

Designing experiences

Through its award-winning oeuvre, a young Singapore design practice seeks to question the status quo, disturb convention, and redefine relevance in a contemporary context.

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It was a fortuitous dinner party that changed Singapore architect Colin Seah's career path.

He was a tutor at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) architecture department when he invited hotelier and restaurateur Loh Lik Peng to his apartment for a meal. One of the pioneers of hip boutique hotels in Singapore, Loh owns a collection of design-driven boutiques, hotels and restaurants, including the widely acclaimed Hotel 1929 that opened in 2003. (His Waterhouse at South Bund in Shanghai was featured in our July 23 profile story on Shanghai design firm Neris & Hu.)

And at that dinner more than 10 years ago, Loh was so taken in with Seah's interior styling of his apartment that he commissioned Seah to do the interior design of his property, the New Majestic Hotel.

The New Majestic Hotel project was the UNOD that triggered the creation of Ministry of Design (MOD), explained Seah, who was one of the speakers at Datum: KL 2014, the annual architecture conference organised by Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia.

Seah is the founder and design director of the Singapore-based practice. Headquartered in Singapore with offices in Kuala Lumpur and Beijing, MOD's diverse portfolio includes lauded architecture, interior design, and product design projects across Asia.

Founded in 2004, the practice has racked up international awards like the Red Dot Design Award 2014 the safety equipment brand Durasafe's retail gallery in Singapore and was named Designer of the Year by International Design Awards USA 2010. The young practice – the 30-strong team's ages average 40 and below – also clinched Singapore's most prestigious design accolade, the President's Design Award, twice: one for the New Majestic Hotel in 2006, and another for the advertising firm BBH's office in a pre-war warehouse in 2008.

MOD was dubbed the "Rising Star in Architecture" by the London-based global affairs magazine *Monocle* in their "Singapore Survey 2010".

The practice's mantra: question, disturb, redefine, informs MOD works.

"It's basically how we think, conveyed in a quick snapshot," says the 42-year-old Seah, who studied architecture at the University of Arizona in the United States. He honed his skills by interning at OMA in Rotterdam, the studio of Pritzker Architecture Prize-winning Rem Koolhaas, and Studio Libeskind in Berlin headed by Polish artist/architect Daniel Libeskind. Seah also had a four-year stint at NUS researching design pedagogy and serving as design critic.

"We have taken convention as a starting point in any project because we're in an age that is advancing so rapidly," Seah explains at our interview. "There's no way you can start a project, which takes years to develop, based on the convention that was established before and hope that your project will remain relevant several years later."

MOD designers start by asking themselves the essential questions: How can they address relevance for tomorrow? Then, they find innovative avenues to disturb the process – the way spaces and forms are created and perceived, and finally redefine their hope for the project.



Zig Zag House, Singapore: Set on a triangular site, the house twists around a mature tree located on its premises, creating courtyard spaces that are sheltered from the harsh weather but allow for light and cross ventilation into the interior and basement level. Internal corridors serve as breezeways between air-conditioned and naturally cooled areas. Slightly lofted above the ground, each of the building's three wings houses an entertainment zone, a family zone and a private master zone. Unfortunately, during construction, the tree roots were damaged and a new tree had to be planted. — Photos from Ministry of Design



Colin Seah's design firm, Ministry of Design, works by taking something that's old, usually a building or a site, and with intervention of a space or experience, we create new life.

"In a nutshell, we create experiences!" says Seah. "For example, we take something that's old, usually a building or a site, and with intervention of a space or experience, we create new life."

Melding old and new

The New Majestic Hotel project in Singapore embodies MOD's approach of breathing life into an old building with intelligence, thoughtfulness and a touch of whimsy.

In early 2000, the concept of a cool boutique hotel steeped in heritage yet also modern was relatively new in Singapore.

"The only hotel that's famous was either the super historic ones like Raffles or the



UOL Edge Gallery, Singapore: A departure from the typical show gallery of staid glass boxes and over-sized billboards, the Edge comprises a double-height sales gallery and two show apartments that are a part of Singapore developer UOL's development of three residential towers on a former hotel and theatre site nearby. To deal with key site issues, such as a semi-circle shaped site, noisy surroundings and a distant vehicular drop-off point, MOD designed a series of L-shaped columns that wrap over the roof and serve as the walls of the two-storey building. Glass doors and windows fill the gaps between. There are no signs or advertisements on the exterior of the building at all. The design attempts to challenge conventional Singapore show gallery precedents, which ignored the use of architectural solutions as a powerful marketing device, according to MOD.

spanning new international branded ones," recalls Seah.

"So our question was: how do you reclaim this shophouse with a 120-year history but not in your typical preservation way? All the projects that preceded New Majestic were very conservative and treated heritage with this bow.

"How do we take something and not freeze it in time and still be respectful of the old?" he asks rhetorically. "That was the biggest challenge because MOD sees conservation as a continuum."

In the New Majestic lobby, for instance, MOD left the original ceiling intact, complete with peeling layers of paint – courtesy of three previous owners – water stains and

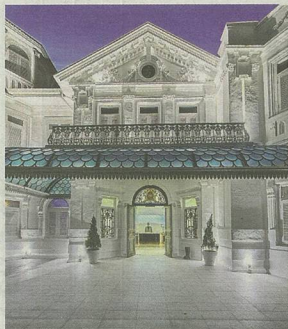
uneven surfaces.

"We thought it was beautiful on another level as it spoke to the history of the space in a very authentic, almost crude way. And the layers of paint reveal the age of the building," says Seah.

"It's almost like an inverted archaeological dig. Some guests thought we'd run out of money but it's a talking point," he adds chuckling.

Airwells and portholes provide natural light while natural ventilation is introduced via airwells and ceiling fans.

"We also designed spaces where four rooms can be combined with the courtyard to host a huge party, a typology unique to Singapore," Seah says. In space-starved



Macalister Mansion, Penang: The melding of old and new prevails throughout the Macalister Mansion project in Penang. For example, the front entrance's original ornate doorway and facade (left) leads to a modern, minimalist reception (above) complete with a reflective copper reception counter and video art of abstracted Penang scenes by contemporary Malaysian artist Masnoon Ramli, accompanied by an electronic soundtrack.



The mansion's dining room was conceived as a 'whimsical experience where the diner enjoys the formality of fine dining imbued with a contracting fairytale-like quality' – pastel deer graze around a tree while squirrels and birds perch on its branches. The pink, blue and yellow animals, which complement the all-white dining room, are constructed from fibreglass and finished in high gloss paint.

Singapore, young adults typically live in small apartments, usually with their parents, and would usually book hotel rooms to throw a party, Seah explained.

"From this project we knew there was a huge opportunity for exploring the continuum and newness of design through old buildings," he says.

MOD applied the same approach to their Macalister Mansion hotel project in Penang by introducing a contemporary twist into the 100-year-old building.

"What we wanted to explore was whether you can inject into history a sense of whimsicality and transform the stoned old into something more engaging as a new experience," Seah says.

Challenging perceptions

In the following Q&A, Seah shares more insights into MOD's design ethos and their projects in Malaysia, including Macalister Mansion.

During the Q&A session at Datum: KL 2014, you said you were 'obsessed' with Rem Koolhaas at one point and 'Koolhaas' primary interest was in utilising typology, rather than form, as the vehicle for change, which made sense to me.' Can you explain how you use typology as a vehicle for change?

If we study the way people use spaces, we find that, sometimes, these typologies change because of culture, society and technology. For instance, the open office plan is a result of a more collaborative way of working, as opposed to silos or workstations, which require a way of working that is quite different.

In the New Majestic Hotel, we explored the typology of the hotel room. Conventionally, toilets and wardrobe facilities are banked in a corner by the door. We explored the "aquarium" room typology by placing the bath or shower block in the centre of the space and putting focus on the ritual of cleansing and celebrating it.

Also, the guest becomes an actor in the stage of the room and central to the active experience of the space as opposed to being a passive observer in it.

What did you get out of your stint with OMA/Koolhaas?

I took away from OMA the core value of a democratic studio environment, where the value of your ideas, and not your seniority, counts most. This is the way we work in Ministry of Design – sometimes my idea's the best, other times it could be the interns'.

What was it about your apartment that led to the New Majestic Hotel project?

This was some 10 years ago and we were trying some ideas that were unheard of back then. The apartment's styling was quite unique and hard to pin down, sort of industrial/oriental chic.

We used full cement screed finishing on all surfaces as a base, overlaid by a series of screens (fabrics, bamboo lattices), exposed M&E (mechanical and electrical) trunking in metal and lots of art. We had lights with lengths of exposed wires which were movable and hung from a network of hooks on the ceiling so lighting could be modularly moved around to follow where the consistency furniture was moved.

Our sofa, dining table, etc, were modular and could be broken down and moved to different locations easily. The idea was to allow

for maximum flexibility because we didn't know how we would eventually want to use the space.

What are the typical challenges in adaptive-reuse projects like Penang's Macalister Mansion?

The challenge is always to find a balance between expressing something contemporary for the project that will be relevant for the current culture or society as well as to retain some of the spirit of the heritage without being too kitsch or literal. This type of challenge is more difficult to overcome than the more obvious ones of structure or build ability. For Macalister Mansion, we recalled the original function of the building as a house and designed the experience around that idea, with bedrooms above and public spaces below.

Also, we revived the idea of the historical figure of Norman Macalister to overlay a persona of the host. It's a bit of fantasy history, though, and needs to be taken as a whimsical gesture, not a purely historical one.

You've said that the Macalister Mansion "challenged local preconceptions of the boutique hotel." How so?

I think what the Mansion does very well, and which differentiates it from other boutique hotels, is the way it tells a clear story,

and how this story or narrative then guides the entire design. Typically, design hotels are based on a collection of cool but generic design gestures that don't tell a story and just convey a stylistic approach. The narrative of Macalister and "his" mansion guides the design of all the spaces – for example, the all-day dining is designed as a "living room" space, the bar like a "library" space and the art and decoration are inspired by Governor Macalister.

What are MOD's current projects in Malaysia? And what are your thoughts on the design scene here?

We established the MOD Kuala Lumpur office to better serve our Malaysian clients, and to increase the number of our projects here. Currently, we are working on several projects, including a new boutique, lifestyle-driven hotel in Penang, a cutting-edge gallery, also in Penang, and residential developments in KL and Iskandar Johor.

I feel that Malaysia has a wide array of development ranging from the unique boutique project to the massive new towns. Also, the clients we've met have exhibited an openness towards good design and an awareness of its need. The value placed on innovative design is something that is a key must-have for MOD when collaborating with clients.



Vanke Triple V Gallery, Tianjin, China: Housing a permanent show gallery and tourist information centre for China's largest developer, Vanke, the gallery is located along the Dong Jiang Bay coastline of Tianjin. Merging structure, sculpture and space into a single form, the gallery's zig-zag form and steel cladding was designed to stand out against the backdrop of a flat landscape. Its pitched roof points out to the bay and the rich patina of the steel contrasts with the blue sky and water. The client requested three main spaces: a tourist information centre, a show gallery, and a lounge for discussion. With their own entrances, the tourist centre and the show gallery are orientated to separate existing pedestrian pathways and can be operated independently. The building is designed to take advantage of the beachfront view.



New Majestic Hotel, Singapore:

Conventionally, bathroom and wardrobe facilities are banked in a corner by the door in hotels. In the New Majestic Hotel project, MOD explored the "aquarium" room typology by placing the bath or shower block in the centre of the space (left), putting the focus on the ritual of cleansing and celebrating it. Also, the guest becomes an 'actor' in the stage-like space, having an active experience in it instead of being a passive observer. (Left) The ceiling in the hotel lobby was left unfinished to show layers of peeling paint, revealing the century-old building's history.

