



RENAISSANCE MAN

WING T. CHAO

AN ENDURING LEGACY AT DISNEY

BY JUDY SECKLER

When a guest visits a Disney resort anywhere in the world and notices Disney character art in the fabrics, the furniture, the carpets, the marble, light fixtures and the wrought iron grille work, a smile is almost sure to follow.

So many of the details that surprise and delight children and adults alike and make their entertainment experience special are the works of Wing T. Chao, who was the chief architect and master planner for Disney.

For almost 37 years, Chao created hundreds of projects worth more than \$8 billion. Chao's touch can be seen everywhere you look: the resorts, the parks, the restaurants, the retail shops, the vacation clubs, the entertainment centers, the Disney Cruise Line, the sports centers, the office buildings and the new planned communities.

(Pictured): Opposite, Wing Chao with photo of Mickey and his creator Walt Disney, Photography by Mark Lawson Shepard and assistant Jonathan Davino. Makeup by Irara Lopetaite.

He was the mastermind for planning and the design conscience for architecture, interiors, graphics, lighting, landscaping and costumes. Currently, millions of guests enjoy these creations every year, and none of these efforts could have been realized without Chao's vision and leadership. "It was truly an honor and privilege to work for Disney. I was very fortunate to work with so many talented people and worked on so many incredible projects," says Chao.

Who is Wing T. Chao? His greatness in stature comes from his confidence as a designer and his sophisticated design sense. During his entire career, he's juggled dozens of projects regularly in implementing and expanding one of the greatest entertainment brands around, Disney.

"Wing is the visionary master planner who kept Disney moving for over three decades, modest, organized and instilled with a profound creative talent for innovative designs," says Barbara Lazaroff, president of Imaginings

Design and co-founder/designer of Spago and Chinois. "He was a delight to work with, to know as a human being and a force to watch in the world of design."

From the start, Chao's gift was in knowing what he wanted for his career. "I wanted to work for a company that had a creative vision and had the rich resources to produce the finest quality products," he reveals. "Disney was at the top of my list."

His admiration for Walt Disney started while he was growing up in Asia. "I've always admired Walt Disney, and I was in awe of his creativity and imagination," he says. After his first visit to Disneyland while he was a student at University of California, Berkeley, he thought it would be fun to get a summer job. However, he was told there was a two-year waiting list. Although he didn't get the summer job at the park, he got the career.

It was fortunate that his extensive undergraduate work in architecture at Berkeley and graduate work in architecture and urban

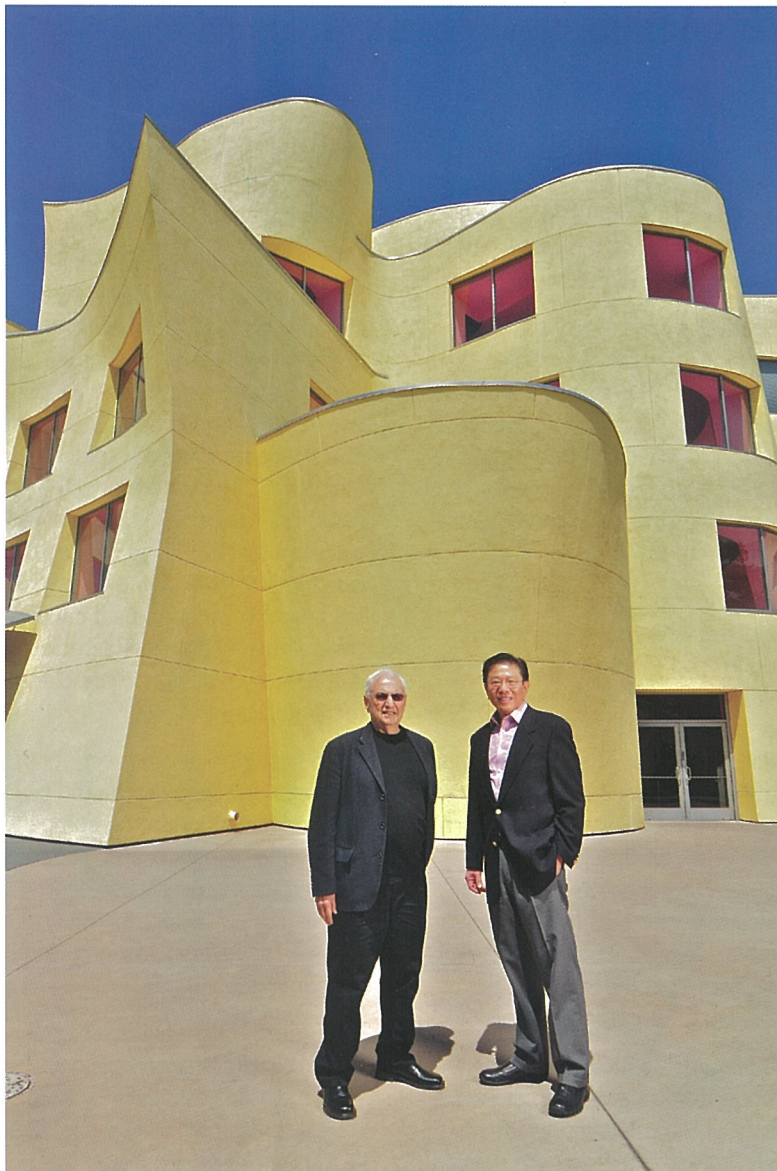
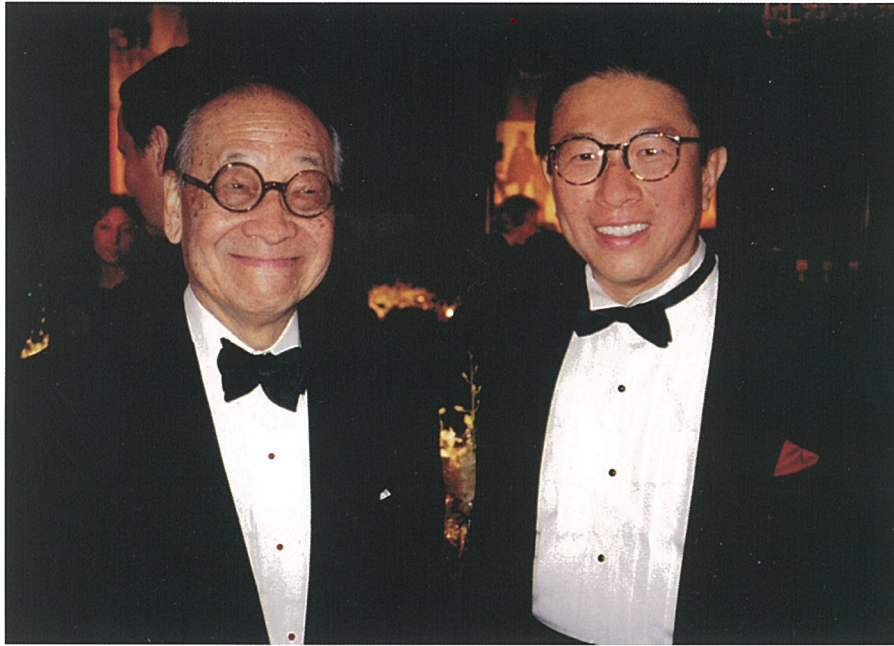
design at Harvard made him ideally suited to be a Disney in-house architect in the '70s.

Chao composed his master's thesis, titled *A Free Time City*, at Harvard under the top Japanese architect and his professor Kenzo Tange, who foresaw the coming of the Information Age. The thesis portrayed a special "Vacation City," where people could not only enjoy their leisure time, but also undergo intellectual enrichment. This idea of combining entertainment and education (edutainment) dovetailed perfectly with Disney's development plans for Walt Disney World.

Chao first worked on a variety of projects at Disney World and became involved when the company decided to take its brand global, building its theme parks/resorts first in Tokyo, Japan, then in Paris, France, later in Hong Kong and Shanghai, China.

By the time Michael Eisner and Frank Wells came on board as CEO and COO respectively to revitalize the company, Chao was ready to take on whatever the

(Picture): Upper Right, I.M. Pei and Wing T. Chao
Lower Left, Frank Gehry and Wing T. Chao. In front of Team Disney Building, Anaheim, Ca.. Opposite, Bertrand Ousset, Michael Eisner, Jean Poulit and Wing T. Chao in front of Disneyland Paris, before the opening in 1992.



growth plans envisioned.

It was the start of a 20-year collaboration in which Eisner and Chao worked on some 100 projects together. Both men had strong passion and believed in design excellence and a sense of beauty with all the creations. A close rapport developed between them. "Wing is brilliant. He interpreted and executed ideas better than anybody I've ever met," says Eisner. "He raised the level of Disney standards, and was instrumental in the design of these great Disney projects. He got things done in a super classy way."

From then on, Chao worked with more than 100 world-class architects and designers to create compelling entertainment properties: Frank Gehry, Robert Stern, Jaquelin Robertson, Michael Graves, Philip Johnson, César Pelli, Robert Venturi, Graham Gund, Charles Gwathmey, Robert Siegel, Antoine Predock, Peter Dominick, Helmut Jahn, Arata Isozaki, Charles Moore, and many others. Chao is probably the only one who has had the opportunity to work with a roster of such talented designers over so many decades. "It was truly an incredible experience to be able to work

with the industry's best talents." reveals Chao. Suffice it to say that the stack of design and hospitality awards and recognition grew.

Chao is highly respected in the architecture and design community. He is a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and was presented the Outstanding Achievement Award. He was also named an honorary senior fellow by the Design Futures Council for his work and great insight.

In addition, Chao is widely admired in the hospitality industry. He was honored as one of the top 20 Hospitality Industry Leaders and Innovators and was inducted as a Platinum Circle member by *Hospitality Design* magazine. He was also presented with the Legend Award by *Contract* magazine, a leading publication for the commercial design industry, and was conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Business Administration in Hospitality Management by Johnson & Wales University.

In 2007, Chao was elected to join the prestigious Committee of 100, founded by architect I.M. Pei, an organization of American citizens of Chinese descent whose accomplishments in a wide range of fields have distinguished them as leaders within their professions.

DISNEYLAND PARIS

After Tokyo Disneyland Resort opened in 1983, Disney's international expansion plans took it to Europe, a market that was ripe for a Disney destination resort. Both the French and Spanish governments courted the

entertainment giant and years of negotiations followed. In spring 1987, France was selected over Spain.

For the Disneyland Paris development, Chao spearheaded a series of design competitions with more than a dozen internationally renowned architects. The result of the accumulation of talent ushered in an era of style and sophistication in the Disney brand that had never been seen before. Chao's collaborators at Disneyland Paris included Graves, Antoine Grumbach, Stern, Predock and Gehry. Under Chao's direction, the resorts represented different facets of American style and heritage.

Graves' Hotel New York was designed as an art deco interpretation of the New York skyline and streetscape. Rooms were fitted with sassy stripes and apple (as in Big Apple) design motifs. In the courtyard outside, an iceskating rink evoked Rockefeller Center. The French architect Grumbach brought the spirit of the American national park to life with a wood siding and river rock hunting lodge design for the Sequoia Lodge.

Predock's Hotel Santa Fe welcomed guests with an old-fashioned American drive-in, complete with large image of Clint Eastwood front-and-center. The hotel brings the American Southwest to guests via its classic adobe architecture and desert artifacts.

Stern captured the sea and yacht club ambience of New England in his Newport Bay Club. A lighthouse, green-and-white-striped window canopies, and

a seafood-themed restaurant completed the look. Just like a Hollywood movie set, his Hotel Cheyenne re-creates an authentic Western frontier town in which guests can feel like real cowboys and cowgirls.

California's adopted son Gehry designed *Festival Disney* now called *Disney Village*—a juxtaposition of unusual forms and diverse materials such as oxidized stainless steel panels, plaster, natural zinc and asphalt—to house the resort's entertainment center filled with assorted boutiques,

restaurants, theaters and clubs. The total effect was a "fun and entertaining place to explore," Chao says.

Beyond the theme park, Disney created an adjacent, newly planned community, Val d' Europe, featuring work contributed by Robertson, Thomas Beeby, Hugh Hardy, Gwathmey, Siegel and Leon Krier, that later garnered many prestigious urban design awards.

Both Val d' Europe and its sister community Celebration, located

adjacent to Disney World in Florida, have been recognized for their innovative new urbanism approach to town planning. In the time since their inception, the principles set forth at Val d' Europe and Celebration have inspired architects and planners around the world.

HONG KONG DISNEYLAND

Chao's next big project took him halfway around the world to Hong Kong as part of Disney's international expansion into the China market. For Hong Kong



“How about down here?” Looking down, Chao saw nothing but water. “Where is the land?”

Disneyland, Chao’s first big challenge involved the site search for the park location around Hong Kong. With Hong Kong’s limited land and hilly topography, a suitable Hong Kong Disneyland site was all but impossible.

During a helicopter flight over Penny’s Bay off Lantau Island, a government official pointed to Chao and said, “How about down here?” Looking down, Chao saw nothing but water. “Where is the land?” he said. “If you like the location, we can create the land for you,” said the government official.

Two years later, the reclamation process was finished and Chao’s

master plan for the resort could be executed. Using principles of Feng Shui, the master plan was developed to reflect the proper orientation and angles for buildings and doorways. Chao, ever meticulous about details, built in many surprises for guests. At the Victorian-themed Hong Kong Disneyland Hotel, the shape of Mickey and Minnie can be seen in the elevator grille work. Also, wall paintings depict guests dressed in Victorian fashions and mingling among park attractions—as if the park has been there for decades.

Inside the hotel, the facade of the upscale restaurant Crystal Lotus



has been decorated with thousands of genuine crystal lotus flowers adorning the entry wall and chandelier. Special effects designers created an interactive

glass floor in which animated koi respond to guests’ footsteps as if in a real pond. Just for fun, the animated fish swim up the walls and disappear into the ceiling, adds Chao. The lotus theme is embellished in the carpet pattern and a huge oil painting displaying crystal lotuses evolving into real flowers.

DISNEY CRUISE LINE

Chao was further able to mix classy interior design with eye candy in the development of the Disney Cruise Line, a monumental undertaking that resulted in two sister 83,000-ton cruise ships, *Disney Magic* and *Disney Wonder*. The challenge of developing a fleet of “floating cities” began with Chao’s rapid study of nautical architecture, an entirely different discipline from conventional architecture.

A design competition among the best naval architects in the world turned up some interesting ideas: a bow with a Mickey-shaped nose, a top deck festooned with palm trees, a curved, shapely body resembling a racing yacht, and a futuristic, stealth-like shell with flat, steel plates. “It was fun to see these far out ideas,” Chao says, “although none were



selected.”

The winning design, a dark-horse entry from Norwegian architect Njal R. Eide with a “classic but modern” Art Deco style, was immediately approved. Its stylish design elements included round portholes, a black hull, white decks, horizontal metal rails, and a tapered bow and stern. Two large stacks, one real and one not, gave it a balanced look.

These two new ships would have many “firsts.” For example, they were the first to have two bathrooms in each state room, first to have three rotating dining rooms, first to have a Broadway-like theater, first to have separate kids clubs, first to have three swimming pools. Additionally, the Disney Cruise Line was the first to have a private island with its own pier. “Designing these ships certainly was an enlightening experience,” says Chao. “We wanted to create a ship design the entire family can enjoy.”

Below deck, Chao’s enthusiastic touch can be seen throughout the ship. The overall interior design captures the elegance and romance of the Art Deco and Art Nouveau eras, which enhance the excitement and enjoyment at sea. In the central atrium, a spectacular Dale Chihuly chandelier (with internal fiber optics) lights a statue of Mickey steering a ship’s wheel. All of these design elements add up to create a wonderful family cruise experience.

After Robert A. Iger was appointed CEO of Disney, the company continued its resort expansion plan both in the US and overseas, including the first Disney resort Aulani, in Oahu, Hawaii. The resort’s tropical design

captures the spirit and heritage of Hawaiian culture and history. Families can be totally immersed in a fun and entertaining experience in paradise.

Chao also directed the design of two 128,000-ton new cruise ships. *Disney Dream* was officially christened in January this year, and *Disney Fantasy* will make her maiden voyage in the spring of 2012. The innovative designs of these ships will take the guests to a new level of cruising experience and enjoyment.

Tom Staggs, chairman of Walt Disney Parks and Resorts describes Chao’s legacy this way: “Wing’s contribution to the Walt Disney Company has been extraordinary. From the timeless beauty of our five destination resorts around the world to the classic elegance of our four cruise ships, he has been a vital creative force on projects that have become icons of Disney architecture and style.”

After a distinguished and accomplished career at Disney, Chao is engaged in a variety of ventures and is advising numerous companies on their resort and park development. Perpetually in motion, Chao continues to “spread his wings” around the world, where the future is always about beauty, creativity and innovation. □

(Pictured): Opposite Upper Right, Wing T. Chao and Barbara Lazaroff. Opposite Lower Left, Damien Lee and Wing T. Chao receiving China Hotel Industry Award in Beijing, China. Upper Right, Tom Staggs and Wing T. Chao on board the *Disney Dream* Inaugural Cruise. Lower Right, Mickey Mouse and Wing T. Chao in Meyer Werft shipyard, Papenburg, Germany.

