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DRESSING ROOM AND “MINI-BOUTIQUE.”
MARIEL RITTENHOUSE REPORTS

WALK-IN

KINGDOM



Turn useless space into a walk-in closet, or a "stand-alone haven," as Melanie Charlton Fascitelli calls it

THERE AREN'T TOO many positives about the small, awkwardly shaped "extra bedrooms" in many Hong Kong apartments. More marketing gimmick than liveable space, that 150-sq-ft triangle off the master suite doesn't properly fit a sofa never mind a full-size bed, and it begs that irking question, "What on Earth do I do with this?" The answer arrives via a beloved – albeit unexpected – ally: your wardrobe.

Melanie Charlton Fascitelli, founder of international design company Clos-ette and author of "Shop Your Closet," creates extravagant walk-in closets or, as she calls them, "stand-alone havens." More than merely a place to stuff clothing, these made-to-order wardrobes are fully fledged "escapes." She says, "People want their closets to be their own mini-boutiques and that's the whole idea behind both the book and how we design."

Antony Chan, creative director of Cream in Hong Kong, agrees, adding that a custom walk-in should be treated "like a VIP fitting lounge that one might see at a top personal dresser," even if on a more petit scale.

On top of Hong Kong's notoriously cramped quarters, the weather also presents a formidable challenge when it comes to preserving the patina of a million dollar clothing collection. Fascitelli advises clients in tropical climes to steer clear of "woods that shrink and expand when it gets hot." Popular alternatives include "hardwoods that have a mother-of-pearl inlay or lacquer-like finishes with a very high shine, which are much more sealed up than a softwood closet." Chan notes, "A dehumidifier is indispensable given Hong Kong's humid weather."

In terms of the closet's function, Fascitelli applies tricks of the retail trade to create a space that mirrors a beautiful upscale boutique: "Merchandising your own clothes enables you to see your wardrobe." From the small details, such as a velveteen hanger, to the large, such as a comprehensive organisation system, a Clos-ette closet maximises all available space with custom cabinetry, hardware and accessories.

Fascitelli explains that after the initial consultation, "We inventory and edit to learn what the client has and the way they dress. After the analysis we can design the space and create visuals so that the way the person gets dressed is how their closet is arranged. Maybe it's a client that's jetting from one city to the next and so if packing is routinely an issue, then we need to account for that." Chan adds, "To make [the closet] magical, clients must confide all of their secret desires." So if you'd like to sip a little bubbly

while dressing for an evening out, speak up.

In fact, according to Fascitelli, that isn't an uncommon request: "Once you've designed for the function of the space and the storage of items, then it's time to trick it out. We've designed a lot of fancy hidden bars – the last one was crafted from Baccarat crystal with a Sub-Zero refrigerator concealed behind an inlaid door."

Proper lighting is an integral part of the dressing experience and Fascitelli stresses that it's important to contract a design team that's well versed in this subtle art. "Lighting sets the mood, you need one setting for during the day and one for the evening before going out." She stresses, "You have to use fibre-optic lighting, it's the clearest and cleanest and you can make it very directional."

Fascitelli's clients are generally staunch sartorialists who spend lots of time prowling the racks of Harvey Nichols, Chanel, Lanvin and the like, so she gets a number of requests for walk-ins that resemble "big shiny jewellery boxes – like Louis Vuitton or Christian Dior stores – with soft cushiony ottomans in the middle covered in really fabulous fabrics."

Chan emphasises that the decorative touches play "a supporting role" and vary depending on the content of the closet. He says, "It should be one's very own universe. A place where you can relax, enjoy, be inspired and prepare yourself for all those important rendezvous." And while there "isn't just one solution," he contends that "a Baccarat chandelier with a leather chaise-longue from Fendi or Poltrona Frau" is an excellent starting point.

For many of Fascitelli's clients, the showcasing and safeguarding of their extensive jewellery collections need to be part of the package. She gushes, "These rooms are literally gorgeous, they can be lined in leather, suede and precious materials and we can add laser security. Some of these rooms hide millions of dollars of jewellery." One such safe for an Arab client ended up resembling an at-home "Van Cleef and Arpels boutique, it was like walking into the most decadent jewellery store in the world."

The cost of a custom walk-in closet runs high: at Clos-ette, fully stacked rooms with a safe and a crystal bar run between US\$500,000 and \$1 million. At Cream, prices start at around US\$38,000. But the end justifies the means, and as Fascitelli says, "These are spaces that hold some of the most expensive items in the house." ■

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