



LUNCH WITH



ANDRÉ FU

Asia's design ace talks interiors at Café Gray Deluxe in the home of his best-known creation, Hong Kong hotel The Upper House

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André Fu takes a sip of sparkling water and a long, thoughtful pause as he considers my question from all angles.

It's not a particularly tough one, as questions go: I've asked Hong Kong's design star how he feels about returning to his projects after they're complete. We've just been seated at

a discreet window table in elegant eatery Café Gray Deluxe at The Upper House, the Hong Kong boutique hotel that sent Fu's reputation rocketing and, as he puts it, "got him noticed".

Looking around the restaurant, which is packed with sharp-suited businessmen and chic lunching ladies, Fu explains that





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he likes to stay in touch with clients and revisit past projects. "I honestly believe that the experience extends beyond the design itself. So it's important to continue to nurture the venue as it evolves," he tells me, choosing his words carefully.

This isn't the only question that Fu will take his time mulling over during the course of lunch; the considered approach is a trademark of this polite, softly spoken young man, who gives me his undivided attention throughout the meal.

However, I get the impression Fu is not entirely comfortable being in the spotlight. He arrives for our interview a few minutes late, accompanied by his PA – who apologetically explains they've

But it's in the world of hotels and hospitality that Fu has cemented his reputation. "Hotels are probably the most complete and holistic experience that you can create; you really interact with a lot of people through them," he observes, admitting that this hotel, in his home city, is particularly close to his heart.

"It's definitely opened a lot of doors. And although I don't consider myself to have a set style, The Upper House is perhaps more similar to something I would choose on a personal basis."

Fu's reluctance to put a label on his style is understandable, given the diverse nature of projects he works on. But his combination of elegance and discipline with sensuous

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rushed over from another meeting that overran – and we decide to kick off with the photo shoot before lunch.

Fu takes this in his stride, patiently posing and smiling, but there's an underlying air of resignation that suggests he'd avoid this side of things if he could. The in-demand designer has been the subject of significant media attention over the past few years; the words 'prodigy' and 'virtuoso' are frequently bandied about.

Although he may be comparatively young, Fu has a perceptible poise, hinting at the meticulous nature that has made him one of the world's most sought-after modern designers. Just into his mid-thirties, he already has a multitude of plum projects to his name, including the Fullerton Bay Hotel on Singapore's Marina Bay waterfront, glamorous Gong Bar at The Shard in London, and a pop-up Louis Vuitton luxury apartment here in his home city of Hong Kong.

Despite this controlled, professional demeanour, the occasional shy smile and a glimpse of low-top Lacoste sneakers paired with his sharply tailored suit are a reminder that Fu is not above a little fun. That's evident in many of his creations, from the modern urban environment of glass and mirrors installed on a Hong Kong pier to showcase a new collection from fashion brand COS, to the enchanting Shoe Library at the city's iconic Lane Crawford department store.

environments sympathetic to the needs of their end-users, has certainly struck a chord with global brands.

This versatile style, incorporating inspiration from around the globe, may be down to international experiences during his formative years. From the age of 14, Fu was educated in the UK – initially at a boarding school, then at Cambridge University.

Fu credits this period of his life with opening his eyes to a world of design. He spent much time visiting London galleries and exploring wider Europe, which introduced the art- and architecture-loving teen to the value of travel. "You're able to experience places on a first-hand basis, and at the same time observe the environment and the way people behave there," he explains.

Understanding how people will behave and interact with a venue is key to Fu's design process, particularly when it comes to hotels. "You have to really consider how the guests will enter and what they'll see; it's almost like choreography in a spatial sense," he says.

An unobtrusive waiter arrives with our starter: succulent slices of house-smoked salmon, wrapped in luscious layers over crisped brioche, decorated with fresh micro-herbs and flowers.

Under the direction of internationally renowned chef Gray Kunz, the 'Grand Café' style restaurant, with its classic European menu and glorious vistas over Victoria Harbour, has become the





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destination of choice for stylish business lunches, classy sunset cocktails and low-lit evening engagements.

"This is beautiful," says Fu appreciatively, turning his dish to admire the precise plating.

Unsurprisingly, art and aesthetics play a big role in Fu's world and have done since his youth, when he drew a great deal. "I don't so much nowadays though," he laughs nervously, perhaps concerned I'm about to demand he dash off a sketch on my notepad.

"I think the first artist I was really fascinated with was Mark Rothko – that sense of colour, the abstraction and the spatial quality his artwork has."

Fu's appreciation of art, space and his desire to create holistic design solutions led him to set up his boutique studio AFSO immediately after graduating in 2000. The company was established initially in London, before relocating to Hong Kong a few years later.

"I started my business quite early on, age-wise, so I'd like to think I still have a long career ahead," the designer says, emphasising that he doesn't want to be confined by previous successes.

"Obviously as a benchmark that's great," Fu clarifies. "But, for example, Upper House is a project that's been loved by a lot of people. I could just carry on and repeat that philosophy – whereas I've been quite conscious to foster things that are different.

"Variety is something I look for. So the pop-up project we did with Vuitton, or the installation with COS, it's all completely different and it's brought out an amazing side of creativity that myself and my team may not have explored previously."

This approach has also brought some impressive names to AFSO's door, including hotel groups Shangri-La, Hilton and Rosewood. Today, even more hospitality companies are clamouring to tap into that unique Fu magic of spatial "choreography".

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"Ultimately, when you travel, you want to be in a space you feel comfortable and good in," asserts Fu. "I know that sounds really basic, but we've gone past the days when people are simply looking for the word 'luxury'.

"I don't believe a really expensive piece of fabric or a particularly massive chandelier will necessarily provide a luxurious experience; that's just a part of the environment. So it's important to conceive the environment as a whole, with the guest in mind."

It's this user-savvy *modus operandi* that's made The Upper House such a hit: a symphony of airy space, glittering floor-to-ceiling views and light wood panelling that takes the guest by the hand, leading them almost organically from reception to outdoor terrace, from room to restaurant.

"The brief here was to create a place that embraced the words 'calm and comfort,'" reveals Fu. "The antithesis of urban life."

During the development process, he chose to translate this ethos into music via a smooth and sultry Sade number. In fact, Fu often chooses a 'theme tune' for his projects: a piece of music that encapsulates the idea of the design in an instantly understandable



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aural format, which can then be shared with the team and project partners. "Music tends to be a very good tool for people to gauge the type of place it's meant to be," he explains.

Our main course arrives and we take a moment to admire it. It's braised beef short-rib: rich, tender and smothered in sticky sauce that's redolent with aromatic cinnamon. I'm forced to give my focused interviewee a break from the serious questions to actually eat, and we veer off into more relaxed chat about what Fu does in his free time.

"I'd like to believe I lead quite a balanced life. I go swimming, spend time with my family, hang out with friends," he shrugs. "I try to keep some time to relax. So I make a conscious effort to be in Hong Kong on Sundays, and have that time and space for myself."

It's an admirable idea, but one that's getting harder to maintain as his multifaceted design reputation increasingly takes Fu overseas. AFSO currently has works underway in Singapore, China, South Korea, Thailand, Bali, the UK and France, and the designer tells me he's off to Sydney the following day for discussions about a new project.

I ask whether he ever finds it stressful? After all, for a young designer running his own international studio with a team of just 20 – that's a sizeable workload.

"I do get quite personally involved with the projects I'm working on, and it's a long process," Fu admits. "So it's more about the endurance, thinking about each and every one of them on a daily basis, and keeping track of them all."

As of next year, he'll have even more to keep tabs on, with big plans afoot for expanding 'Brand Fu' through a new lifestyle and retail division called André Fu Living.

"It's always been in the back of my mind," he tells me seriously. "There have been a lot of people asking where they can buy those chairs, or that light, and the studio obviously has a huge portfolio of designs."

To mark the beginning of this venture Fu will also launch a scent: a limited edition fragrance created in partnership with boutique Argentine perfumer Fuegoia.

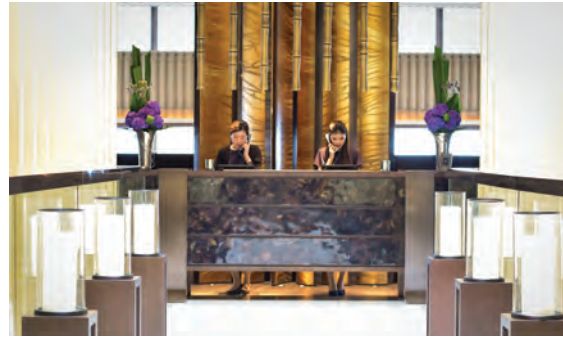
"A lot of companies are interested to work with us and create product ranges. So far we haven't really done that, except for a collaboration with Tai Ping Carpets – and that's because I never wanted them to be just objects, I wanted to ensure it happened as part of a whole, holistic vision," he elaborates.

"With the launch of the scent, and other things in the pipeline for next year, the idea is really to build up a whole experience."

Fu's potential partners in these other collaborations are firmly under wraps for now, but when I ask whether he has aspirations in the fashion world, he tells me smilingly to watch this space.

At that moment the pudding arrives – an enticing creation of whipped chocolate cream, pistachios and crumbly, buttery biscuit, which quickly silences our muttered concerns about being too full for dessert.

As we spoon the last traces of sorbet from the plate, I ask if Fu has any words of wisdom to share on what it takes to make it in design today. "Truthfully, there is no magic to how these venues are created – it's about endurance," he tells me.



"In the times we're living in, with digital and social media, everything is instantaneous. People are looking for an immediate sense of achievement, which is unrealistic, and they can easily give up on things if they don't get instant results.

"But there is no magic; it's just hard work," says Fu simply. On that note, he's eager to get back to his own hard work. I've kept Fu for what I suspect is an unusually long lunch break in his world, and he's obviously champing to get back to the office, where an afternoon of internal meetings awaits him.

Fu bounds off with an enthusiasm not everyone would be able to muster at the thought of several hours of meetings. But for this design prodigy, that's the joy of the job: the spotlight is now off him and back on the latest project. Which, magic or not, will undoubtedly turn out to be as bewitching as its predecessors.

THE BILL

2 x house-cured gravlax with brioche and garnishes (US\$36), 2 x braised short-rib of beef and soft grits with Meaux mustard sauce and horseradish julienne (US\$50), 2 x milk chocolate Chantilly with pistachio crumble and calamansi yoghurt sorbet (US\$15), 1 x large bottle of sparkling water (US\$9), 1 x espresso (US\$8), 1 x English breakfast tea (US\$8)

Total: US\$126



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