

Blurring Boundaries

Text / Christopher DeWolf Images / Nirut Benjanapot

Sometimes it takes a bit of creative friction to make a partnership work. Last year, architects Vincent Lim and Elaine Lu launched Lim + Lu, a new design practice that works on interiors, furniture and products. The pair met while studying at Cornell University, where a romantic relationship blossomed into something more.

Though the two studied architecture at the same time, they didn't share any studios, so didn't have much sense for how the other approached design until they began working together. 'We agree on a lot of things but we do have small disagreements,' says Lu. 'That's when we have to solve problems,' adds Lim.

A perfect example is the couple's 120-square-metre flat in Hong Kong's Happy Valley, which they recently transformed into a cheerful and versatile space. 'Vince's style is more black and white and geometric, mine is more organic,' says Lu. When they designed their kitchen table, for example, they agreed on a thin marble top, but Lim wanted black rectangular legs. 'I wanted brass and something curved,' says Lu. 'So we debated and in the end we came up with something that's brass but more geometric. We did various iterations and I think the one we compromised on was the best.'

That kind of creative give-and-take sheds some light on the couple's design philosophy, which stresses flexibility and modularity. They started out in New York, where Lim was working for Kohn Pedersen Fox and Lu was designing shop interiors for Tiffany & Co. 'We wanted a creative outlet to do something on our own, so we decided to do small furniture pieces.' The pair exhibited at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in 2014 and received positive feedback, 'so we decided we wanted to do this full time,' recalls Lu.

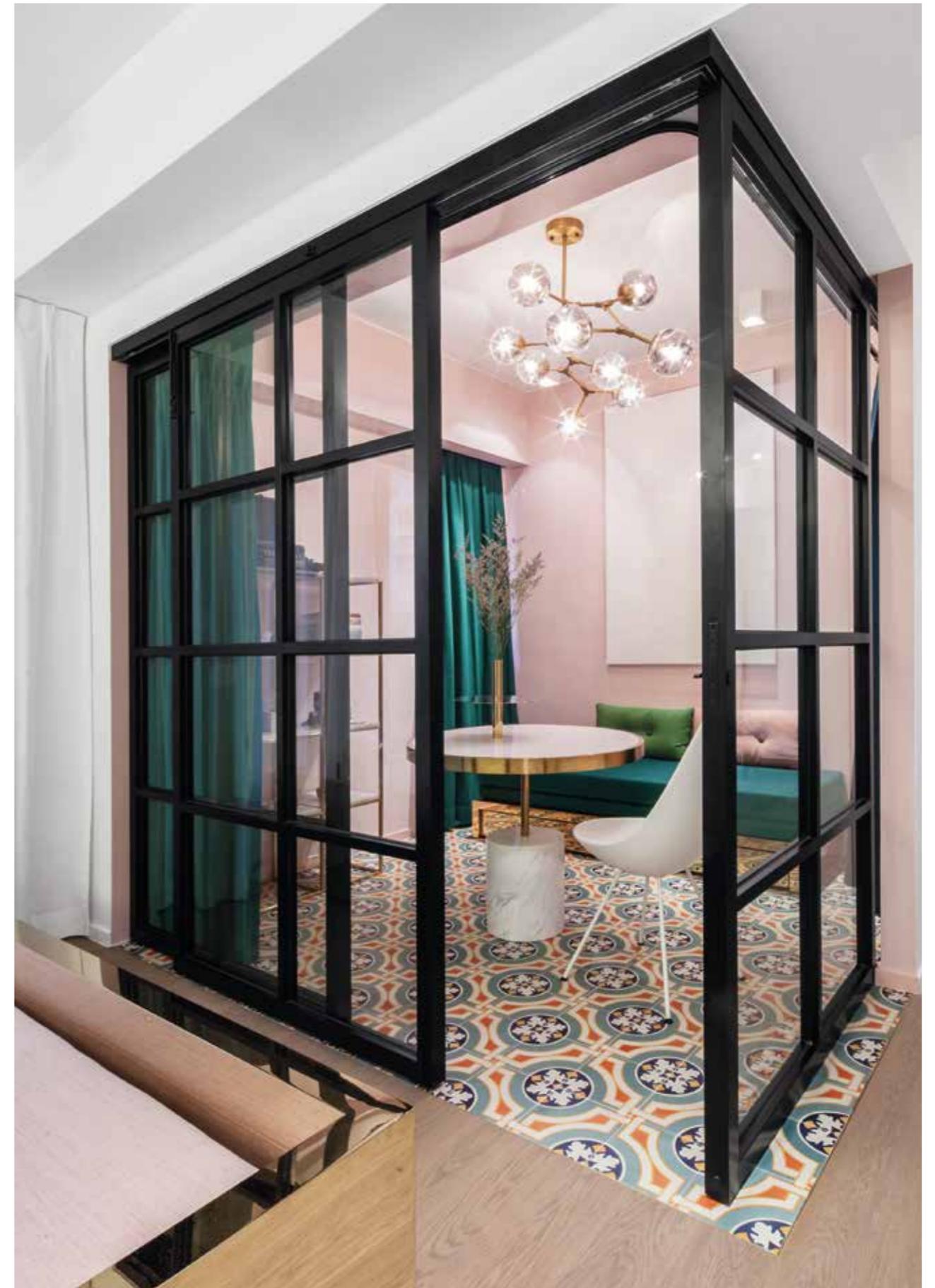
That's when they decided to move to Hong Kong. 'It's much more accessible because we can be on the factory floor,' says Lim. 'We're able to source metal fabricators and go to stone factories. In New York, it was hard for us to even find someone who'd do a furniture piece or product for us at a reasonable price, a price that was affordable if we were to make one hundred or something.'

There was another reason behind the move. Lim's father is Hong Kong architect William Lim, whose firm CL3 has designed the East Hotel and the upcoming H Queen's. (Architecture runs in the family: Vincent's brother is openUU's Kevin Lim.) When the couple first arrived in Hong Kong in late 2015, they shared space in CL3's office and designed custom furniture for some of its clients. Their work includes Nest, a nesting set of stools that also function as nightstands, and the Mass Series of modular daybeds and sofas that contrast brass surfaces with pastel-hued cushions. They are now designing a collection of furniture for their alma mater's New York City studio space. 'Their space is not small but they still want the option of having one configuration and then another one for a different function,' says Lu. 'There's this flexibility that's the core of our design philosophy.'

In a space, that translates into 'blurring lines and blurring boundaries,' says Lim. 'I think our Happy Valley residence is a really good example of how we do that. We chose to use sliding doors instead of your typical swing-open doors; you're able to open everything up and it becomes one continuous space, or you can close them off into individual rooms.'

Lu gives an example. 'There's a pink room that's usually a study where we can read and work, but when guests come over it can become a dining

Understanding the importance of versatile space in cities like New York and Hong Kong, design duo Lim + Lu designed the study in their Hong Kong apartment to double as either a dining room or private guest room





room. We can move the table out and close the curtains and doors and it becomes a private guest room. That's important in cities like New York and Hong Kong where space is limited.'

They took a similar approach to their work on Kasa, a new restaurant on Wellington Street, Hong Kong. 'We made the entire front door collapsible so it becomes an extension of the street itself,' says Lim. The restaurant serves Chinese fusion food, so they wanted the interior style to reflect Hong Kong's ubiquitous *cha chaan teng* diners, but with a twist. Tile walls are paired with marble table tops and pink leather. Brass and gold make an appearance, along with a more industrial take on Hong Kong's beloved red market lamps.

'If you look at the restaurant and residence they're completely different styles,' says Lim. 'That's not by chance, it's because we don't have one specific style. We're more interested in being experimental and

challenging the norms, to mix and match styles and be playful in different ways. I think because we had multicultural upbringings, the East-meets-West quality comes through in our design naturally.'

Lim grew up in Hong Kong, but his American-educated parents always maintained a strong connection to the United States, while Lu was raised in Atlanta to Chinese parents. 'My parents are both artists, so at family dinners we always talk about art,' she says. 'And with the Lim family we always talk about design. It's a nice transition.'

Both Lu and Lim say they draw inspiration from everyday objects around them — spiralling joss sticks in temples, bamboo scaffolding, ironmongery like window grilles — which they constantly discuss. And disagree about, as the case may be. After all, says Lu, 'it's the disagreement that helps push our design forward.'



The duo's design of Kasa restaurant in Hong Kong's Central is an upscale version of Hong Kong's ubiquitous *cha chaan teng* diners where tile walls are paired with marble table tops and pink leather



In their apartment, Lim+Lu prove that elegance and efficiency need not be mutually exclusive. The daybed and sofa, upholstered with Kvadrat fabric, are from Lim + Lu's Mass collection; the Frame table with marble top

is also the duo's design. In the master bath their Lunar Mirror features two half-swing doors that are also fully collapsible, resembling the phases of the moon



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