

stacked

Within architect James K.M. Cheng's huge glass "ice cube" looming over Toronto's University Avenue, The Design Agency creates the multi-level Momofuku restaurant.

By Leslie C. Smith

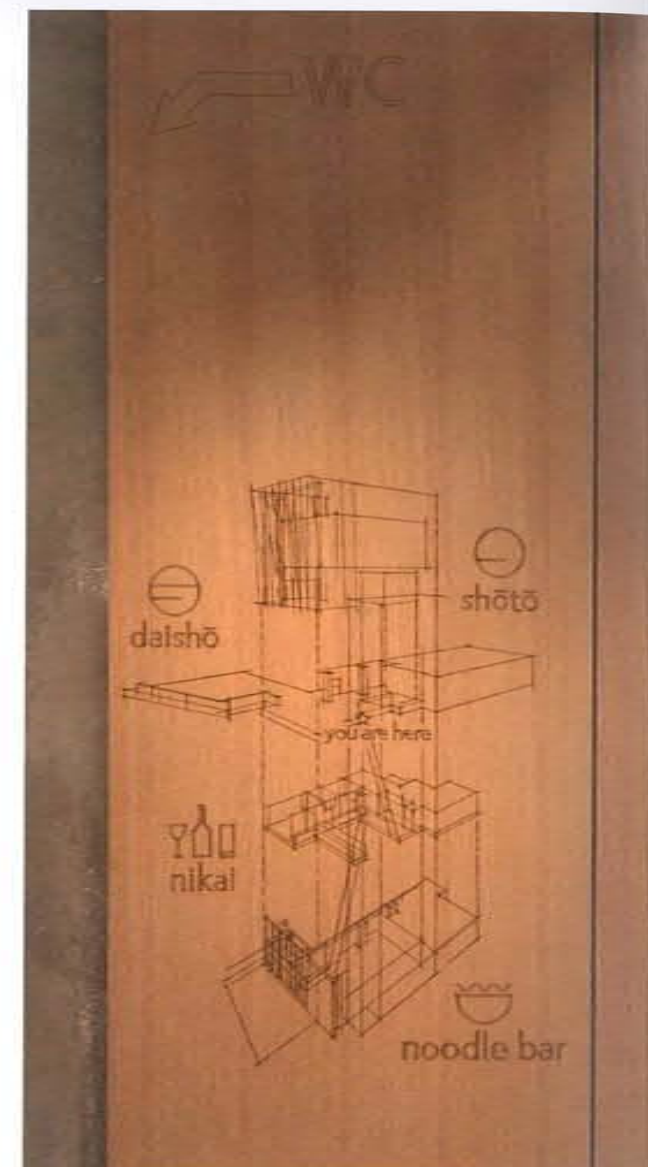
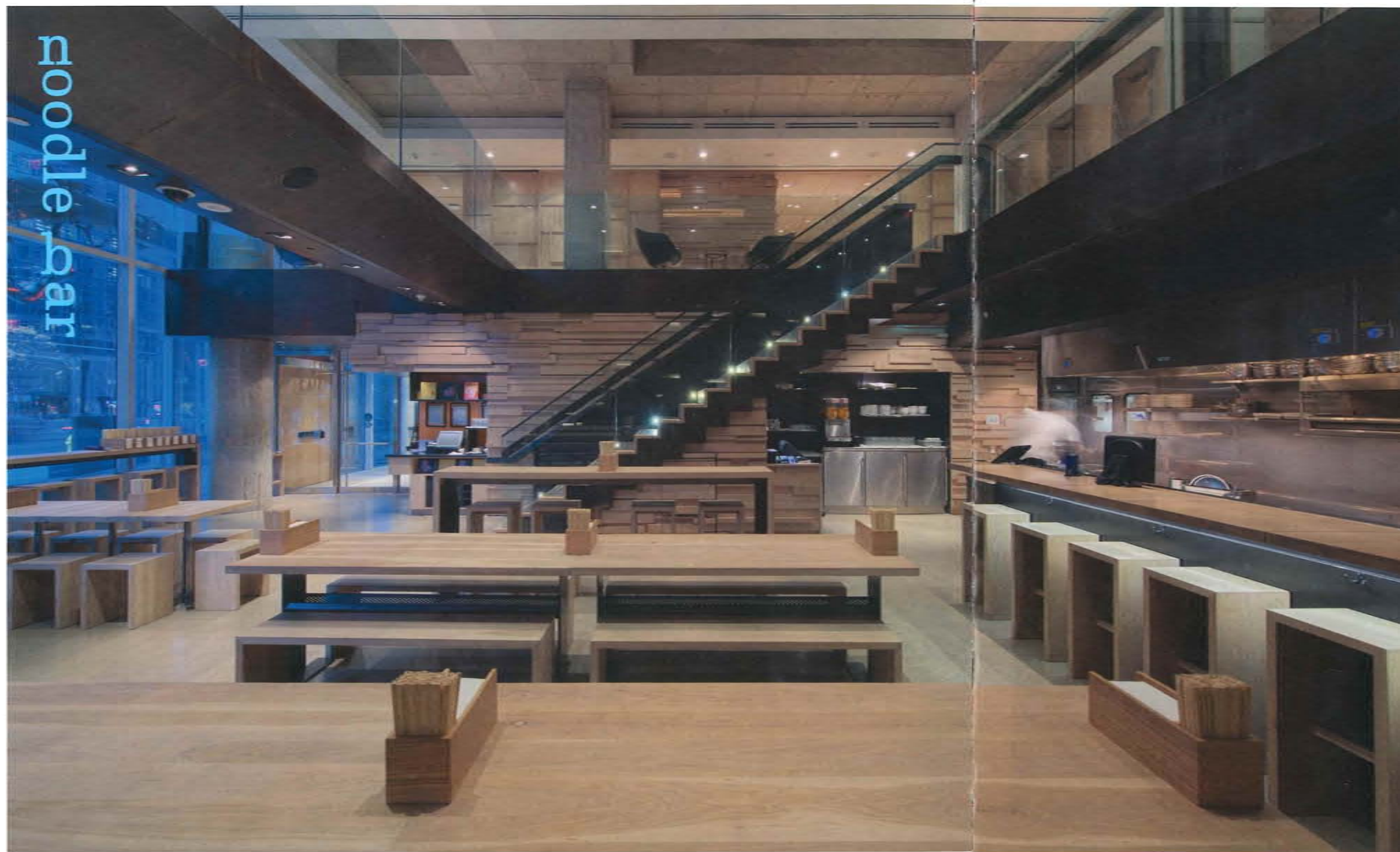
Langri-La hotel
TORONTO

You can't miss Momofuku, both figuratively and literally. Launched in October 2012, the four-stage noodle-bar restaurant, part of a New York/Sydney micro-chain run by celebrity chef David Chang, sits in a huge, bevelled glass "ice cube" (designed by architect James K.M. Cheng) protruding cheekily from the northeast side of Toronto's new Shangri-La Hotel. Looming over the downtown boulevard of University Avenue, it stands apart from its staid surroundings of neat grass strips, by-the-book buildings and commemorative statues to the Boer War. Although technically located at 190 University Avenue, everyone

knows it as the place with the stainless steel dragon outside.

This huge, 33-foot-tall, 65-foot-long outdoor sculpture stands at the base of the building and rises partway up the glass cube: a writhing, twisting, silvered vine somewhat resembling the mythical Chinese beast, covered in scores of leaf clusters that on closer inspection reveal themselves as a swirling flock of rock doves (a.k.a. pigeons). Named "Rising" and created by Chinese artist Zhang Huan, its showy presence plays counterpoint to the actual restaurant entrance, which is small, to one side and minimal in impact – just a white oak double

Below The main-floor Noodle Bar consciously references the U-shaped gallery on the second floor and the squared-off, communal seating of old Chinese caravan inns. "Ramen-noodle" walls and a rust-patina steel bridge and bulkheads, along with angular Escher-inspired stairs, stir up extra visual attention. **Right** A designer's schematic etched beside the elevator indicates the positioning of Momofuku's four entertainment areas stretched over four floors.



door with an artificial "live edge" wave down its centre.

Designers Anwar Mekhayech and Allen Chan, co-partners with Matt Davis in the Toronto-based studio The Design Agency, appear to have riffed on the sculpture's name and organic-yet-not-organic styling, bringing these elements into play in Momofuku's 6,600-square-foot interior as well, along with a single stainless-steel pigeon carefully placed by the artist himself above the second-floor gallery. In particular, the pair built the space's four separate entertainment areas upwards in aspiration, starting with the everyday accessibility of the main-floor Noodle Bar; moving up to the shoji-screened Nikai bar/lounge; and, finally, reaching the stunning apogee of the third-floor Daishō dining room and Shōtō open-concept kitchen.

These Japanese names, along with the chain's saucy title (Momofuku means "lucky peach" in Japanese – but sounds like

daishō



nikai



This page Wooden shoji screens done up in an offbeat Mondrian pattern can be used to separate the second-floor, public-access gallery from private parties in the Nikai bar/lounge. Jazzy white-oak strips, with open slits here and there for a peek-a-boo effect, give Nikai an energetic vibe. Opposite Patrons in the third-floor Daishō are treated to the novelty of a huge oak-finned cube floating above their heads, plus an unimpeded, panoramic view of downtown Toronto. Excel chandeliers and floor lamps, resembling a string of Japanese taiko drums, provide a softened glow during the daytime and dramatic lighting at night.

something else in English – and pays homage to Momofuku Ando, the Taiwanese-Japanese inventor of instant ramen) are part of what you might call the “Span-Asian” influence noticeable in both the restaurant’s food and its design. The Noodle Bar’s square, double-height dimensions, with communal seating below and stairways on two sides leading to a bridged,

U-shaped gallery above, consciously reference old Chinese caravan inns, the kind to be seen in such movies as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. The idea of cubes stacked within cubes – especially prominent in the third-floor dining area – echo the stepped pagodas of Korea, chef Chang’s own home country. And the ribs of white

oak veneer that encircle the third-floor interior floating cube, along with the wooden strips decorating the walls and ceiling of the first two storeys, suggest giant ramen noodles, a staple food throughout the Asiatic region and a growing one in North America. The kitchen – or rather kitchens – is king here, and Chang was instrumental in their design and placement. Each floor has

its own open cookery (a fourth, back-of-the-house kitchen sits secluded on the basement level), making meal preparation part of the sensory entertainment. The third-floor Shōtō dining area is the most intimate instance of this: islanded behind the Daishō bar in what is essentially a high-gloss black cube, chefs work a central galley, handing off freshly made tasting-menu dishes to patrons seated at the surrounding

black-granite counter.

But, ultimately, it is Daishō dining room out front, with its 40-foot-tall glass face turned towards University Avenue, that truly impresses. Inside this ice-cube container floats another huge cube (within which, incidentally, lies the hotel's swimming pool). White paint and horizontal white oak ribbing visually decrease its bulk. More white oak used as bottom

panelling provides a human-proportioned dropped ceiling over the bar, while still leaving diners with a stunning panoramic cityscape and the impression that they too are floating over the downtown scene. ◀



Taste of the town Shōtō sits on the other side of Daishō's wine-fridge wall, a glossy, black-granite inner sanctum encasing an open chef's gallery. Guests seated on high Catenary bar stools from Brooklyn-based Token are invited to imbibe while sampling a daily tasting menu.