

# g S STYLE

## DESIGNED TO SELL

Why developers depend on Meichi Peng's style to help  
move high-end properties | BY CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

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# A MODEL OF GOOD TASTE

Interior designer has an eye for what looks livable and stylish — and for what sells

By Christopher Muther  
GLOBE STAFF

**T**his is not an enviable time to be in the business of selling multi-million-dollar condominiums.

A meringue-soft economy still has buyers skittish, and sales of luxury condos in Boston last year were off by double digits compared to 2008, according to the Listing Information Network. But developers and real estate agents still need to move units, which means creating sumptuous spaces, highlighting spectacular views, and otherwise soothing and enticing potential buyers anxious about a market in turmoil.

They have a secret weapon on their side: Interior designer Meichi Peng. In recent years, the 35-year-old has become the city's go-to design virtuoso for creating model units that demand attention and, with any luck, open checkbooks.

Her contemporary interior architecture and designs have helped sell million-

dollar condominiums at 360 Newbury Street. A transitional palette — in design speak, that's a blend of modern and traditional furnishings — helped move the more modest units of 285 Columbus Lofts. Currently, she's lending her vision of livable, modern design to the luxe residences at the W Hotel. Though her business also includes residential design, Peng is increasingly associated with high-end commercial work.

"When you see a model unit, you really have to believe that someone could easily be living there," she says, perched on a sofa in the lobby of the W on Stuart Street. "When you do it right, it really captures the spirit of the potential buyer."

A professionally designed model unit is like conventional real estate staging on steroids. Peng's work is not a matter of simply bringing in sleek furnishings or painting walls. She creates complete vignettes for the hypothetical occupants of her rooms — down to the window treat-

ments and table settings. It's something that's done in both down and up markets, but in a buyer's market, her work becomes even more crucial.

"Design is always important to us, good times and bad," says Curtis Kemeny, CEO and president of Boston Residential Group, who has worked with Peng on several projects. "If you're asking me if it's even more important in a bad market, the answer is a very strong yes. Model units are an essential part of the marketing package. It's a very powerful thing to walk into a model unit, see the finished room, and to see yourself living in it."

For the W, Peng designed the sales center, which resembles one of the building's condominiums. In the early stages of the project, she was also charged with designing dollhouse-size model units. She later chose finishes for the condos, such as tile and cabinets and is currently designing a model unit on the 20th floor of the W. Her schemes reflect just a hint of her Taiwan-

Meichi Peng — (above) in her South End studio and (far right) in the W Hotel's welcoming office — scours stores for one-of-a-kind home accents and vintage furniture to use in her designs.



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ese upbringing — an ancient Buddha head there, a piece of Asian art there — but they primarily show the talents of someone who has a keen ability to create a room that is modern and chic, but doesn't feel sterile.

"She absolutely has her ear to the ground and knows what makes people excited," says Kevin Ahearn, president of the real estate firm Otis & Ahearn, who has worked with Peng on 360 Newbury, 285 Columbus Lofts, and now the W residences. "On top of it all, she's also a complete workhorse. You give her some challenging deadlines, she takes it on and delivers."

Peng arrived in the US at age 18 speaking very little English. She started at Simmons College in 1993 to get a grasp of the language, and then went to Wentworth Institute to study interiors. But interiors were not Peng's first love. As a girl growing up in Taiwan, she wanted to become a fashion designer.

"When I was little, I was always making things," she says in her rapid-fire manner. "I'm very good with my hands. I'm good at sewing, and I knit sweaters, which is very different from interior design. When I was young I became the seamstress of the family. I took sewing classes in elementary school and my grandfather had me fixing his collar on his favorite shirt."

Despite her role as family seamstress, Peng's parents had big plans for their daughter's future. They didn't see financial success for her in the fashion world, so in high school she focused on chemical engineering. After three years she took a leave of absence (high school in Taiwan is structured differently than the US), and told her shocked parents that she was moving to the US. The compromise between pursuing chemical engineering and fashion was interior design.

But Peng was unable to ignore her love of fashion. One summer she and her sister went shopping for handbags, but had little luck finding something that was both fashionable and large enough for her design tools. So she went shopping for leather and started making her own bags. The bags were a hit, and several years later, once she was an established interior designer, she nearly dumped the vocation to create her handmade purses full time.

Instead, she's figured out a way to combine all of her loves. Last spring she opened a store in the South End at her design studios to sell her bags (which retail



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STEPHEN F. BEVACQUE



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**Clockwise from top left: Meichi Peng's handbags, which she makes and sells; a model condo unit she designed at 285 Columbus; and two views of her homey model unit at 360 Newbury.**

for up to \$2,500) and home accessories. In her travels, she scours stores for one-of-a-kind home accents and vintage furniture and brings them back to Boston to sell.

"Unique accessories are one of the hardest things to find, so when I find something, I'll pick it up," says Peng, who lives in Waltham with her boyfriend, restaurateur Douglas Tran of Malden's All Seasons Table. "If we see something spectacular, we put it in the showroom."

Peng plans to go a step further eventually by launching her own home accessories line that would include items such as linens, home goods, and candles. Given

her success — and seemingly endless energy — it seems like her next step would be to return to her first love of fashion. But Peng seems content with her current mix of handbags and home design.

"I realized that even though interior design was really my second choice, I've developed a deep love of it," she says. "There is a lot of enjoyment in working with clients, and knowing that you're touching people by making places that they love to come home to."

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## BY THE NUMBERS

We asked Meichi Peng to break down her busy schedule and creative days into solid numbers.

- 414** Number of hours spent on a recent charity event for design and installation
- 98** Number of hours spent folding and installing 5,000 paper cranes for same event
- 121** Number of new Peng handbags and accessories hand-sewn for her retail store last year
- 4,840** Number of hours to design and create the handbags
- 72** Hours spent designing, furnishing, and installing last model unit (on tight deadline)
- 41** Number of calls fielded on an average day
- 22,500** Number of custom one-inch tiles used to create a mosaic for a powder room design
- 72** Number of hours spent shopping in Asia for vintage accessories over the holidays
- 46** Number of new bedside tables located for clients last year
- 16** Number of times she said she should design her own line of bedside tables last year
- 90** Number of days to complete a 5,000-square-foot restaurant, from design to construction documents to furniture installation to completion



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