

## HOUSE AND HOME EMERGING MARKETS

## China's one-man art deco revival

Sarah Murray meets a designer whose love of old Shanghai is countering the city's modern-day glass-and-steel explosion

One of the joys of Shanghai's architectural heritage – at least what's left of it – is a rich seam of highly original art deco design that emerged at a time when the city, then a treaty-port of divided territories, was both the "whore of Asia" and "Paris of the East", and business tycoons and movie stars mingled in smoky clubs, chic restaurants and glamorous hotels. While many of the original deco-era structures have disappeared, one designer is busy recreating the kind of stylish interiors that were in vogue during what was the city's most dazzling period.

Spencer Dodington, an energetic Texan who has lived in Shanghai since 1995, has long been fascinated by architecture and design. Sitting on a large club chair in one of the spectacular art deco interiors he's created in his own apartment, Dodington points to his socks, embroidered with images of New York's Chrysler Building.

"That was what that did it for me," he says, explaining that at the age of 10, when visiting a relative in New York, he was taken to see the building. The towering shaft of silver was what kindled his passion for architecture. "The streets around the building were a mess, with windows boarded up, [and] there seemed to be no hope of any future – yet that building was so utterly beautiful," he says.

It took some years to blend his passion with his profession. Armed with an MBA from the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas, Dodington spent the early part of his career in mergers and acquisitions. However, his passion for architecture – and particularly art deco – eventually brought him to Shanghai, and into the business of interior design and restoration.

Many of his projects are located in areas characterised by the colonial buildings of the city's old international settlements – created after the first Opium War, when Britain defeated China and forced it to open ports such as Shanghai and Canton to trade.

In the French Concession, where Dodington's lives, the force of modern development has not yet eclipsed a continental European environment: tree-lined avenues, boutiques, chic restaurants and cafes, art deco apartment blocks and once-luxurious early 20th century mansions, which provide elegant reminders of Shanghai's past.

The French Concession was also home to the pioneers of China's communist movement; a small residence now open to the public hosted the first National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, with Mao Zedong in attendance. But those days seem far off now, with a capitalist-style real estate boom consuming the area. As in other parts of Shanghai, prices have soared in recent years, driven by an influx of foreigners working in the city and the return of Chinese who have been living – and accumulating wealth – overseas.

Dodington's clients have so far included expatriates from Europe, South Africa and elsewhere in Asia who, having purchased apartments, are looking to give them a flavour of the old Shanghai.

But his first client was himself. After acquiring an apartment in a building designed by Leonard, Veysseyre and



Spencer Dodington in his Shanghai apartment: 'Nothing's impossible here. It just takes time – and usually it's a case of more time than money'

Wu Jianxin/ImageChina

Kruze, a French architecture firm, he set about transforming it, taking elements from the original 1930s structure and recreating them elsewhere. These include double doors that flank an opening between the sitting room and the hallway, which draw on the design of the original pair that divide the sitting room from the bedroom.

In certain aspects of design, Dodington believes authenticity has its limits. In the original layout of his apartment, for example, the sitting room and hallway were divided by a narrow, single doorway. But by opening up the entrance, he says, he was able to bring a feeling of light and openness into the space, something that is more appropriate to a contemporary lifestyle.

Spectacular pieces in his home include a pair of Soviet-influenced glass bedside lamps and a wooden cupboard for storing Chinese scrolls that, while traditional in form, has a roll-down cover and bold shape that puts it firmly into the realm of Shanghai deco. Dodington, who has a large collection of 1930s furniture, can also source items for his clients.

But while he spends much of his time hunting down the antiques that give his interiors a feeling of authenticity, Dodington is quite prepared to improvise. The curtains in his sitting room, for instance – bold red drapes decorated with simple black and white lines – were adapted from something he saw in a murder mystery movie. "I

found the Hercule Poirot series on DVD and I saw the curtains in his flat, so I copied them," he explains.

Often, lack of original materials means he is forced to turn to modern equivalents, such as the black and white tiles he likes to use for bathrooms. "You have to mix and match," he explains. "The old tiles were rectangular, like the 'subway tiles' you find in New York bathrooms," he says. "But you can't get hold of those, so you have to use the new versions."

But then the real skill in this Texan designer's work lies in combining genuine deco furniture, accessories and light fittings with more contemporary layouts and features, particularly in rooms such as the kitchen and bathroom.

In a project for South African client – a four-storey 1930s house not far from his own home – he is incorporating modern amenities such as double glazing and central heating into the building, as well as undertaking the complete rewiring of the place to accommodate sophisticated lighting effects.

He has also created a wider staircase than would originally have been installed in the house. But to maintain the spirit of authenticity, the metal grillwork detailing on it is extrapolated from the designs of the grillwork found in the original windows in the house. "The stairs were too narrow and steep, so we've made a wider staircase – but in every other respect, it's pure Shanghai," he says.

When original details are not available to refer to on site, Dodington uses a collection of photographs he has amassed as a kind of pattern book. "When I got here in 1995, I felt it was such a shame that so much of this was being lost, so I started documenting the lane houses and all their architectural details," he explains. "I've walked every lane in the French Concession and the International Settlement, checking out the houses. Sometimes I even sit down and play mah-jong with the residents or join them for a cup of tea."

The result of these years of pounding the pavements is a collection of thousands of photographs of homes and their architectural features – many of which have since been demolished – that Dodington can show clients when deciding on the details for an interior.

But the other crucial ingredient in recreating the features that make his spaces look authentic is finding the right craftspeople to do the job. And here, it seems, Shanghai is well endowed. "There's not the ability to recreate the past in terms of purchased products, but you can find workers who can do fantastic things with woodwork and grillwork," he says. "And everything I do is wood-intensive, so good carpenters are critical."

It also helps that the Texan designer speaks flawless Shanghaiese – a dialect that is quite distinct from the Mandarin spoken elsewhere in China. For him, this means he can develop the good working relationships with contractors, craftsmen and suppliers that enable him to get complex and creative work done. "Nothing's impossible here. It just takes time – and usually it's a case of more time than money."

With the supply of old houses diminishing, however, Dodington foresees a time when he will start working to create deco interiors in contemporary buildings. The only limitation here, he says, would be the ceiling height, since low modern ceilings make it hard to capture the grand atmosphere of a real 1930s interior.

But then mix and match was always the hallmark of Shanghai deco, which combines European, American and Asian influences in a style that was simple, minimal and symmetrical. "And the more I distil the Shanghai style, the more it's possible for me to recreate these kind of interiors anywhere, even in a contemporary building," he says. "Because it's all about recreating the spirit of Shanghai deco."

## CHINA

## Political factors

■ China has the world's fastest-growing economy and is the WTO's newest member. Shanghai is one of its strongest housing markets, and the government has been yo-yoing on policies to try to stem soaring prices and overdevelopment.

## Expect to pay...

■ A furnished city studio (55 sq metres) would cost about Yn1m (£71,000).

## Mortgage

■ Banks are limited in what they can offer, therefore, you may be required to front 40 per cent of the cost yourself as a deposit. Mortgages are available through institutions such as HSBC and Bank of China.

## Legal

■ Freehold property does not exist. Instead, under what is known as "land use rights", homes have leases of typically 70 years for residential property, 40 years for commercial.