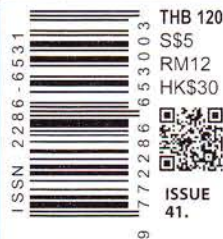


THINK DESIGN

MODERN LUXURY BY DESIGN

JULY 2013



**F1-RACE DESIGN AT THE
MONACO GP**

MEET OTZI THE ICEMAN

**THINK CREATIVELY- SOME
INSPIRATION**

THINK DESIGN (M-THA)

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BLINK

WORDS: **DAVID JOHNSON**

ON A RECENT steamy afternoon in a soaring loft space in Bangkok's financial district, Asian design's new double act are getting warmed up. Clint Nagata, founder and creative director of BLINK Design Group, and Christopher Chua, the firm's recently appointed director of architecture, have struck up a business and creative partnership that promises to be as fruitful and entertaining as the great double acts of stage and screen.



As personalities, they could hardly be more different: Nagata the fourth-generation Japanese Hawaiian from a comfortable middle-class home, the duo's deadpan straight man, and an unflappable iceman who glides about in what seems to be slow motion; and Chua, the perennial high achiever from a modest Singaporean home, who talks about his career as both a marathon and sprint race to stay ahead of the pack. Yet their career paths share a similar trajectory: precocious talents thrust into positions beyond their years at leading architecture firms, talents later stifled by politics and partnerships, who took leaps of faith to branch out on their own. Each stared down the wrath of mentors and protectors to give full rein to their designs on the world of hospitality.

Just as negative space elucidates and amplifies great design, Chua's carefully cultured sentences fill the voids between Zen master Nagata's infrequent contributions, uttered in a slow surfer-dude drawl; think Keanu Reeves reciting a Haiku.

Nagata's designs, too, tend to Zen, or at least a dislike of the fussy, frivolous or unnecessary. They are, however, →

seasoned with the surprises and unique touches one might expect from a Geoffrey Bawa disciple who worships Malcolm Gladwell.

Chua is a prodigy of spatial intelligence who designs by feeling, instinct and intuition, qualities highly prized by the BLINK brains trust. They are poles apart but very much on the same page, and together they are reshaping the face of luxury hospitality design in Asia and beyond. 'HOSPITALITY Aficionados' is how this BLINK duo might be billed; designers who live and breath hotels and resorts, who understand that subtle touches and grand flourishes and a harmony between form and function are what stay with guests long after check-out.

With a name cribbed from Malcolm Gladwell's seminal



come on the power of instinct and first impressions, BLINK, says Nagata, believes in distilling magic from moments. "It's understanding the power of first impressions ... and how to make them last," says Nagata.

This ethos has served BLINK well following a heady year, which saw Nagata's Bangkok-based hotshop acquired by Singaporean design powerhouse Space Matrix. Some

small birthing pains and re-positioning has seen BLINK swell to a force of more than 80, with multiple offices.

"We are set up to facilitate collaboration at the highest level between studios; we share projects, manpower and finances," Nagata says. "Our head design studio is in Bangkok. Our head business studio is in Singapore. Our head support studio is in New Delhi. And our newest →



studio in Shanghai has been set up for China client relationships.”

BLINK picked up the Silver Award in Hotel Space for Jumeirah Dhevanafushi, a stunning resort in the Maldives, at the Asia Pacific Interior Design Awards 2012, announced recently in Hong Kong. This follows one of the world’s most prestigious global design awards, the Hospitality Design (HD) Magazine Award for World’s Best Luxury Hotel for the Conrad Sanya last year.

“SIX MONTHS already,” nods Nagata as he surveys BLINK’s soaring space in a double-height unit, which commands the entire 30th-floor penthouse of Bangkok City Tower in the prestigious Sathorn CBD. With breathtaking views of Bangkok, the 8m-high loft ceiling enabled the design team to create and build a fantastic metal mezzanine structure that overlooks the open offices.

Nagata says the idea was to highlight the beauty of the “massive double-height volume space” of the penthouse and maximise the stunning views of Bangkok, by day and night.

Upon entering the lobby, you are greeted by a sleek reception desk in black stone and textured resin. The back wall in black stone is highlighted with a video wall in a highly polished stainless steel casing. The floor is light engineered oak in a herringbone pattern, giving the warmth and cosiness of a high-end loft residence. The ceiling is a black metal mesh that imparts an industrial modern vibe. The furniture is sleek and contemporary and inspired by hospitality design.

This cedes to the yin and yang of the main meeting rooms:

On the right, the ‘Hong Sawang’ or ‘light room’ has a more formal corporate feel, with an elegant white marble stone boardroom table, champagne mirrors and light veneered walls. The other way lies the ‘Hong Salua’ or ‘dark room’. This room shows its hospitality roots, with dark finishes complementing the black metal mesh ceiling of the reception and dark veneers.

“The light room is mainly used as a library,” says Nagata. “The dark room can easily be transformed from a conference room to a training room, or a superb event space for parties, presentations, brainstorm sessions and client meetings.”

The main walls are left in raw concrete, which juxtaposes dramatically with the jet-black carpet and a Zen garden with raked pebbles underneath the staircase. It is up this staircase to a cluttered table on the mezzanine section that Nagata and Chua are holding court and baring souls.

Nagata is joking about his hotel key card collection, which he says symbolises his road warrior spirit and lack of a life. He’s a self-confessed workaholic and he’s fine with that.

“One of these days I’m going to organise my key cards into an important modern art piece,” he jokes. “I go travelling a lot for work nowadays. I never really get tired of it.

“To get to where I am today, something had to be sacrificed and it’s obviously my personal life. But this is what I enjoy doing. Time off, I just try to relax and do nothing. Don’t read much or watch a lot of TV or movies. I do like going out to check the latest clubs, bars and restaurants, though.” →



Nagata finished school on Hawaii’s famed North Shore and never left the island until scoring a year’s internship with Walt Disney Imagineering in Glendale, California.

“I then responded to a generic ad, which said something like, ‘wanted: creative individuals’. So I applied, and it happened to be for architecture firm WATG. I wasn’t so much into hotel design back then; I just wanted a job.

“When I joined WATG the firm was really small, so the layer between

myself and the partners was almost non-existent, and I had a lot of opportunities. I was the youngest partner by 35. But then I left.” He laughs.

“So ungrateful,” jokes Chua, before taking up the thread. “I came from a very ordinary family. But I was thrust into an upper-class school that is quite famous in Singapore. To make ends meet, I worked part-time in a hotel. My first experience was working back of house, and I fell in love with it.

“From there, I started to intern at

Eco.id Design Consultancy, and it was a natural progression to study architecture at the National University of Singapore. By my third year at Eco.id, I was running architecture projects by myself. So like Clint, I was given the opportunity to grow quickly.

“After nine years, I decided I needed to move on. There’s always a glass ceiling in the old established firms; there are partners and you are an associate. That wasn’t enough for me and I knew it.” ✖

