



The Tao of Vegas

Studio Gaia and Thomas Schoos Design
follow parallel paths at Tao Las Vegas

text: debra scott photography: warren jagger



Previous spread: Inspired by the moon gates of Chinese temples, Studio Gaia devised a tunnel entry for Tao Las Vegas. Thomas Schoos Design, which handled the restaurant and nightclub's furnishings, specified sandblasted alder for the arches and added the tubs of cast concrete and resin.

Left, from top: Backlit acrylic frames Tao's twin entrances, the focal point of a facade that departs dramatically from the baroque decor at the Venetian hotel. In the nightclub, 271 monk statues surround a bar faced in stucco. *Right:* The nightclub's lounge features cast-concrete reproductions of Thai Buddhas, plus Murano glass chandeliers.

Opposite: A foam-injected Buddha based on a Japanese original dominates the 37-foot-high dining room. Its brick wall duplicates a 19th-century original at Tao New York. Thomas Schoos designed the lanterns, and the owners commissioned the ceiling banners, which conceal mechanicals.



If you think that too many cooks spoil the broth, you must not have been to Tao Las Vegas. A pan-Asian restaurant and nightclub decorated with hundreds of Buddha statues, the 37,000-square-foot space flows seamlessly over three levels—despite being the composite effort of two design firms and four hands-on owners who, by their own admission, were “too involved in the process.” Tao partners Richard Wolf, Marc Packer, Jason Strauss, and Noah Tepperberg hired Studio Gaia to transform a Warner Bros.–branded restaurant at the Venetian hotel into a contemporary Zen sanctuary. Then Thomas Schoos Design, which had worked on the original Tao New York, came in to add what Wolf calls the “Thomas Schoos touch,” incorporating ethnic art and objects in a cutting-edge setting.

Designers and owners all agreed that Tao Las Vegas needed to compete with over-the-top local attractions without turning into a theme park. (A particular challenge, given the Venetian's singing gondoliers and endless baroque frescoes.) With that in mind, Studio Gaia president Ilan Waisbrod—known for his creative minimalism—produced the drawings for the space and made sure the koi pond wouldn't leak into the casino below. Schoos, for his part, scoured sources in the U.S., Asia, and Africa for paintings, photographs, and sculptures as well as a full arsenal of furniture, fabrics, fixtures, and coverings. His mandate ran the gamut from paving walls and floors with river stones to making floral arrangements.

To frame the restaurant lounge's tunnel of an entry, Studio Gaia lined up six rounded arches, stylized versions of Chinese moon gates. Between the arches, Schoos explains, are “tranquillity pools,” tubs filled with water, rose petals, and—on weekends—nymphets dressed in nothing more than strategically placed blossoms. After Waisbrod built the nightclub's bar, an oblong wrapped in stucco, Schoos surrounded it with monk statues holding offering bowls of floating ginger blossoms and votive candles. The addition of so much ornamentation was “a little hard for us,” Waisbrod admits. “But at the end of the day, it was done tastefully.”

The owners had suggestions of their own, too: putting stall doors in the women's restrooms onstage in the nightclub, for example, so everyone could keep an eye on the comings and goings of fellow patrons. And all talents melded synergistically to create the “opium wall,” a museumlike display of antique opium pipes in the dining room. Wolf had intended →





Left, from top: In the lounge, Buddhas referencing various Asian cultures occupy niches detailed with Venetian plaster. Studio Gaia designed the dining room's display wall for antique opium pipes; Schoos lined the glazed cases in Thai silk. **Right:** The promenade between the monks' bar and the restaurant lounge is lined with banquettes encircled in alder.

to feature snuff bottles, but Schoos lobbied for the more provocative vintage drug paraphernalia. It's now displayed in Studio Gaia's bank of illuminated cases, which Schoos lined in multicolored Thai silk.

Waisbrod's work included establishing strategic spots for observing the action. The view from the entry tunnel—initially restricted to a gilded reclining Buddha straight ahead—gradually opens up to take in the whole restaurant lounge. Because the 400-seat dining room is hidden behind the lounge bar, there's a similar coup de théâtre when the 37-foot-high space is abruptly revealed, with a 16-foot-tall foam-injected seated Buddha on a dais, front and center. This jaw-dropping figure is Tao's cynosure, placed in clear sight of all the tables in the bi-level dining room. In the third-level nightclub, private booths are designed like opera boxes, looking down on the spectacular statue and up at the five banners that the owners commissioned from a street artist in New York's Chinatown.

"You can see everyone, but they can't see you," Studio Gaia senior architect Ronald Deschamps explains. This voyeurism is particularly evident in the nightclub, where the promenade that connects the entry to the monks' bar is lined with semi-enclosed banquettes for semiprivate canoodling, and scantily clad models cavort on a Shanghai-style opium bed. Other models sit and meditate, wearing little more than body paint. Not even Waisbrod could think them overdecorated. 🍵

PROJECT ASSOCIATE (STUDIO GAIA): PEGGY LEUNG. PROJECT TEAM (THOMAS SCHOOS DESIGN): MICHAEL BERMAN; GARY CHURUKIAN; UWE FREYER; SERGIO LARIOS-SAINZ; DANE RAMBERT; YVONNE SHAW.

FLOOR TILE (ENTRY): STONE SOURCE. ARCHWOOD: THROUGH CONKLIN'S BARNWOOD. CUSTOM TUBS (ENTRY), CUSTOM LANTERNS (EXTERIOR, DINING), CUSTOM BUDDHA STATUE (DINING): YOUNG ELECTRIC SIGN COMPANY. ARCH STAINING (ENTRY), FLOOR STAINING (NIGHTCLUB LOUNGE), PLASTERWORK (DINING, LOUNGE): GUERIN DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT. CHANDELIER (NIGHTCLUB LOUNGE): LA MURRINA. BAR COUNTER: SLAB USA; ALEXANDER SERVICES (INSTALLATION). BACK BAR FINISH: CHEMETAL. BRICK VENEER (DINING): CEDCO. CHAIRS: ISA INTERNATIONAL. CHAIR, DISPLAY FABRIC: THROUGH DESIGNERS PORTFOLIO. CUSTOM TABLES (DINING), CUSTOM BANQUETTES (LOUNGE): MUNROD INTERIOR UPHOLSTERY. CUSTOM BAR COUNTER (LOUNGE): BAMBAM DESIGNS. FLOORING STONES: THROUGH SOLISTONE. SOFA FABRIC (LOUNGE), BANQUETTE FABRIC (DINING): ARC-COM FABRICS. BANQUETTE FABRIC (LOUNGE), OTTOMAN FABRIC (PROMENADE): MAHARAM. CEILING, WALL FINISHING: D.C. VIENT. FLOOR FINISHING: KHS&S CONTRACTORS. MILLWORK: COMMERCIAL CABINET COMPANY. LIGHTING CONSULTANT: JOHNSON SCHWINGHAMMER LIGHTING CONSULTANTS. STRUCTURAL ENGINEER: JOHN A. MARTIN & ASSOCIATES. MEP: JBA CONSULTING ENGINEERS. ARCHITECT OF RECORD: KLAI JUBA ARCHITECTS. OWNER'S REP: TAYLOR CONSTRUCTION GROUP. GENERAL CONTRACTOR: MARIS TECH CONSTRUCTION CORP.