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## Going the Wong Way

For Alexander Wong, one of Hong Kong's leading architects, there is only one way of doing things—his way

The common belief that Hong Kong people live a fast-paced life becomes the understatement of the year two minutes after meeting Alexander Wong. From the way he charges purposefully through a room to the breakneck speed at which he speaks, this entrepreneur-cum-architect never misses a beat—or even seems to take a breath.

Fuelled by a feverish nervous energy, Wong initially appears somewhat high maintenance—someone who knows what he wants and expects it this very minute. Halfway through the conversation, he demands that his chair be replaced, lamenting its shoddy design. Artistic concepts are his forte after all and it becomes evident that he is finicky about the finer details, largely because they mean so much to him.

This Princeton graduate established his eponymous multi-disciplinary firm, Alexander Wong Architects, in 2001, which has since gained international recognition and a host of industry accolades. In 2009 he was featured in the China Construction Expert Subject Stamp Album under the

*To hear Alexander Wong describe his sense of style, watch the additional online video interview by visiting [www.igafencu.com](http://www.igafencu.com) and clicking **Gafencu Men***



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framework of CEPA—the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, an initiative aimed at building closer ties between Hong Kong and the mainland. His articles have also been published in magazines across Asia and the 2005 release of his book, *Naked + White*, received critical acclaim in both Hong Kong and London.

Every bit the eccentric artist, Wong was raised in something of a creative environment. His father was a calligrapher and Wong junior practically grew up with a paintbrush in his hand, even graffitiing the walls before his drawing talent was harnessed through more structured watercolour lessons. Amongst his many mentors was his grandmother, a woman who was responsible for building a farmhouse in the 1920s. The elegance and simplicity of its design has never ceased to amaze him.

“Only with extreme stress can we do good work, otherwise it’s boring. That’s why we’re professionals”

His grandmother forms part of Wong’s earliest memories. He says: “My first memory was of her back. I realised I had arrived in the world.” It may also be part of the reason he decided to embark upon a career in architecture, or what he calls “the mother of all art”, relishing its ability to transport people to another universe.

Successful design, according to Wong, must be functional first and foremost. That function, though, must tie in with the rituals of daily life, the way in which we behave and interact with one another, as well as the meaning that seemingly mundane objects can have. He says: “You

relate to objects in such a way that it becomes tied up with your memories. It’s really complicated. I’ve been in architecture for 30 years and I feel like I’m only now beginning to understand just what I’ve learnt from reading books.”

Wong’s work has become all-encompassing to the extent that leaving the office every night at 10pm has become the norm. He has eaten dinner at 5am on many an occasion. Although he admits to being burnt out beyond belief, he maintains that part of the fun is working in a team and having your mind constantly spinning with ideas. He says: “Only with

- 2 White shirt; Waistcoat; Dotted tie, all by Tom Ford  
Watch by Franck Muller
- 3 Suit; White shirt; Dotted tie, all by Tom Ford



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extreme stress can we do good work, otherwise it’s boring. That’s why we’re professionals. You can’t have everything in life—you have to choose.”

One of the luxuries Wong willingly forgoes is travel, convinced that if he leaves the office for too long, complete disaster will ensue. Although the idea of visiting his uncle in Brazil appeals, he cannot imagine when he could ever find the time to squeeze a 30-hour flight into his hectic schedule. Still he doesn’t regret it for a second, explaining that the feeling he gets when seeing his designs come to life is beyond words.

The enthusiasm Wong has for a number of materials, notably wood, concrete and steel, he says, is comparable to the fervour that John Galiano or the late Alexander McQueen had for cloth, pins and needles. He says: “I’m sure something would just come to them and it would be like magic. They could probably spend all day looking at a piece of leather or silk.”

Getting into the groove, as Wong puts it, requires a total dedication, one that separates the amateurs from the real deal.

Interesting work requires sinking your teeth into the project. He says: “You’re totally lost in it—it’s bliss. You forget your problems, the problems of the world, the challenges of humanity and completely dive into this sphere. It’s your own baby so you mould it. Everything else fades away.”

Each of Wong’s projects tells a story and he enthuses about them in the same way a proud new parent would about their latest offspring. With remarkable exuberance he describes the futuristic Gardenia Clearwater Bay residence, inspired by one of his favourite Billie Holiday songs; the HK\$130 million Tai Tam apartment

with its koi fish pond and silver, egg-shaped car park; and the seductive Garden of Eden-esque cinema in Shenzhen. It is clear that the long hours have done nothing to dampen his enthusiasm.

As Wong flicks through images of his most recent work, it is almost as if he still cannot quite believe the opportunities architecture presents. He says: “Can you imagine living like this? It’s not just the money, it’s the level of elegance and beauty—that’s what’s exciting. It takes you to a totally different level of existence. That’s all you think about. But then you have no life, of course. Like me.”

If a project does not possess the potential to transfer its user to another level, Wong is simply not interested. He believes that his work has the capability to affect people on a spiritual level, saying: "Think of all the holy places you've been to. I'm not only talking about sanctuaries and churches here—it could be a little cabin where Dylan Thomas wrote his poems or Ernest Hemingway's house. It all comes together in our appreciation of the universe through the portal we call 'architecture'."

A talented architect should have equal measure of innate skill and determination, he believes. The most difficult part for Wong is balancing the required budgetary practicality and time-management restrictions, whilst remaining cutting edge and thinking outside the box. He says: "It might sound really guru-ish but each one of us is here for a reason. You have to find your own way to exist in the universe and it's hard for everyone. It's hard on the ant, the beetle, all the way up to human beings."

Carving out an identity is one of the greatest challenges Hong Kong faces in terms of its lacklustre art scene. Wong believes that the city's post-colonial heritage means that its process of self-discovery will inevitably take time. He says: "We were part of one system and now we are part of another. Obviously that will cause a problem. My hunch is it will take 30 years, a whole generation, for people to know who they are. It's part of survival. You need to have an identity and art is part of that."

One of the things Wong misses most about living in Hong Kong is a variety of

high-quality museums. He feels that the city's current offerings, in terms of artwork, lack a context when compared with London or New York. He says: "These cities have a long history of creating work which is something of an industry, a part of the lifestyle and *modus operandi* of that part of the world. In Hong Kong pop culture is really the arts and already surrounds us in the media and on billboards. Putting it in a museum would be contrived. I find it difficult to digest."

Although pop culture may appear superficial, Wong believes it to be the key means of understanding the universe. He says: "We are totally brainwashed and controlled by the media. This is down to technology, whether it be print, iPods or iPads. Although the content itself is shallow, it's actually very profound in the sense that it really describes the state of humanity, if there is anything left of it."

The current state of affairs worries Wong as it goes against his motto of personal growth—or more specifically, the need to survive, grow and conquer. He says: "Our population is ballooning and we can't kill anyone off. We've had the longest ever history of peace in human civilisation, which is supposedly a really brilliant thing, right? The problem is you end up with no growth because everything will plateau economically

and that's going to affect us politically. What will happen to our culture?"

Fortunately the nature of Wong's work is varied enough to fulfil his desire for self-evolution. He is currently kept busy by new clients, fresh projects, moving offices, changing the company dynamic through increased staffing, not to mention an entirely separate interest in the world of animation. There is literally no time for anything else. He says: "I'm non-stop. You can't unwind or the whole thing will explode. I'm serious; I will just go out of shape and collapse. If I went to the cinema, I'd say 'Can you speed this up?' because I've got so much to do. I couldn't possibly. There's no fast-forwarding."

Although Wong's day begins at the crack of dawn, his free time involves only a small proportion of the very early hours, when he swims—at a hotel because all the other pools are closed at this time—eats dinner, flicks through HBO or reads prior to going to bed, before the whole thing starts again. Yet he savours this experience completely. He says: "Does that sound horrendously boring to you? To me, the best day is if I can go to work. I want to create a world where I can be creative, innovative and imagine new things for our civilisation. That's my dream." ■

“I'm non-stop. You can't unwind or the whole thing will explode. I'm serious. I will just go out of shape and collapse. I've got so much to do”



Contrast-collar checked shirt; Waistcoat; Dotted tie, all by Tom Ford; Watch by Cartier