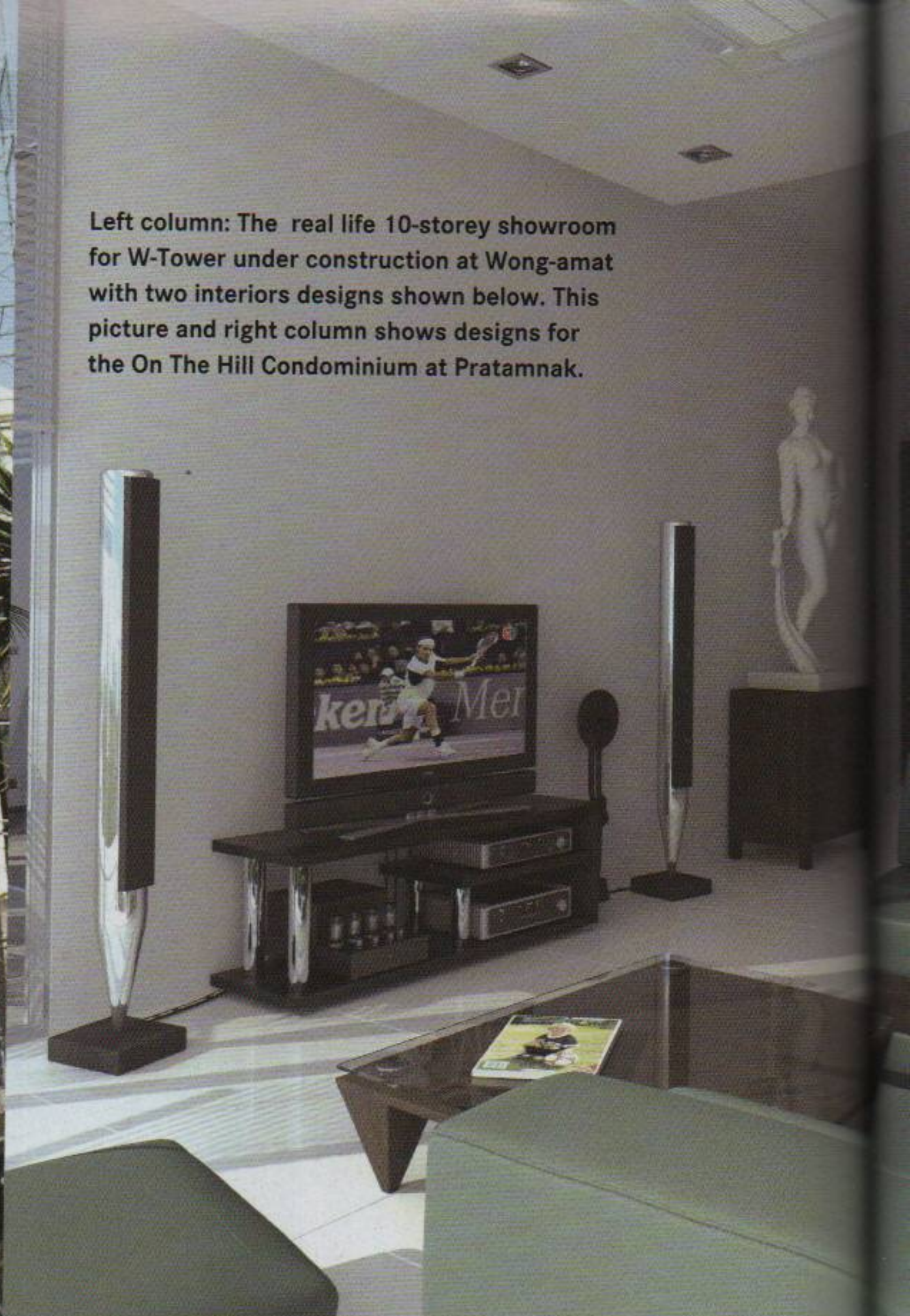




Left column: The real life 10-storey showroom for W-Tower under construction at Wong-amat with two interiors designs shown below. This picture and right column shows designs for the On The Hill Condominium at Pratamnak.



Pushing

Imitation, they say, is the most sincere form of flattery. It's a philosophy that architect Mario Kleff clearly subscribes to because it bothers him not one iota when he sees aspects of his structural designs being copied on the streets of Pattaya. In fact, he positively enjoys it, writes *Robert Collins*.

"It means I'm having a big influence on the direction construction design is going here," said the managing director of the Wandee group with a wry grin. "I love to introduce new ideas just for the fun of it, and it's something I have been doing for the five years I have been here."

Mario winces slightly when described as an architect. "I am a designer," he said, "and I will

design for you whatever you want ... a car, a piece of furniture, a garden ... but I happen right now to be designing buildings. The satisfaction comes from introducing new design concepts."

The buzzword today among many investors and developers is 'maximisation' – achieving the greatest possible usable floor space from the available land. But maximisation itself is boring, according to Mario. "It limits the creativity you can put into the design," he said. "In fact, you could simply copy one plan after another to meet the requirement for maximisation. I prefer to have input into the brief to produce a design that satisfies not only the investor but also satisfies me as a designer."

The self-confessed workaholic put in an average



back boundaries

We meet the designer who is happy – not angry – when he sees ideas being copied

of 20 hours a day, seven days a week, during a hectic December designing six, eight-storey buildings in the process. Sleeping quarters in the Wandee Group's Thappraya Road headquarters meant he frequently didn't leave the building for days on end. It's difficult to understand, therefore, how he manages to balance work with family life.

Nittaya Wongsin, Mario's Chinese wife, and beautiful daughter Jiang Li Wongsin agree he works long hours, sometimes

without sleep. However, the family appears happy together. "The fact is that without my wife I could not have achieved what I have over the years," Mario said. "My family go along with my art and we work together as a team. And team playing is what it's all about."

Mario is realistic enough to know that not everything he designs gets built. In fact, he expects that 40 per cent of his condo designs will never get past the drawing board, usually because of lack of investment.

But that doesn't bother him.

"For me the creative idea is more important than the finished result," he said. To illustrate the point he singled out the four projects outlined here, even though only one of them is currently under construction.

Each is distinctive in its own way, pushing the boundaries of building design in Pattaya even farther.

W-Tower showroom

This 10-storey, free-standing temporary building to showcase the prestigious W-Tower at Wong-amat is the first officially licensed showroom of its kind having been given the go-ahead personally by a Minister.

The design brief was to create a showroom for the W-Tower for a budget of between

2.5 and 3.5 million baht. But the concept that Mario came up with not only led to a five-fold budget increase, but also added impact and replicated the feel, ambiance and atmosphere of the W-Tower units themselves, including their fantastic sea views.

"When I read the original brief I said why build something nine metres high when you can build it 27 metres high? As a result Haim Bar-David, CEO of Heights Holdings, is more than pleased again to have something unique which supports their motto to develop the future."

On The Hill Condominium

This is another eight-storey condominium on Pratamnak Hill, the exterior architecture

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of which is based on 1930s' functional designs from Sweden ('funkis' in Swedish), which are based on light and purpose rather than ornamentation. Minimalist interior and furniture designs combine with high quality materials to create a warm atmosphere in each unit.

"The developer asked me to go over an architectural plan he had for a building he called On The Hill because he felt the design wouldn't work," said Mario. "I created a completely new design and engineering concept by coming up with this very nice funkis design style."

Park Royal II

Another outstanding eight-storey condominium on Pratamnak Hill, this new building from Heights Holdings could easily be termed the 'transparent' building. Part of the 'Luxury Collection for 2009', it will go up on Soi 1 where

Wandeegroup already have Park Royal I, another original design by Mario Kleff, already under construction.

The design brief to Mario was: design what you like, as long as you keep to your own individual style and come up with something new that does not exploit the budget yet delivers the maximum saleable space.

"My solution is a complete cellular structure design using modified steel beams for columns and bars to enable very large spans," said Mario. "These beams simply did not exist in Thailand at the time, and although we have introduced them on W-Tower, Park Royal II is the first residential building where they have been permitted. As a result, the entire building is all glass and steel with virtually no concrete. Even the bedroom, bathroom and elevator walls are glass with the exterior clad in shining green glass. You can see

right through the building!"

Haim Bar-David was sufficiently impressed with Mario's new ideas that he decided to adopt it and the subsequent official construction permit is again the first of its kind.

Club Royal Condominium

Another outstanding architectural design and engineering solution for Heights Holdings, the Club Royal Condominium at Wong-amat sets new standards for engineering in Pattaya by incorporating huge spans between columns on residential floors of between 20 metres and 43 metres.

"For years most local architects have been working with spans of eight metres," said Mario, "but my standard spans are 12 to 15 metres and even 20 to 40 metres on occasions. Those kinds of dimensions were only previously used in bridges."

Such were the innovations Mario was introducing that City

Hall planners needed to recruit a specialist engineer to evaluate the merits of his designs. Yet again, the official construction permit for the Club Royal Condominium is the first of its kind to be issued in Thailand.

The massive spans incorporated in the design certainly caused a few eyebrows to be raised, but having designed the 140-metre high W-Tower, the Twin Towers Skypark, each more than 180 metres tall, and other high-rise residential buildings, Mario managed to convince investors and planners that he knew what he was doing.

The design brief was simple: something different, within budget, in keeping with its surroundings and which optimises land use.

In a departure from normal practice, Mario asked Haim Bar-David for a room layout first!

From that he created a master plan featuring six



complete, modern buildings occupying an entire road of almost 200 metres. The ground-to-roof glass cladding will mirror the opposite side of the road without displaying any visible floor structures or balconies, which will face a tropical garden between the buildings. With more than 400 units in the development and incorporating Wandegroup's new cellular steel construction, the Club Royal is destined to become one of the most sought-after, high-quality condominium resorts in the area.

The project echoes the Suan Sawarn Condominium development from TAG Group, which was also designed by Mario Kleff. Its three phases in Jomtien Beach contain more than 400 units and tropical water gardens. Judging by these two projects, it is easy to see why Heights Holdings are pleased with Mario's modern architectural concepts. Ω



Facing page: Park Royal II on Pratamnak Hill where "you can see right through the building".

This page: An interior (above) and two exteriors of the newest offering from Heights Holdings – Club Royal Condominium at Wongamat which incorporates cellular steel construction. City Hall had to hire a specialist engineer to evaluate it.

