



A scene in Warner Brothers new movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. Photo by Sanja Bucko

CELEBRITY STYLE

Here's Why All the Sets in *Crazy Rich Asians* Look So Authentic and, Well, Rich

Production designer Nelson Coates and set decorator Andrew Baseman tell *AD* how they tackled the film's Southeast Asian set design without a prop house

By Cathy Whitlock

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Creating the worlds of old and new money in Southeast Asia for Kevin Kwan's bestseller turned film *Crazy Rich Asians* may seem like fun, but try doing it without visiting a prop house. Luckily, production designer Nelson Coates and set and interior decorator Andrew Baseman were able to tackle the challenge, along with a number of other design dilemmas for the highly anticipated Warner Brothers film that hits theaters August 15.

Filmed in the culturally rich country of Singapore as well as Malaysia (specifically Kuala Lumpur and Penang which doubled as New York City's West Village), the romantic comedy follows New Yorker Rachel Chu (Constance Wu) as she accompanies her boyfriend Nick Young (Henry Gouling) to a wedding only to discover he is from one of Singapore's wealthiest families. Coates (best known for his recent designs on the *Fifty Shades* film franchise) and Baseman (who has worked on the set of *The Americans*) were tasked with bringing the tastes, traditions, culture, and design of Singapore to the silver screen.



The Young family ancestral home.

Courtesy of Warner Brothers Pictures

Tyersall Park, a 19th-century estate near Singapore's botanical gardens, served as the backdrop for the Young's ancestral home. While the two abandoned mansions on the property were architecturally appropriate for the Young residence, they weren't quite ready for their close-up on the inside. According to Coates, they were filled with monkey feces. "The jungle had literally taken over," he says. Regardless, the Peranakan style of the buildings, a hybrid of centuries-old European and Asian designs originating in the Singapore Straits, gave the designers the inspiration for the interiors.

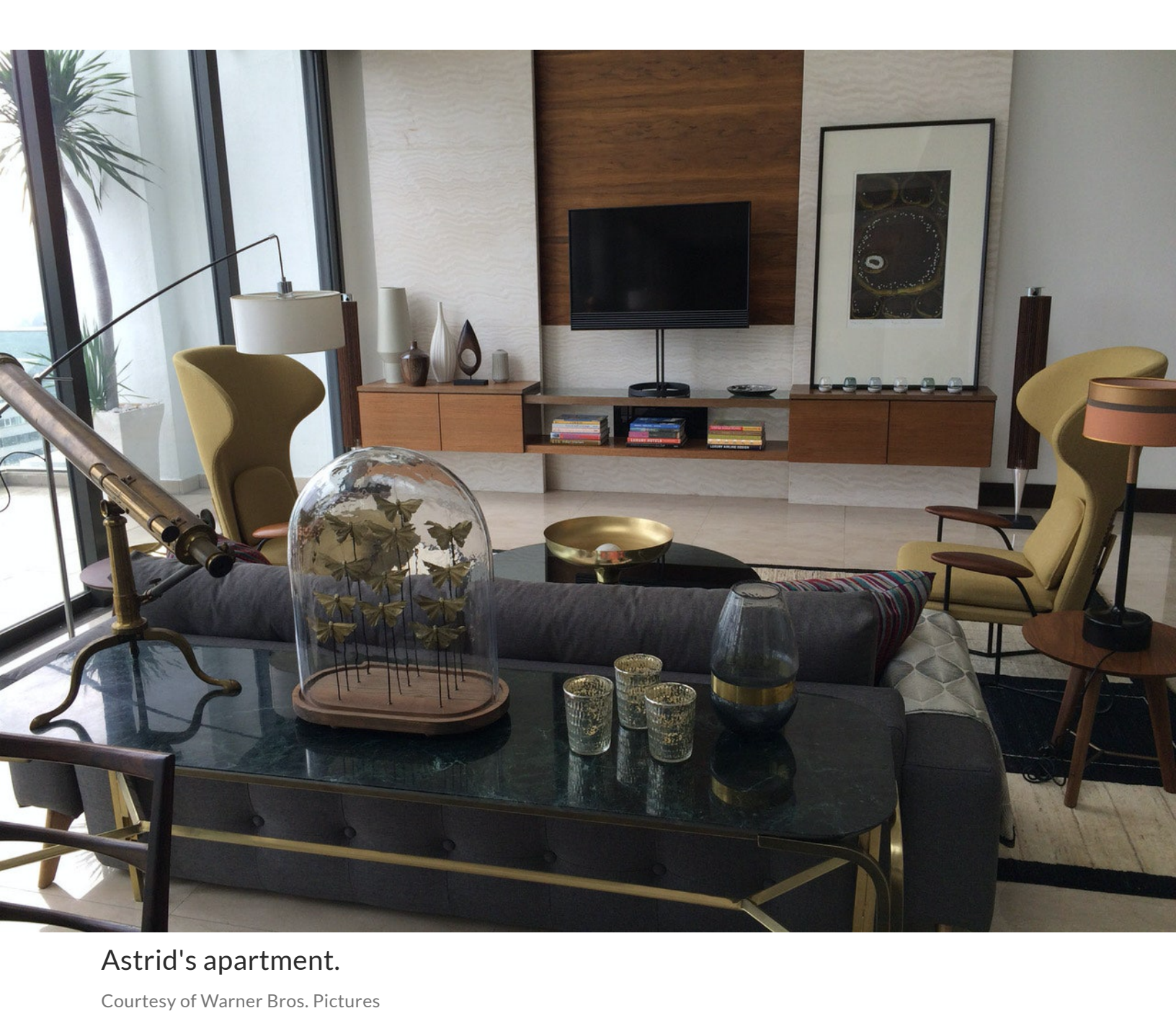
"The style was basically from early immigrants in China who married into wealthy families," explains Coates, who says the "incredible wealth of art, architecture, and formality that exists in the Peranakan style" is evident in many of the set's design elements. These include floral and animal ornamentation, decorative inland mother-of-pearl furniture, lacquered chairs, glazed ceramic tiles, louvered shutters (known in the 1800s as "jealousy shutters"), and a William Morris-style wallpaper. The Peranakan style is "a unique combination of Chinese, English, Malaysian, and Victorian," Baseman adds.



Nick Young's mother's home.

Courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures

This decorative mix of cultures and time periods can also be seen in the contemporary tower apartment of heiress Astrid Leong (Gemma Chan). The "New Old Guard," as Baseman calls it, is represented, with a combination of midcentury and Scandinavian complemented by contemporary and Asian accessories. "Astrid was cool, sophisticated, and often traveled to Paris, so we wanted the look of a very chic, contemporary apartment," says Baseman. Another goal, according to Coates: "We wanted to make it look like she follows the magazines." As there are no prop houses in Singapore, however, the crew turned to local antique shops. This was a problem made easier by the country's vibrant design scene. "Singapore is one of the richest countries in the world and filled with high-end luxe pieces."



Astrid's apartment.

Courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures

A few other things the designers focused on during the design process include symmetry (which Baseman calls "one of the most important characteristics as everything is done in pairs"); ancestry (the designers even gave a nod to author Kevin Kwan, who provided personal family photos to be used in the background of the film); and attention to detail. The later seems to be the one they had the most fun with: "We did an Asian *Gatsby* theme that we were calling Downtown Asians," says Coates.



Perhaps the best example of this is the portrayal of the \$40 million wedding of characters Colin Khoo and Araminta, where the designers were able to pull out all the stops. Given the directive by the film's director, Jon Chu, that "this has to be a wedding like you've never seen before," the designers created a church of "nature" at Singapore's former 19th-century convent Chijmes with custom velvet benches amid a meadow of three-foot-tall grasses, large eight-foot bamboo fans, and hand-painted lanterns made from scratch to accompany the show-stopping center aisle where the bride seemingly walks barefoot on water. Besides the obvious need for waterproofing, painstaking details such as creating lanterns with the bride and groom's names and scenes of fertility and prosperity were added (each lantern took three weeks to craft). "Everything has a cultural reference," explains Coates. "As a nonlocal looking at this with fresh eyes, I knew we were a part of something unique. It really felt new and we wanted to represent Singapore well. We had to make sure we got the details right."