

INTERIOR DESIGN[®]

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lights, camera, action

*There's nary a
shadow of Suzie
Wong at Sevva,
Tsao & McKown's
cinematic Hong
Kong restaurant*

text: edie cohen



Previous spread: Custom synthetic-wicker sofas line the plastic resin decking on the wraparound terrace at Sevva, a Hong Kong restaurant by Tsao & McKown Architects. Photography: Virgile Simon Bertrand.

Left, from top: In the formal dining room, a drywall partition and corresponding ceiling curve define the power table. A wall of ferns runs along one side of the lounge, with its vintage and custom furniture and cerused-oak flooring. Photography: Jimmy Coirssen. **Right:** A Candida Hofer photograph hangs above the formal dining room's built-in banquette. Photography: Virgile Simon Bertrand.

Opposite: A recess in the ceiling of the formal dining room is painted to resemble shade under a sunny sky. Photography: Virgile Simon Bertrand.



People in Hong Kong never tire of the views, be they the cityscape's kaleidoscopic light show or the sweeping harbor vistas. Plus, native Calvin Tsao says, "We Chinese eat all the time. Nibbles, snacks, power breakfasts, late breakfasts, lunch, tea, drinks." Then comes dinner, when the scene hits

high gear. All of this figured into the scheme of Tsao & McKown Architects's restaurant Sevva, an informal club with virtually 24-7 operations.

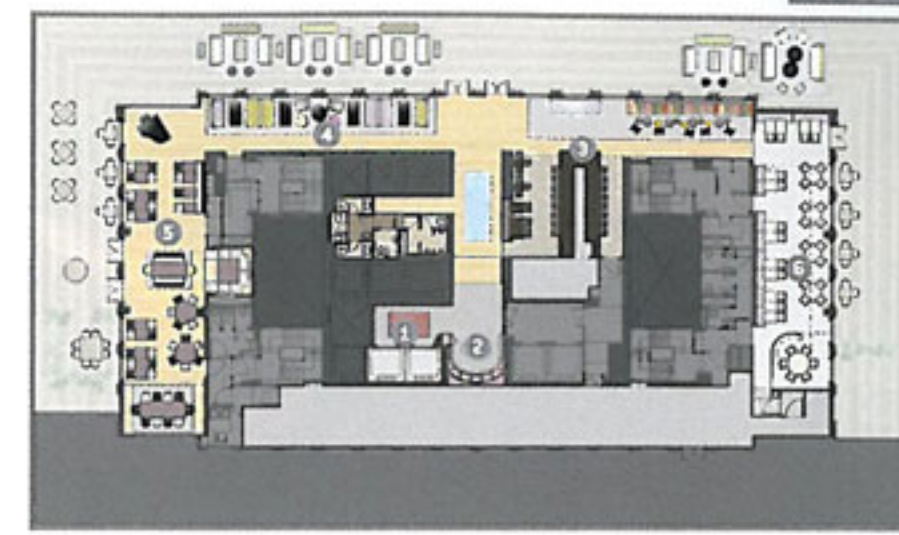
If Tsao begins conversation with the ins and outs of Hong Kong society, he knows whereof he speaks. He's a family friend of the restaurant's owner, the fashionable Bonnie Gokson—formerly regional image and communications director at Chanel Asia Pacific and currently an entrepreneur. Part of the program at Sevva, he notes, was to "socially engineer the landscape." Minutes later, talk turns to restaurant as theater, another area of expertise. Tsao studied acting, set and costume design, and lighting as an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, then moved on to directing at Carnegie Mellon University. (Ultimately, he got his graduate architecture degree at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, where he met his partner, Zack McKown.) "A good restaurant is like a seamless ensemble production," Tsao says. "In terms of design, we take a set and steer the analogy toward a script, i.e. a procession." In an Oscar-worthy performance, Tsao & McKown transformed the 13,000-square-foot 25th-floor penthouse of the 1960's mixed-use Prince's Building into a half dozen environments, each with distinctive decor.

Tsao & McKown placed the two dining rooms at the short ends of the rectangular floor plate, while spanning one long side is a kitchen to service them both—churning out an all-organic fusion of Western and Asian food. The remaining side is split between a lounge and a tapas bar. Each of these spaces doubles as the entry to the dining room beyond. They also flank the doors that open to the wraparound roof terrace, home of Hong Kong's trendiest after-work cocktail hour. ➤





- 1 ENTRY
- 2 PATISSERIE
- 3 TAPAS BAR
- 4 LOUNGE
- 5 CASUAL DINING
- 6 FORMAL DINING



0 10 20 40

Catering mostly to the business-lunch set, the formal dining room skews masculine. Think corporate conference room, only with banquette seating and stylized bergères covered in cotton-linen, since Hong Kong usually swelters. The power table is defined by a spiral drywall partition, playing into patrons' simultaneous desires for visibility and intimacy. Most tables have a view of the neighboring HSBC bank tower by Foster + Partners. Meanwhile, a wall-ful of Candida Höfer photographs lends interior vistas of such landmarks as Italy's Teatro Comunale di Bologna.

The airier, more casual harborside room presents what Gokson calls an "easy-glam" atmosphere. A ceiling vault lined in backlit fabric panels glows over an array of chairs. Armless ones at center tables sport solid or printed cotton covers; wingbacks referencing the 1930's keep company with reproduction Shaker benches. The benches surround a rectangular stained-oak table for 10, near a semiprivate niche that seats eight. "In Asia, people tend to go out in dozens," Tsao says.

Sewa's real social hub, the long area split between the lounge and the tapas bar, is where Tsao and McKown's eclecticism is best displayed. The bar's clear acrylic klismos chairs, vintage finds, have jewel-toned pony-skin upholstery for punch. Moroccan-style cushions, covered in equally vibrant silks, form a banquette that stretches 30 feet. Steer's horns serve as the curved legs of stools. While stained-walnut planks run across the rear wall of the bar, a wall of ferns enlivens the lounge. Old bank chairs are reupholstered in tufted baby-blue silk, and a back-to-back sofa had its oak legs hand-carved and gold-flecked in London. "It cost an arm and, well, a leg," McKown admits. Although the ensemble reads ad hoc, this combined space was "the hardest," he adds. "We were obsessed within

Opposite: Backlit by color-changing fluorescent tubes, Ruth McDermott's embossed fabric panels line the 46-foot-long ceiling vault in the casual dining room. Photography: Virgile Simon Bertrand.

Top: The owner, Bonnie Gokson, commissioned the entry corridor's party-themed gouaches from Gladys Perint Palmer, a fashion illustrator.

Bottom: At one end of the corridor, a chandelier from the 1950's dominates the patisserie called Ms. B's Sweets. Photography: Jimmy Cohissen.





Left, from top: The casual dining room's custom furnishings include a stained-oak table and benches and a wool rug. Pony skin covers the cushions of the tapas bar's vintage acrylic chairs. **Right:** Above the bar proper, chromium-leafed wallpaper reflects light from Tom Dixon's pendant fixtures. Photography: Jimmy Cohnssen.

Opposite: Works by Nic Graham hang against the bar's stained-walnut walls. Photography: Virgile Simon Bertrand.



an inch of our lives." Obsessive detailing continues above the bar, where the architects punched a 9-foot-deep recess into the ceiling, lined the resulting void in chromium-leafed wallpaper, and hung 27 of Tom Dixon's brass pendant fixtures inside.

This being Hong Kong, feng shui governed many issues of placement. "It's in the Chinese

blood. They don't have to choose to buy in," Tsao says. Architect, in fact, comes in below feng shui master in the food chain. True to tradition, Gokson brought hers in first. For Western-trained Tsao and his American partner, the practice's commonsense flow holds particular appeal. Dead ends are inauspicious, so the central corridor now terminates at Ms. B's Sweets, a nook of a patisserie with a gigantic 1950's chandelier that used to hang in the British embassy in Rome. Because floor-through transparency is another taboo, Tsao & McKown stretched out the arrival sequence as long as possible. "At Seva, we have a spectacular view, but it doesn't open up immediately," Tsao explains. "In Western terms, that builds up the drama."

Incidentally, the name Seva is not Chinese but Indian. It's Sanskrit for service to the highest form. ॐ

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