kong?

The brand started out in Bali so it has an Asian heritage. Then LVMH bought the brand and brought it to the cities; the company wanted it to be a retreat destination in an urban jungle. As LVMH wants to roll out the brand on an international scale, the colour palette has also evolved from the first property, Ku De Ta in Bali. It is now dominated by shades of red. Other key elements to the brand

include the centrepiece in the dining area, the chandelier covered by green plants and the circular "nests" area for the couches.

Cé La Vi has five brand pillars—cuisine, venue, entertainment, design and mixology. For Cé La Vi Hong Kong, the aim is for people to go there for dinner, then drinks and some dancing, and finally ending with a relaxing drink or cigar on the rooftop. The time that a customer may spend in Cé La Vi is longer than the amount of time they will spend in a normal restaurant. So we had to make sure the decor evokes a consistent vibe throughout. Nothing was an afterthought; every element was planned and analysed to see if it matched with the overall scheme. ❶