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A STAR IS BUILT

Hong Kong witnesses the rise of musical robots

The fifth wall

Ceilings offer uninterrupted expanses for creative expression, writes *Peta Tomlinson*. Little wonder designers revamping homes are looking up

Throughout history, ceilings have been a canvas for artistic expression, with some of the most celebrated examples found in the world's most revered architecture.

In modern mass residential construction, however, we somehow settled for the idea of flat white – a legacy of the Bauhaus movement, which in the early 20th century rejected ornamentation, says architect Alexander Wong.

But things are looking up, as statement ceilings become an ascendant design trend globally.

For Wong, founder of Alexander Wong Architects, it has always been so.

"We never forget to include the ceiling design at the very start of all our projects, [incorporating] the lighting as well as electrical and mechanical requirements, the desired mood, and what that means in reinforcing the central theme of that particular project," he says. "The whole space is an organic construct that is then developed in a holistic way."

Wong's studio is known as much for its fantastical hotel, retail and cinema projects as it is for its luxury residentials, but regardless of the site or size, ceilings can throw up challenges. They might be too high or too low. There may be structural beams, ducts and pipework to contend with, and, simply concealing it all behind a conventional flat false ceiling is, in Wong's view, a wasted opportunity.

Big or small, complex or straightforward, "every ceiling is meaningful", he says. "Small can become powerful; big can become balletic. That's what makes every home more interesting."

Grand ideas from the commercial or hospitality world can be replicated in a residential setting, as demonstrated at Maison Belle, a show flat for Paliburg Group at Mount

At Maison Belle, a show flat for Paliburg Group at Mount Regalia, Kau To Shan, Alexander Wong Architects went all out with chandeliers and mirrored ceilings

PHOTO: COURTESY ALEXANDER WONG ARCHITECTS

Regalia, Kau To Shan. With a sizeable 3,000-plus sq ft floorplate, a generous budget and a developer preference for art deco style, Wong topped the extravagant fit-out with chandeliers dripping from lofty, glossy wood and mirrored ceilings.

However, elevation is not a prerequisite for a statement ceiling. For Natura, a 600 sq ft Mid-Levels apartment with a just-above-standard 2.6-metre ceiling height, Wong continued timber floorboards up the walls and overhead, sculpting the planks around the light fixtures, rather than boxing them in.

"The design is whimsical, but also practical," he says, "achieving a totally original design without reducing the depth of the space."

Given Hong Kong's typical constraints of low ceilings (2.5-metre minimum) and exposed services, NC Design and Architecture's ceiling solutions put functionality first. Says Nelson Chow, founder and principal: "We start the design plan by concealing imperfections, then elevate with materiality [such as plaster, wood and fibreglass] and lighting to turn potential drawbacks into stand-out features."

Hand-crafted looks add uniqueness to a home, and the fifth wall (as the ceiling is known) is something designers "can really play up", Chow continues.

"Whether it's cornice detail, square or elaborate mouldings, stepped layers or creating integrated lighting, there are many options. Ceilings needn't be linear: in terms of form, we can play with depth, organic curves and more, to do something really beautiful without the interruption of furniture."

One of his studio's signature techniques for family homes involves sculptural, curved or egg-shaped plaster forms that drop organically to wrap around and hide beams and ducts. "The fluid geometry softens the space and adds a calming 'wow' factor, hand-plastered for smooth integration without bulk," he says.

If height allows, layered false planes or arched, CNC (computer numerical control)-milled fibreglass elements create depth and interest, with recessed sections precisely built to box in ducts and beams invisibly. "Often we'll combine this look with hidden LED coves for an ambient glow that distracts from any structural necessities," Chow says.

But if you're really pressed for space, a simple reflective paint on the ceiling can make a room feel loftier.

Addressing another common Hong Kong housing complaint – a lack of adequate storage – Alice Cheung Tin-wai, co-founder and creative director of ABT design studio, inverts the idea of a platform.

"In a tiny home, with its various doors and windows, usable horizontal space is limited," she says, referring to an ABT-designed 300 sq ft apartment in North Point. "Many people assume a floor platform is the answer, but we prefer attic storage, as it's easier to access."

Overhead storage also avoids the "complicated flow problems" associated with moving furniture to lift up a hatch.

To maintain a comfortable living space below, a minimum three-metre ceiling height is ideal. For the owners of the North Point flat, 500mm of attic storage in the bedroom holds everyday necessities in pull-out baskets. In the living area, deeper, 700mm overhead compartments store bulkier, less-used items such as the couple's camping equipment and festive decorations.

There's another upside, Cheung adds. In a small flat, a ceiling higher than 2.5 metres can make a room feel narrow. Therefore, installing overhead storage can help the space appear larger.

Cheung, however, cautions against devoting an entire ceiling to storage – for one thing, it would be too hard to access. Adding light troughs around the segmented storage turns a practical solution into a design feature.

But maybe you're less concerned about making a style statement, or even looking to supplement storage? What if it's more about the vibe?

While toiling away in his workday office, business owner Kevin Gui Yu-guang dreams of laid-back, barefoot days at his favourite surf breaks. At his Victoria Harbour-view apartment in Sai Wan Ho, the refined boho interior, designed by Norman Ung Wai-lun, co-founding partner of Design Eight Five Two (DEFT), replicates that laid-back coastal feeling.

A weathered-timber aesthetic was key, so in the slightly elevated living room area, the raked wood panelling overhead and matching floorboards give the impression of stepping up from the sand into a beach hut. At the apex, a recessed light fitting resembling a skylight bathes the room in a moonlit ambience.

"We wanted to create the feeling of transcending into a separate zone, creating a little beach house within the flat," Ung says.

Whereas the living room ceiling is "rougher, more like a windswept beach", Ung says, the bedroom ceiling, slightly stepped and trimmed with timber, has a calmer, curvaceous form, like waves lapping at the shore.

"Because of the full sea view, and me being a surfer, I wanted my apartment to be infused with an ocean vibe," Gui says. "Everything looks beachy, but refined. I feel calm and relaxed here." ■

PHOTOS: COURTESY ALEXANDER WONG ARCHITECTS (NATURA); ALEXANDER MAK (SAI WAN HO); COMMON STUDIO (SOUTHSIDE); COURTESY ABT DESIGN STUDIO (NORTH POINT); COURTESY NC DESIGN + ARCHITECTURE (GUANGZHOU)

ABOVE: for Natura, in Mid-Levels, Alexander Wong Architects continued timber floorboards up the walls and overhead, creating a "whimsical, but also practical" feature

ABOVE RIGHT: the refined boho interior of this Victoria Harbour-view apartment in Sai Wan Ho, designed by Norman Ung of Design Eight Five Two (DEFT), has a laid-back coastal feeling that chimes with its surfer owner, Kevin Gui

FAR RIGHT: in this 300 sq ft North Point flat, ABT design studio inverted the idea of a platform, making use of ceiling space to provide overhead storage

RIGHT: in this Guangzhou home, a double-height living room allows for a stepped ceiling, the design, by NC Design and Architecture, making best use of clearance while creating interest, with recessed sections built to box in ducts and beams invisibly

BELOW: ceilings needn't be linear, says Nelson Chow, of NC Design and Architecture. A metallic finish adds drama to the organic flow of a sculpted ceiling in this Southside home