

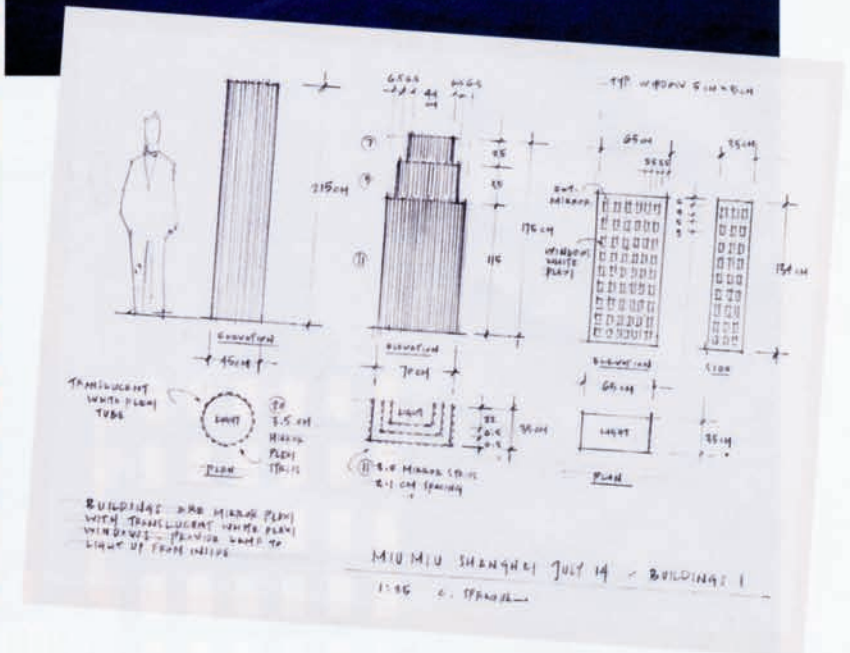
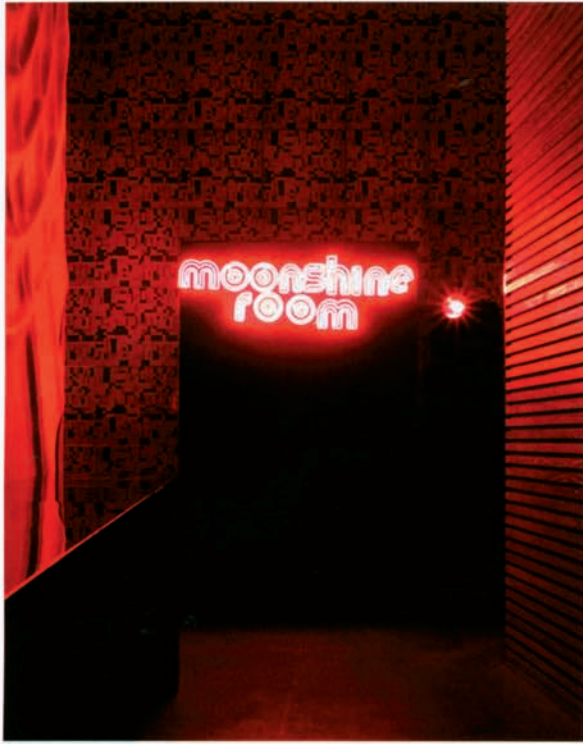
# Shanghai surprise

*With hours to go before a recent Miu Miu fashion show, the man who conjured up Old Hollywood-style New York atop a Chinese high-rise for the set offered us a peek behind his Plexiglas*



**TALL ORDER**

Plexiglas palm trees and skyscrapers formed part of production designer Carl Sprague's set for Miu Miu, created on five floors of Shanghai's Park Hyatt hotel



On the 91st floor of the Park Hyatt hotel in Shanghai, Carl Sprague, an American film and theatre production designer, was swiftly being baptised into the skittish ways of the fashion world. It was exactly 32 hours prior to Miu Miu's ambitious local cocktail of full-scale fashion show, seated dinner, and six entertainment shows twisting around five floors for 800 guests. Yet not one of Sprague's mirrored Plexiglas palm trees, shiny skyscrapers, silver runways or neon light signs, had yet to materialise. 'It's a planned panic,' the Massachusetts-based Sprague remarked optimistically. 'I'm starting to realise that the fashion world makes even the limited lead times of the movie business seem very leisurely.'

The last-minute gallop is something of a fashion badge of honour, but no

one is on more intimate terms with the concept of pulling an all-nighter than the Milanese maverick, Miuccia Prada. The stories of Mrs Prada's design team furiously sewing together clothes as models are about to step onto the runway are by now a hallmark of her work. Another trademark, of course, is her spectacular sets, which show off the latest conceptual conceit from AMO, the design and research division of architectural firm OMA.

For her second label's Shanghai extravaganza (staged in July this year) however, Mrs Prada went fishing in Hollywood for her top set pencil. To be exact, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where Sprague lives and has managed to make a specialty out of smaller-scale, East Coast productions such as

#### KING OF NEON

Sprague's neon lighting designs (top and above left) unified the five different floors of the hotel, each hosting a different entertainment venue, plus the lobby (top right), which doubled as a red carpet. Above right, Sprague's sketches for his illuminated skyscrapers

*The Royal Tenenbaums*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, *The Social Network* and *Mona Lisa Smile*.

Formally, the term 'production designer' was coined in 1939 when William Cameron Menzies realised that the immensity of his job on *Gone with the Wind* required a beefier title than what the mere 'art director' intimated.

'But now,' observes Sprague, 'every piddly-dunk, \$300,000 New York Indie film has a "production designer" — even if that person doesn't have anything to offer except maybe a tape measure and a car.'

Sprague happily bounces around both job titles. As a PD, he is responsible for the entire visual look of a film, while as art director he goes more micro, drawing the actual sets and overseeing their execution.

The latter job for *The Royal Tenenbaums*, where Sprague oversaw an astonishing >>



140 different sets, was what piqued Mrs Prada's interest.

'Our conversation began with "Oh, you remember the movie when..."', recalls Sprague of their first meeting. 'So she obviously has a very busy Netflix account and has seen everything.'

In keeping with the fashion collection's 1940s theme, the brief was to recreate a classic, old-Hollywood nightclub.

'Most people have a wonderful vision in their heads of a nightclub atop a New York skyscraper,' says Sprague. 'But apart from the Rainbow Room it doesn't actually exist. When Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers are gliding across some incredible night club in the sky, it's actually a sound stage in Culver City.'

It's not just the night life that was created out of thin air. Before 1960, nearly every interior seen on film was built on a studio lot. 'If you're in Grand Central Station it's because they built Grand Central Station,' says Sprague. 'It's hard to believe because they did such a seamless job.'

Today, location work is standard but not all locations are available – like the Harvard campus for *The Social Network*, which needed to be built. 'Also, many times we are building the teenage girl's bedroom just because we can't afford a company move,' Sprague explains.

Occupying 14 floors almost at the top of a 101-storey tower, Shanghai's Park Hyatt hotel comes pre-built with the fine bones of a floating nightclub in the sky, as if custom-ordered by Van Nest Polglase himself. Sprague's job, then, was to dress the space, an unusual challenge given the time frame (less than three weeks), the enormous square footage and the



#### CATWALK TO CABARET

A full scale fashion show of the autumn/winter 2011 Miu Miu collection (top right) was presented to guests during dinner. An all-night repertoire of musical acts followed in various nooks, including the 93rd floor which was transformed into a cabaret venue (top left)

Top right, dress £3,580; shoes, £555; bag, £850, all by Miu Miu, [www.miumiu.com](http://www.miumiu.com)

serpentine layout (stretching over five floors, served by just four elevators). 'And there's not that wonderful convention of film or theatre where you've got only one angle,' adds Sprague. 'Everything has to be a positive experience from 800 points of view.'

Of course, the designer was heavily armed with a major shipment of Miu Miu staff from Milan who helped make the ambitious event come to life. While outsiders may be dumbstruck by the sheer numbers of people imported for the event, no one at Miu Miu bats an eyelash. After all, the brand is well-accustomed to airlifting over 400 people twice a year to Paris to stage its fashion shows in the Palais d'Iéna. And just days after the Shanghai event, the dancing shoes stayed on as the entire team was flown to Los Angeles to throw a party and film screening in an old Hollywood mansion.

The Prada pace is stiff and so, it would appear, are the budgets. 'No one's made a peep about money, which to me is totally refreshing,' enthuses Sprague. But not every gig is so cushy. His latest project, for example, is a low-budget, East Coast production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the Shakespeare & Company theatre. Total set budget? A scrappy \$600.

'Architects are always envious of what I do,' Sprague concludes with a semi-sigh. 'Oh, you're conjuring up soap bubbles! You don't have to worry about it standing up or falling down,' they say. But a lot of it ends up in a dumpster before you even have time to take a photo.' Luckily for Sprague, Prada archives every set it's ever created in a huge warehouse in Milan. See? The indoctrination into the fashion crunch time was worthwhile after all. ★