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08.10

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Up, up and away

Space is at a premium in densely populated Hong Kong but that was never going to cramp Andre Fu's sky-high plans for the ultra-spacious, hi-tech The Upper House

Story **David Meagher**

Size matters in Hong Kong. Or at least when it comes to hotel rooms it does. Tell an in-the-know Hong Kong local that you're staying at swanky new hotel, The Upper House, in the Admiralty district and after a bit of impressed eyebrow-raising the most likely response will be along the lines of "did you know it has the biggest rooms in Hong Kong?"

Space is a luxury item in the increasingly cramped special administrative region of Hong Kong. More than seven million people share just 1100sqkm of land, making it the fourth most densely populated region on Earth. So it's little wonder that size, rather than views or amenities (although The Upper House is spectacular in both regards), is a selling feature when it comes to hotel rooms.

The guest rooms at The Upper House are not only big by Hong Kong standards, they'd be considered on the large size no matter where they were. The "smallest" of the hotel's 17 rooms is an impressive 68sqm and they feel more like the suites of other hotels. There's a small hallway, a large and light-filled living and sleeping area, a dressing room and a palatial bathroom, all with magnificent views.

The hotel was designed by the Hong Kong-based, Cambridge-educated wunderkind architect Andre Fu and his firm AFSo. What you won't find at The Upper House is a luxurious day spa to be pampered in or an infinity swimming pool to lounge by or a statement lobby to leave you gasping for superlatives. In fact, The Upper House barely has a lobby at all. Fu, instead, did what many designers would have thought unthinkable: he eschewed the standard bearers of luxury in other Hong Kong hotels (the soaring lobbies, the pools) to give more space to the guest rooms.

"There's no spa here and there's only one restaurant but the rooms are really big and, surprisingly, people often ask me what's going on with that," says Fu. "It's about giving people space because you stay in a hotel not to be in the lobby, but to be in your room and so that's where the space should be. We hope the rooms will have a rejuvenating effect instead of a spa."

The Upper House was the second establishment to be opened by Swire Hotels in Asia, following The Opposite House in Beijing in 2008. Since then it has opened East, a business hotel on Hong Kong Island, which welcomed its first guests in January, and there are plans to open the group's first property in the UK later this year. The Upper House sits above Pacific Place shopping centre and occupies the top 13 floors of an otherwise nondescript tower (the Marriott hotel is on the lower levels). It used to be a bland collection of serviced apartments and Fu's brief from the hotel's owners was, he says, just two words: "calm and comfort".



"A poetic, upward journey": Andre Fu in the hotel's SkyLounge.

His idea was to create an urban oasis and for it to be what he calls "a total environment". Fu, therefore, has designed every aspect of the hotel, from the furniture to the light fittings, and was consulted on the staff uniforms, the scent used in public areas, the floral arrangements and the artworks hanging on the walls.

This is a rare commission for any architect but even rarer when you consider that Fu was 30 years old when he won the job. "I was thrilled," he says. "At the time I had only been working in Hong Kong for just over two years and I was fairly young. An opportunity like this, in such a prime location, is extremely challenging, not just because of its scale but because it was created from what I call a singular vision for the entire hotel. There were probably about 30 different consultant parties involved so the challenge was really to drive that vision and communicate it to every single party to ensure that the resulting product is something that is truthful to the original vision."

"I don't know if it's a rare thing for a client to give an architect a brief to design everything but I tend to do it quite often. It's about creating a total experience. I wouldn't

necessarily say it's important to design everything but at least to have someone that can oversee the whole thing and understand it and see that it's consistent."

Fu's work has included private homes, most notably for actress Michelle Yeoh, although he says he doesn't do much residential work these days. His design office has created restaurants in Hong Kong, London, Tokyo, Shanghai and Singapore as well as a concept store for Agnes B in Hong Kong. On his drawing board at the moment is a gym in Hong Kong and what he describes as "a spin-off brand for an existing hotel brand". The next project due for completion is the Fullerton Bay Hotel in Singapore.

A guided tour of The Upper House with Fu starts with the presentation of a thick rectangular card that is like a map to what Fu calls the hotel's "poetic, upward journey." We meet in the ground floor lobby, only it's not a lobby. Hotel guests arrive through a stone curtain, at street level, which was designed by Thomas Heatherwick, the Englishman behind the striking UK pavilion at Shanghai Expo. There's no check-in desk here. Instead guests are escorted up a very long escalator that takes them to a lobby space on the sixth floor, which is more like a lounge room in a super-chic, minimalist house.

Still no check-in to be seen. The Upper House has a paperless check-in process conducted on the journey upwards to your room by a concierge with a handheld device. It's just a taste of the hi-tech facilities to come. However, unlike many hotels that employ cutting-edge technology for guest facilities, the ones here not only work but feel intuitive. You won't find a printed compendium in your room, just an iPod Touch that has all the hotel's information and through which you can order room service. "I like technology when it's invisible," says Fu. "That's when it's brilliant, not when it's there just to wow you. Like when you're trying to do something simple like plug in your laptop to the powerboard on the desk, when you flip down the lid, it all just fits. All these little things we spend time on so that it not only looks cool but that it works." Another example of this attention to detail is the motion sensors in the rooms – their function is to let housekeeping staff know the room is occupied and so ensure guests are not disturbed.

The journey upwards through The Upper House takes guests to the Atrium Void, which spans the levels that houses the rooms and suites and culminates in the SkyLounge on level 49 of the tower. This lounge is a communal area where guests can relax, enjoy a drink or a snack. In a way, it fulfils the function that a lobby would in other hotels. Walk across the SkyBridge and you're at Cafe Gray Deluxe, the hotel's restaurant run by chef Gray Kunz.

Creating the idea of a journey or a storyline is how Fu likes to approach a brief. "Whenever I take on a project,"

Osaka-born sculptor
Hiroshi Watanabe's
stainless steel sculpture *Rise*
climbs the walls of the atrium
in The Upper House.





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- 01** Marvin Mintzfang's sculptures can be found in all rooms as well as in the sixth floor lobby space.
- 02** In the guest rooms, Fu's use of natural materials married with seamlessly proportioned spaces creates a "modern-Oriental residence".
- 03** Guests are transported to a higher plane via the hotel's very long escalator.
- 04** The lobby area on the sixth floor is "more like a lounge room in a super-chic, minimalist residence".



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he says, "it always starts with a storyline in mind and as much as I can I try to walk in the space and feel the space and take something from it."

Fu has used a variety of materials throughout the hotel, among them limestone, bamboo, nickel, marble, oak and bedonia stone, in an effort to create "a sophisticated, modern-Oriental residence". The hotel was designed with respect to balanced geometry and symmetry and, says Fu, with the intention of providing guests with a level of comfort similar to that of a stately home. "I guess you could say that it's a boutique hotel but it's not done with a boutique-hotel mentality. It's done with a five or six-star mentality." He doesn't like to talk about cost, parrying with "let's talk about time instead. The whole process from design through to completion took four years. That time was committed to making sure that everything happened in a particular way and was crucial, in my view, to the experience guests will have in the hotel."

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Shopping in Hong Kong

The Upper House is perfectly situated above Pacific Place shopping centre, which is undergoing a serious upgrade by British designer Thomas Heatherwick. Right on the hotel's doorstep is a branch of department store Lane Crawford plus luxury boutiques such as Joyce, Louis Vuitton, Burberry, Dunhill, Hermes and Cartier.

Not that that makes Pacific Place unique: European luxury houses are scattered across Hong Kong like Starbucks outlets in other cities. It's worth checking out the luxury temples on Canton Road on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong for their sheer size. There's a MTR (subway) station accessible via Pacific Place and, even though taxis in Hong Kong are cheap, the MTR is often the quickest way to get around.

Many island dwellers rarely venture to Kowloon, or "the other side" as they call it, but on Canton Road you'll find stores for Louis Vuitton, Prada, Gucci, Hermes, Chanel, Christian Dior and many others – and some are the size of a medium-sized Australian department store. For many of these brands, such as Louis Vuitton, Hong Kong is their biggest outpost outside the Paris mothership. But a word of warning: due to the size of these stores and their proximity to one another, they tend to be magnets for groups of cashed-up mainland Chinese tourists. So if you're not planning on spending a lot of money you might not get the most attentive


service. One store manager said it's nothing for a customer to drop \$HK1 million (\$150,000) in an afternoon, so by comparison that pair of shoes you're procrastinating over isn't really worth the commission.

For a more relaxed but no less fashionable shopping experience head to the Landmark shopping centre on Hong Kong Island. This used to be home to the luxury-brand megastores before Canton Road became the focus. These days it caters mainly to locals so the service is a little more polished and the vibe less frenetic.

Back on the Kowloon side, a new shopping mall that seems to specialise in high-end jewellery and watch boutiques has opened at the end of Canton Road, close to the Star Ferry terminal. Called Heritage 1881, the complex houses stores such as Van Cleef & Arpels, Cartier, IWC, Rolex, Mont Blanc and Paspaley.

At the IFC Mall you'll find boutiques and beauty stores as well as what has to be the most beautiful department store anywhere: Lane Crawford. It isn't a big department store by any means but its selection of brands and how they are presented will dazzle you every time you visit. From IFC you can walk back to Central and take the detour through Chater House, which, with the exception of a handful of stores, is like stepping into a Giorgio Armani universe with all his brands under one roof, including a book store, florist and chocolate shop.

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 Cathay Pacific (cathaypacific.com.au; 131 747) operates flights to Hong Kong from Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Brisbane and Cairns with up to four flights a day from Sydney to Hong Kong. The Upper House hotel (upperhouse.com) is at Pacific Place, 88 Queensway, Hong Kong. Rooms start at \$HK3000 (about \$450) a night.