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## *Hong Kong*

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# COOL KING OF SPACE

SOUGHT-AFTER ARCHITECT ANDRE FU SEES LUXURY AS ABOUT INDULGENCE RATHER THAN VISUAL EXCITEMENT, AN ETHOS BEST REFLECTED IN HIS CALM AND ELEGANT HOTEL SUITES

STORY **DAVID MEAGHER**



With views of Hyde Park and Knightsbridge, the Opus Suite at the Berkeley is a model of understated elegance





Clockwise from left, Inagiku Japanese restaurant at the W hotel in Guangzhou; Asian design sensation Andre Fu; Ist Too restaurant at the Shangri-La Istanbul, Fullerton Bay Hotel lobby, Singapore



**A**fter winning plaudits for his design of Hong Kong's hippest hotel, The Upper House, it's not surprising that the architect Andre Fu would receive commissions to design other luxury hotels. What is surprising is how one of the most prestigious of his subsequent commissions came about. The Upper House, as well as being a great hotel, is a complete design experience. Fu describes the design of The Upper House, which opened in Admiralty in Hong Kong in 2010, as a "total environment" in which he 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. The charm of The Upper House is in the generous size of the rooms (the smallest is 68sq m) which are minimal and understated. There are no wet-edge pools or day spa at this hotel, but it somehow succeeds in leaving guests feeling calm and relaxed in what is an otherwise frenetic city.

About 2½ years ago, one of those guests was an owner of the London-based Maybourne Hotel Group which includes some of the city's most storied hotels: Claridge's, the Connaught and the Berkeley. As Fu was preparing to leave work for the day, there was a knock on his office door in Central. "He had no appointment and he just came in and introduced himself as the owner of the Maybourne Hotel Group," recalls Fu. "We talked a little bit, which was

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just general chit-chat, and after a short while he mentioned the possibility of doing something together.”

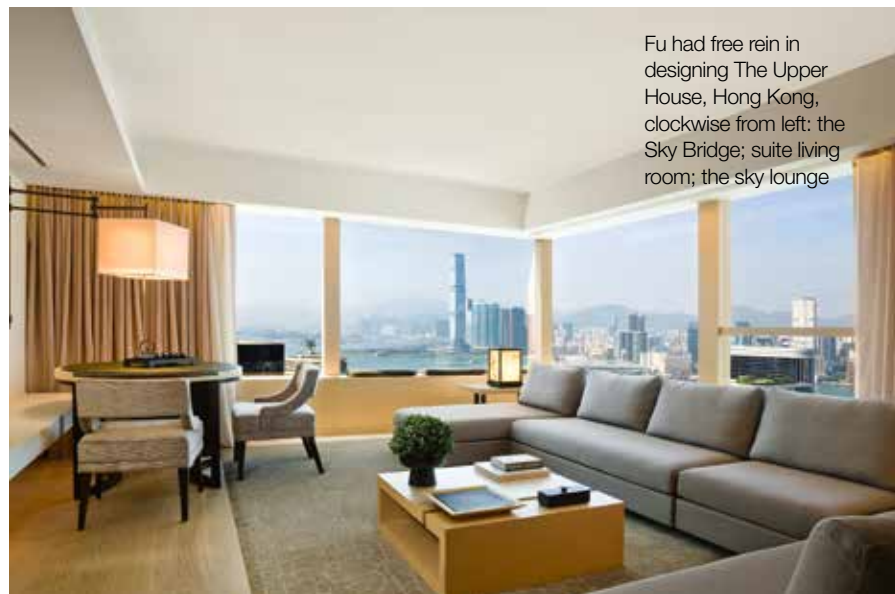
What Maybourne had in mind was a new premium suite for the Berkeley hotel in Knightsbridge. The suite, which opened late last year, occupies 278sq m on the hotel's fourth floor. It takes the place of five previous rooms and one suite and has 270-degree views of Hyde Park and Knightsbridge. To say that it's large is an understatement. The Opus Suite, as it is called, is one of the largest in London and has a master bedroom with two dressing areas, two enormous bathrooms, a dining room that can seat 10 people and a kitchen fit for a Michelin-starred chef. (In fact, the Berkeley's two Michelin chefs, Marcus Wareing and Pierre Koffmann, can be booked to

prepare dinner.) The artworks for the suite were commissioned by Fu, as were the carpets, the furnishings, the light fittings and every other minute detail. The price of the suite starts at £10,000 (about \$18,490) a night.

Fu was born in Hong Kong and educated in Britain, graduating from Cambridge University in 2000. The Opus Suite at the Berkeley is his first completed commission in Europe and, in designing it, he says, he wanted to differentiate the suite from other luxury hotels in London and in Europe in general. "Fundamentally, I think London has two main offerings in terms of suites," he says. "One is the very opulent, very decadent and classical style of suite typically with period furniture; and then the other type is a very a hi-tech, very sleek and very minimal type of suite that is not always very comfortable for the guest. I wanted to create something more residential. The idea for the kitchen was again something very residential but also a way to integrate the lifestyle of the Berkeley into the suite. I think of this suite as very architectural and proportionally very masculine, but the way we have broken the space up and used soft furnishings and fabrics and bespoke lighting breaks down that masculinity and gives it a much softer and more elegant appeal."

After graduating from Cambridge, Fu worked briefly in London before returning to Hong Kong in 2003 to establish his own architectural practice, AFSO, which now employs a team of 20 people. "I'm being honest when I say that I never really had a plan," says Fu. "I pretty much set up the office without any plans and I was kind of just helping friends with their projects and





Fu had free rein in designing The Upper House, Hong Kong, clockwise from left: the Sky Bridge; suite living room; the sky lounge



then I hired my first staff member in 2003 and one thing followed the other and here we are. I knew, however, that I wanted to use our base in Hong Kong as a bigger platform. A lot of designers who establish themselves in Hong Kong immediately look to mainland China for projects once they have a name here. Hong Kong is the benchmark and China is where you grow. I've taken on a slightly different perspective. I've done, I believe, reasonably well in Hong Kong but I've used Asia as my bigger platform, so that's where I see my career is."

His first commission was two restaurants for the JIA hotel in Shanghai, which started him on a trajectory that now places him as one of the world's pre-eminent hospitality industry designers specialising in five-star hotels, resorts and restaurants. "I enjoy doing hospitality design because I like that you are creating a total experience," he says. "A lot of people associate hospitality design with luxury, visual excitement, that kind of thing. But for me the purpose of good hospitality is to be indulged. It could be something very basic — it's just the thoughtfulness of it that makes it a hospitality experience."

As well as the Berkeley suite, AFSO has also designed the Fullerton Bay Hotel in Singapore, a restaurant at the recently opened Shangri-La Hotel in Istanbul, a restaurant at the W hotel in Guangzhou, as well as projects for Lane Crawford, Agnes B and a private residence for the actress Michelle Yeoh, among many others.

Next on Fu's drawing board is another London project, this time in one of the most anticipated hotels of

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the year — the Shangri-La London, which occupies floors 34-52 of the Renzo Piano-designed Shard building. Fu has designed the hotel's Gong bar on level 52, which will also be home to a swimming pool and a gymnasium. Fu is keeping mum about exactly how the two functions of the floor will work together, other than to say the space will "transform" at the end of the day "and the pool will then become an integral part of the bar. The space will have a very different energy to it from day to night". At the same time AFSO is working on a Waldorf Astoria hotel being built in Bangkok and a resort in Bali for Rosewood due to open next year.

The Upper House, owned by the Swire Group, would

have been a dream job for a young architect as the client more or less gave Fu carte blanche to create a new hotel. Understandably, Fu says this is his preferred method of working and, given the success of projects such as The Upper House and the Fullerton Bay Hotel, his clients are increasingly willing to give him free rein.

"The Upper House gave me a very good platform in terms of communicating a lot of the beliefs I have about design and about how to create a hotel experience that is a holistic one for the guest. We take a very hands-on role in most of the projects we're doing now," he says. "The Bali project is being built from the ground up and we are fundamentally doing the interiors. But as things go with the extent of trust we have, the amount of modifications that we've been allowed to implement into the shape of the building ... we are really creating something that is a total experience for the guest, and for me that's really important."

Despite the autonomy Fu commands, it doesn't mean he ignores his client's requests; in fact, he sees the design process as a collaborative one between architect, his team and his clients. "I really enjoy the process of design and sometimes the coolest things that come about in a design project are often through the interaction with a very experienced operator, experienced clients who actually know a lot about what they are doing and what their vision is. I've always thought that my role is trying to find a means to take that vision and translate it into something three-dimensional." 