

Hinge Magazine (Hong Kong)
April 2014 Vol.222

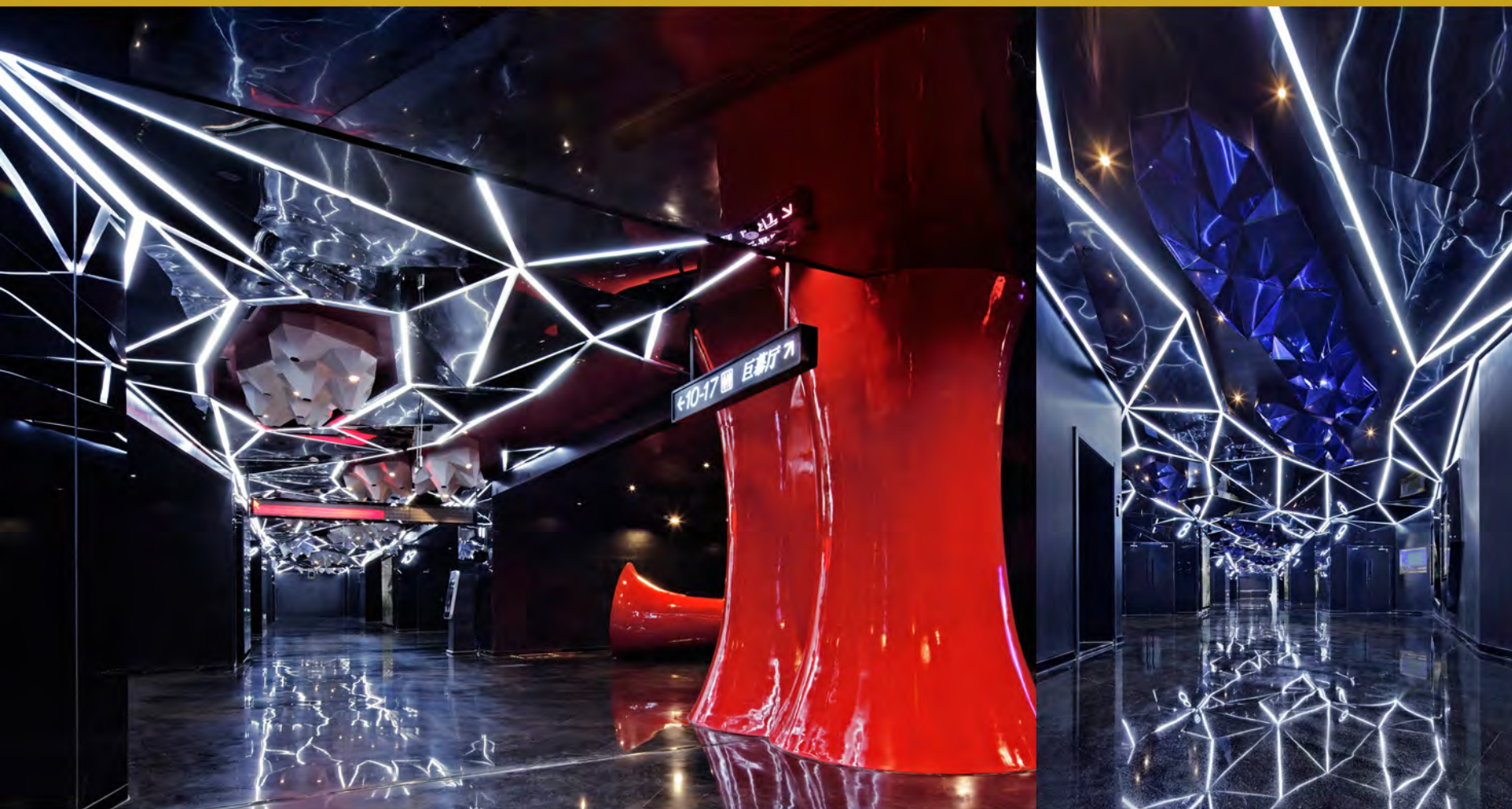
Avatar City – Zhongshan, China
Digital Sky Garden – Beijing, China
 Alexander Wong Architects

This pair of new multiplexes by Hong Kong's Alexander Wong Architects take inspiration from James Cameron's historic blockbuster, *Avatar*, to serve up a cinematic experience that defines the idea of a two-hour escape from the drudgeries of daily life. The Zhongshan MayFlower Cinema City transports its temporary guests into the near future, with an extravaganza of colour and forms that envelop you from the minute you enter the space. In part a homage to film classics such as Ridley Scott's *Alien* and Disney's *Tron*, *Avatar City* is not quite like any other theatre in Asia or perhaps beyond.

A complex formation of geometrical shapes and organic, plant-like textures, the space contains features such as the Butterfly Pavilion, Plaza Pandora and Tron Tunnel, which lead moviegoers to the actual theatres, variously named House of Blue Whale, House of Purple Rain, Chromosome X-over and so on. There is also an Alien Lounge reserved for VIPs who might be in the house for galas and premieres, as well as the Plaza Pandora where media conferences can be organised. Even the restrooms get into the act, costumed out as they are in black, white, silver and green.

Wong has used intricate lighting effects to realise his utopian fantasy world, and benefits from a cinema's generally dark atmosphere to emphasise colour, contrast, shape and texture. The design style is aggressively taken all the way, somewhat like science-fiction film production would; after all, the future is imaginary, anyway. Movies are fantasies, this cinema is saying, and this trippy entry to the genre may be more interesting than some of the onscreen dramatics.





"Future Nature" is the theme behind Digital Sky Garden, in Beijing. Located within the New Cinema Complex of the China Film Group in the city's Millennium Commercial Boulevard, this facility offers up the latest and greatest international films for a rather sophisticated audience. The centrepiece is an abstract, futuristic garden dominating the grand entrance lobby area. The box office and concession stand are nearby. Ample dimensions allow the space to be easily adapted for events such as film premieres, press sessions and celebrity appearances. Escalators then whisk patrons up to the actual movie chambers, with special features along the way such as the Wormhole Counter and Column inspired by Anish Kapoor, or the Big Bang Chandelier that supposedly represents the origin of the universe.

Here, too, lighting and shape play central roles. Wong has fashioned a spatial and visual experience that captivates the eyes and orients the legs. Cinemas may be escape hatches from everyday life, but they also have to organise the physical location of sizeable groups of people in scheduled timeframes. The 'natural' environment of the future presented here suggests an explicit role for science, in the sense of precise biological formulae and patterns. Far from implying that we are headed toward a future of threatening aliens or discord, Wong's textures and illuminated colours suggest a realm of energy and visual pleasure. Hmm, sort of like what movies are.