



To the manor born

Shanghai-born Olivia Hsu Decker seemed destined to succeed in real estate after migrating to the United States. She targeted the big spenders, selling only properties worth more than US\$1 million and gaining a string of celebrity clients such as Cher and Sharon Stone. Now she's a big spender herself, living in luxury in the French chateau featured in bestseller *The Da Vinci Code*. Kelly Carter reports.

Olivia Hsu Decker's Chinese accent is still strong; her English is not perfect. But that's not a problem for a woman who wraps herself in Armani designs and leaves a trail of Madame Rochas perfume behind her. On this clear spring day she is, as usual, clad in her favourite designer's creations as she relaxes on a white lounge chair in the enormous garden of the Chateau de Villette, her amazing 17th-century French chateau which author Dan Brown deemed a worthy setting for part of his best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*. The reflection of the historical landmark, just outside Paris, bounces off its two lakes and in the distance looms a massive fountain and a decorative pool so large guests can swim in it. The gardens are her favourite part of the chateau, which is a little surprising considering there are no flowers. But that was the early style of Andre Le Notre, the landscape architect who designed Versailles.

"It's a very peaceful garden," she says looking around. "It's beautiful but it's not high maintenance. I don't have to pick flowers or cut hedges. When you have 80 hectares you can't be bothered."

And when you're as busy as Hsu Decker there is little time for pastimes such as gardening. The Shanghai native who once thought her Chinese background would impede her ability to sell luxury homes to middle-class Americans in the San Francisco district of Belvedere has become one of the Bay Area's most successful realtors. She sold Sharon Stone her US\$7 million-plus mansion and her company, Decker Bullock, is currently the listing broker for tennis star Andre Agassi's \$24 million property. She holds the listing on a \$65 million home, the most expensive house in the Bay Area. Other celebrity clients have

included Cher, Eddie Murphy, British film director Alan Parker, the late screenwriter and author Stirling Silliphant and Lars Ulrich, drummer with Metallica.

"I had no idea when I started that I would be successful," says Hsu Decker, who migrated to the United States in 1975 at age 24 and delved into real estate four years later. "I said, 'Who's going to give their multi-million-dollar Belvedere home to a Chinese girl who is from outside?' It involved writing legal contracts and would they trust my English ability or would they trust my connections to find them wealthy buyers?"

These days such self-doubt is all in the past. She responds to e-mails into the wee hours, rarely sleeping for more than a couple of hours a night whether she's at her Belvedere manor, which serves as her main residence, the 18-bedroom, 21-bathroom Chateau de Villette, or her other fabulous home, Chateau de Grimaldi, an 11-bedroom, nine-bathroom, 17th-century mansion in Aix-en-Provence. She travels back and forth between San Francisco and France every other month, checking her foreign properties, both of which she rents out for a small fortune. During a recent three-week trip to France she took time out of her hectic schedule for this interview, her first about the chateau's connection with *The Da Vinci Code*.

Despite her daily lack of sleep, she looks fabulous. Always glamorous, clicking around in her high heels and designer outfits even when cooking at home, which she did for visiting friends and this reporter. She looks incredibly young for her age, which she refuses to reveal ("I consider myself ageless," she says) but unintentionally gives away (she's 53) when telling her life story. There are no signs of weariness, and a promise to take a nap after the interview and before

heading to Paris in her Rolls-Royce for a cocktail party at a jewellery boutique goes unfulfilled. There's too much to do.

Her assistant Carol Matthews, who has travelled from California to France with her, has neatly stacked business papers and mail for her to go through. A caretaker informs her of a minor problem with her Mercedes-Benz. In two weeks French movie director Claude Lelouch, who made the Oscar-winning *A Man And A Woman* in 1966, will begin filming his latest movie *Happiness Is Better Than Life* at the chateau. Everything must be ready. And of course there is the booming real-estate business 9,600 kilometres away, where she spends most of her time. Her office, part of her private quarters tucked away in the chateau, looks anything but orderly yet she finds everything with ease.

Finally she finds time to sit down and chat. Listening to her recite her story it should come as no surprise that her life has turned out as it has. The eldest of five children, Hsu Decker's mother was a nurse and her father worked for the Chinese government, becoming a history professor after the communists took over. When she was two the family fled to Taiwan, where her parents still live. "My parents never gave me details about how we escaped," she says. "They never wanted to talk about it. It's a very painful experience for them."

She studied social and cultural anthropology at Taiwan's National Chengchi University. Aged 20 she and some college friends visited a blind fortune-teller to learn what was in store for them. Touching Hsu Decker's face and palms, he told her she had lived in an Italian palace in a previous life in the 17th century and that for the remainder of her life she would live >>

abroad, gradually moving further away. At the time, she had never been outside Asia – her only exposure to Europe had been through books and music – so she thought nothing of the man's prediction. Besides, the outing was just for fun and she left giggling with her friends.

Now she finds it "bizarre" that her life has turned out somewhat as the fortune-teller predicted. She has

an eye for colour, she took interior-designing courses in her spare time and *Architectural Digest* became her bible. A pattern developed: she would buy a home, decorate it, lease it and watch it quickly appreciate. After a couple of years of doing this for herself and friends, her husband and peers convinced her to make her foray into real estate.

"My husband said, 'We don't need you to work.

1979 she finally found a small firm willing to take her on. After six months she was well on her way. By 1981, the year she divorced Decker and gained her US citizenship, her career had skyrocketed. She joined Merrill Lynch, then the country's largest real-estate company, and by 1984 she was among its 10 top sellers. By 1986 she was its No. 1 seller in the US. Her clients jokingly called the company Merrill Lynch Decker and encouraged her to go out on her own, promising to stay with her. She opened her own company in 1989 and two years later joined forces with her main competitor, Bill Bullock, forming Decker Bullock as the company is now known. These days, she's upped the ante and only handles properties worth more than \$2.5 million. Some of her clients buy houses like other people buy a new winter coat, every few years. Some homes she's sold repeatedly.

"She is extremely bright and extremely personable," says retired *San Francisco Examiner* property editor Corrie Anders, who covered Hsu Decker's career for 15 years. "In real estate that makes for a winning combination. Sometimes it's really hard to put your finger on something but she has this amazing ability to connect to people and especially at the upper levels of business."

Hsu Decker impressed Anders with her marketing savvy. For instance, she is known for hosting opera- or ballet-related parties during the opera or ballet season at either her home or a house she has for sale. It is a perfect way to socialise with people, not to mention showcase a luxury home. Instead of hobnobbing with

"SHE IS EXTREMELY BRIGHT AND EXTREMELY PERSONABLE. IN REAL ESTATE THAT MAKES FOR A WINNING COMBINATION ... SHE HAS THIS AMAZING ABILITY TO CONNECT TO PEOPLE"

lived in Hong Kong and Japan, working first as a hostess for a popular television variety show and later as a flight attendant for Northwest Airlines. She met Gary Decker at a New Year's Eve party at the American Embassy in Taipei in 1973, when he was the Tokyo office manager for shipping company American President Line. When he was transferred to the US in 1975, she went with him and the couple married later that year. She landed a job at the Grand Hyatt in downtown San Francisco's Union Square. Because of her people skills she was soon dealing with the hotel's VIP guests. She also used her savings to buy investment property, which, because of the recession, was inexpensive compared with the inflated Tokyo prices to which she was accustomed. Artistic and with

Just sell a couple of houses a year," she recalls. "I ended up selling a couple of houses a week. My weekly commission was more than my entire year's salary at the Hyatt hotel."

She obtained her real-estate licence and made an incredible declaration: she would sell only \$1 million-plus homes and only those in her neighbourhood of Tiburon and Belvedere because she didn't want to drive far (which she'd had to for her job at the Grand Hyatt). "People thought I was arrogant, crazy or both: 'What do you mean you won't touch anything under a million?' " she recalls them saying. "I said, 'No, this is what I've decided to do.' I built a niche that I've kept all these years by sticking to high-end properties."

Large real-estate companies shunned her but in late



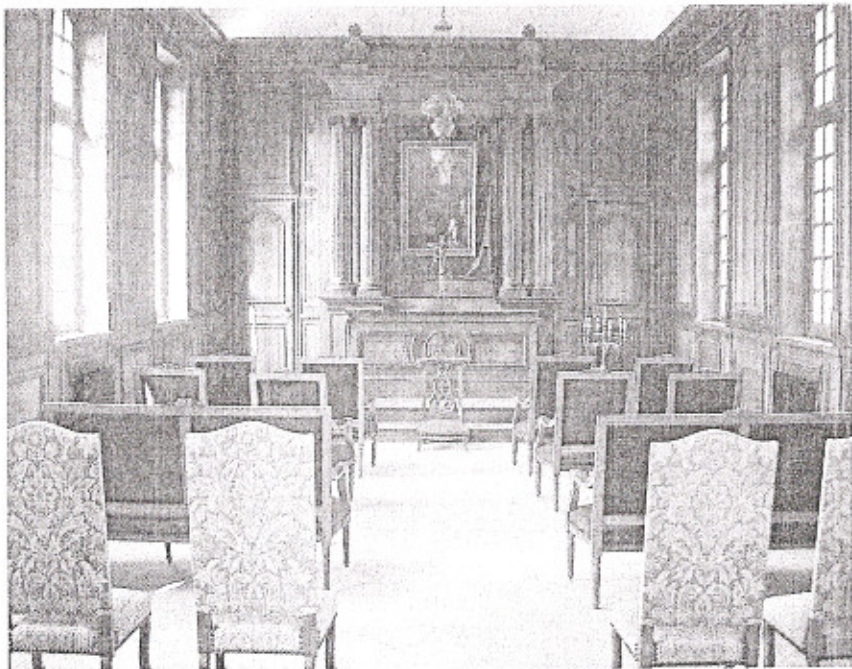
Olivia Hsu Decker can't recall how much she spent restoring Chateau de Villette and furnishing it with period pieces, but the figure is believed to be more than its US\$5 million purchase price. "I just remember writing French cheques - millions and millions," she says.

people whose homes are selling for \$200,000, she's rubbing elbows with those whose abodes are worth several million. And of course, she's always outfitted in expensive gowns and jewellery during these soirées, Anders notes.

Although she's in a competitive business Anders says other real estate agents are not jealous of Hsu Decker. Instead there's what he calls a "begrudging admiration" for her. She and Bullock complement each other well. He loves to manage and has a broker's licence, which Hsu Decker has never wanted. She prefers to sell because of her love of people and homes. The merger of the Bay Area's two real estate stars allowed Hsu Decker to travel more. Trips to Italy appeared on her itinerary and she fell in love with an Italian man. The two planned to wed until he expressed his desire for her to become a typical Italian housewife and give up her business.

However, two good things developed from that relationship. She took Italian cooking lessons after her fiancé, like many Italians, complained the Italian food in the US was not up to par. Her culinary skills improved when she dated another Italian and cooked for him and his friends. Later she studied French cuisine at Paris' Ritz hotel. These days she gives Italian and Chinese cooking lessons in Chateau de Villette's professional kitchen, which is equipped with top-of-the-line Hobart commercial appliances.

The other good thing to come out of her failed engagement was a villa on Lake Como, Italy, that her then-fiancé purchased. She cleaned up the property »



Kelly Carter

Time to be pro-active about skin-care

Sponsored Feature

There are times in life when you have to be pro-active and not just sit back and let things pass you by. This is especially true with skin care where doing nothing results in your youthful looks passing-by to be replaced by wrinkles and tired looking skin.

But now skin-care professional Clarins have come up with a range of treatments in which you really can sit back and relax and let someone else be pro-active while you reap the rewards with improved skin, radiance and well-being.

The Pro-Active range debuted in Hong Kong in May at the Institut Clarins at the Peninsula Spa, the Central Building and Sogo Department Store and features a range of treatments aimed at rejuvenating, revitalizing, nourishing and hydrating skin.

The secret, according to Barbara Mo, development manager of the Institut Clarins in Hong Kong is a two-pronged approach which teams the expertise massage techniques of the Clarins beauty therapist - The Clarins Touch - with a range of specially developed Pro-Active products.

The products contain high concentrates of plant extracts and aromatic oils - such as aloe vera, seaweed and orange oil - which are specifically designed to be used only by trained Clarins therapists of degrees customized to your skin's need.

"Our regular clients and new clients have been astonished at the results," said Ms Mo. "They cannot believe their skin looks so soft and so healthy after just one treatment."

"Normally, a woman spends a few minutes a day on their skin-care routine but with the Pro-Active Treatment, the formulas are concentrate and are delivered deep into the skin with the massage lasting nearly one hour... which is why the results are so noticeable."

Ms Mo added that because Clarins treatments place an emphasis on well-being as well as skin-care, the benefits were felt in mind as well as the body which means clients are also left feeling much more relaxed and stress free after treatments.

The range, which targets the body and the face, includes a slimming and toning treatment called the Synchronised Body Toning Four-Hands Slimming Treatment - an intensive six session treatment delivered by two therapists at the same time.

The facials are aimed at restoring, hydrating and improving skin texture and appearance and begin with the therapist cleansing and exfoliating the face to prepare the skin for the specialized Pro-Active formulas to follow.

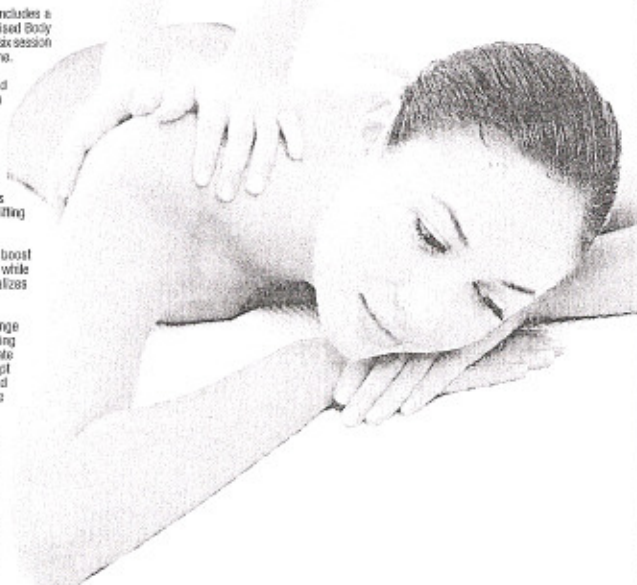
The Pro-Active Age Defying Facial is aimed at rejuvenating mature skin and uses age-defying avocado, aloe vera and apple seed oil which is delivered deep into the skin with an intensive firming, lifting and relaxing massage.

Extracts of papaya, kiwi and orange are used to boost circulation and lymphatic flow in the Radiance Facial, while seaweed and cactus pine and white lupin revitalizes moisture levels in the Hydrating Facial.

In addition to the slimming treatment, the body range also features a Body Reshaping and a Body Rejuvenating treatments which aim to intensify tone and regenerate the skin. Those with extra time on their hands can opt for the Pro-Polish Exfoliation which first removes dead skin cells and impurities in order to maximize the effects of the Pro-Active formulas.

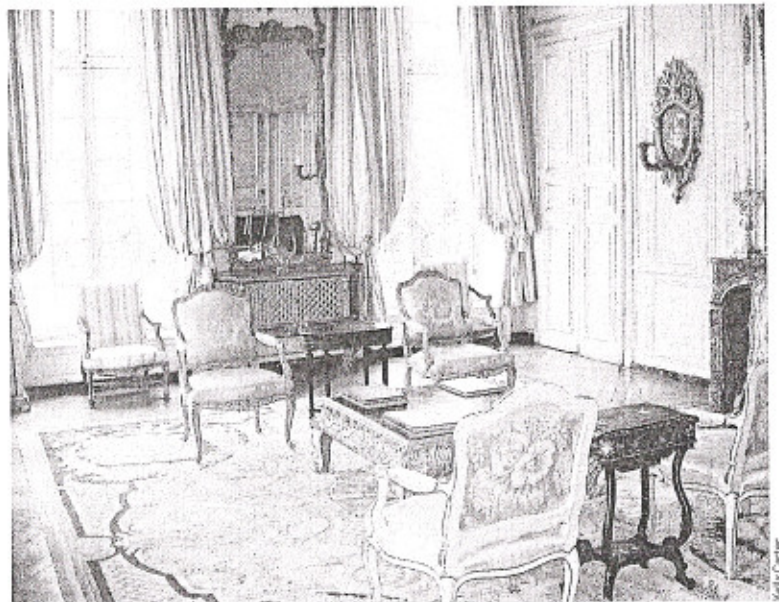
All the treatments use the most dynamic version of The Clarins Touch - the massage technique developed by Clarins founder Jacques Courtois-Clarins in 1954 and perfected in the fifty years which followed.

It is this expert massage which works to stimulate blood circulation and the lymphatic system and delivers the Pro-Active ingredients deep into the skin to produce the maximum results with the minimum of effort - on your part at least.



and decorated it. It would prove to be a source of inspiration. The pair spent a lot of time there but she hated the cold winters and found the summers too humid and overrun with tourists. She sought a villa of her own and started looking at places she considered suitable for more than two months of the year. She scoured Italy without success then started looking in the south of France. She was seeking a new challenge in a new country, a new culture and a new language and hit the jackpot when she came across Chateau de Grimaldi, which she bought in 1995. After restoring it she felt the urge to buy another. Because of her regular visits to Paris, she searched near the French capital.

In 1998 she stumbled on Chateau de Villette. It wasn't on the market but she convinced the owners to sell, sealing the deal in July 1999. Soon thereafter she began the arduous task of renovating. She installed a sewerage system and new phone lines and bought a transformer to provide electricity. Chateaux typically have few or no bathrooms and hers was no different. Initially there were five or six bathrooms and 25 bedrooms. She built 21 bathrooms and reduced the number of bedrooms to 18. She decorated with 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century furnishings and carefully selected the fabrics for all the curtains, lampshades and



Novel approach puts chateau in the spotlight



Olivia Hsu Decker says she had no idea her French chateau would feature prominently in Dan Brown's wildly popular novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Nor can she recall providing any details about her home during Brown's re-searching of what would become one of best-selling books of all time.

She had not even heard of the book until friends mentioned it to her after reading it and seeing Hsu Decker's 17th-century Chateau de Villette was the setting for more than 80 pages. She merely remembers communicating with a woman named Blythe; the unusual name stuck in her mind. Blythe Brown, an art historian and painter, collaborates on her husband Dan's research. Hsu Decker isn't sure when she spoke to her: perhaps 1999, or was it 2000? "People think I'm crazy for not remembering," Hsu Decker says. "They say, 'How could you not remember? It's *The Da Vinci Code*. It wasn't *The Da Vinci Code* at that time.'"

Instead, it was someone requesting information on her chateau, located 35 minutes northwest of Paris in Condecoeur, which she rents out for a whopping 45,500 euros

(HK\$437,500) for the minimum one week. She often fields inquiries from prospective tenants.

Brown needed a particular type of residence to serve as the home of character Sir Leigh Teabing, who is crucial to the plot. Teabing's abode needed to be impressive enough for a British knight, in close proximity to Paris, with large enough grounds for a breathless escape scene in a Range Rover and close enough to Le Bourget airport, where a getaway in Teabing's private plane takes place. Villette, with its 87 hectares located just outside Paris and 20 minutes from Le Bourget, and its extraordinary salons and 18 bedrooms, matched the requirements. It may seem strange that Brown went through the painstaking process of finding the ideal chateau when writing fiction but that is his style.

"Authenticity is Dan's top priority with all his novels — that is, using real locations, architecture and history in order to make his books as intriguing and well-researched as possible," says Jason Kaufman, Brown's senior editor at Doubleday. "That's why he chose a real location."

The Da Vinci Code tells of a murder of the Louvre's curator at the museum and takes readers on a suspenseful race throughout the world of art and religion in search of the Holy Grail. The controversial thriller debuted at No. 1 on *The New York Times* bestsellers list in March 2003, has topped every bestsellers list in the United States, has been published in 40 languages and has sold 5.7 million copies, according to Nielsen BookScan. It currently sells at a rate of about 100,000 copies a week. This autumn *The Da Vinci Code: Special Illustrated Edition*, a photo book, will hit bookstores and Columbia Pictures plans to make a Ron Howard-directed film version of the original novel, meaning even more people will know about Hsu Decker's not-so-humble home.

The stately chateau was designed by architect Francois Mansart in 1668 for Jean Dyle, the Count of Aulnay, Louis XIV's ambassador to Venice, and finished in about 1696 by his nephew Jules Hardouin-Mansart. Andre Le Notre, the mastermind behind the gardens of Versailles, also created Villette's sumptuous gardens, which include two rectangular-shaped lakes on each side of the main garden. French aristocrats owned the property, which is sometimes called La Petite Versailles, until Hsu Decker convinced a widowed baroness and the three sons of deceased baron Robert Gerard to sell it to her.

"It was an honour to have my home featured in such a successful book that the whole world has been reading," Hsu Decker says. "It is even more interesting that the story was about the life of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, the Sacred Feminine and the Lost Goddess and I am a single woman who owns this chateau. I don't think Dan Brown intended to find a chateau for the book's character Sir Leigh Teabing to be owned by a woman but it turned out to be."

These days the book's phenomenal success is working to Hsu Decker's advantage. The businesswoman has become affiliated with an annual seminar/retreat that has run for three years. This year's event in September explores the life of Mary Magdalene, a central figure in the novel, and features insights by a Jungian expert. Hsu Decker is offering participants seven nights at her other French home, Chateau de Grimaldi, meals, transport and registration at a cost of US\$3,900 a head. Truly obsessive fans can fork out the same amount again, spending the following five nights at Villette and taking in other sights mentioned in the book.

Rented out for a cool 45,500 euros (HK\$437,500) a week, Chateau de Villette has proved to be hot property, and its popularity looks set to increase thanks to the huge success of *The Da Vinci Code*.

bedspreads. She doesn't know how much money she put into the project but it is clearly more than the \$5 million purchase price. "I just remember writing French cheques," she says. "Millions and millions. It's cheap to buy a chateau but what is expensive is remodelling and what is even more expensive is to decorate."

Why does she need such a grand chateau anyway? "I don't know," she says with a laugh. "I always loved big spaces and high ceilings. For me it is very comfortable to be in a 20-bedroom chateau, much more comfortable than a smaller one. I don't know why but the bigger the better."

"I ALWAYS LOVED BIG SPACES AND HIGH CEILINGS. FOR ME IT IS VERY COMFORTABLE TO BE IN A 20-BEDROOM CHATEAU, MUCH MORE COMFORTABLE THAN A SMALLER ONE. I DON'T KNOW WHY BUT THE BIGGER THE BETTER"

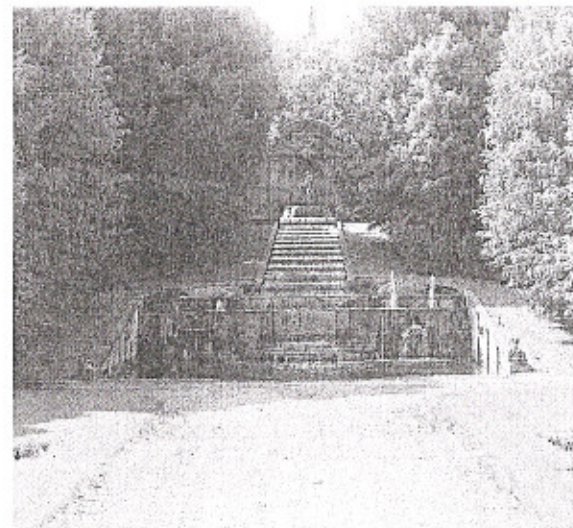
And it brings in money. Joan Edwards, her best friend of 10 years, says, "It's a phenomenon to have the background she has, to have come here to this country and made herself such a success and then go on and not even speak the [French] language and create two lovely chateaux and make money on those too – and all on her own. It is pretty amazing."

No one can dispute Hsu Decker's success – except perhaps one person, and Hsu Decker reveals no emotion when she talks about her. "My mother didn't think I should have a career or business success," she says. "Having not had children is a big strike against me. My mother doesn't consider me a success. I'm still a failure for not having wonderful children."

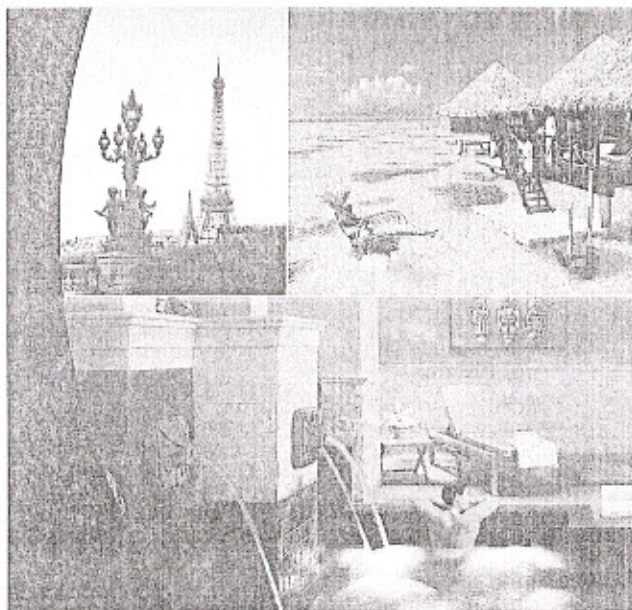
Because she spends so much time in Europe Hsu Decker hasn't been back to Taiwan for more than 10 years and has never returned to Shanghai, which she is eager to see because of its much-heralded changes. One gets the feeling that someday she'll find that Italian villa she searched for a decade ago. Her Italian is much better than her French (she also speaks Japanese) and she beams when talking about the boot-shaped country.

But San Francisco is where her heart lies. She vows to remain in the Bay Area because she is established in business, has deep friendships, loves the weather and takes advantage of the city's cultural offerings – she was on the opera guild's board and frequents the ballet, symphony orchestra and theatre. The balance between the old world of her historical French properties and the new world of her San Francisco lifestyle pleases her immensely.

"I have the best of both worlds," Hsu Decker says. "I feel very, very fortunate." ■



Kelly Carter



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