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INDESIGN

INTERIORS ARCHITECTURE DESIGN

FORMWERKZ ARCHITECTS' NEW EXPRESSION FOR TRADITION

ARDMORE RESIDENCE BY UNSTUDIO | RT+Q ARCHITECTS | DPS KINDERGARTEN BY KHOSLA ASSOCIATES
JALAN MAT JAMBOL HOUSE BY ZARCH COLLABORATIVES | LATTICE OFFICE BY FDAT ARCHITECTS

IN CONVERSATION: COLIN SEAH & CLAU SENDLINGER



ADVENTURES IN DESIGN

INTERVIEW EDITED BY
PORTRAITS
IMAGES

» RACHEL LEE-LEONG
» JOVIAN LIM
» COURTESY OF
RESPECTIVE
COMPANIES

TWO DESIGN RULE-BREAKERS TALK ABOUT
AUTHENTICITY AND ESCAPING TO FOREIGN LANDS.

Above: Claus Sendlinger (left)
and Colin Seah in the lobby of
Wanderlust Hotel, a member of
Design Hotels

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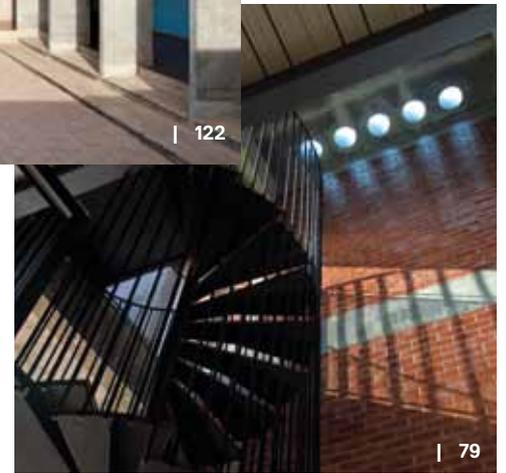
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COLIN SEAH, FOUNDER AND Principal of Singapore design firm MOD (Ministry of Design), and Claus Sendlinger, Founder and CEO of Design Hotels recently met up when the latter arrived in Singapore to launch *The Design Hotels Book: Edition 2013* at Wanderlust Hotel. Seah brings a unique perspective to design that is daring, innovative, and sometimes even risky. But it all makes for a firm that has truly become one of the most exciting Singaporean practices to watch. The German hotelier, on the other hand, is touted as a trend forecaster and a thought-leader through and through. The fact that they're already firm friends made the conversation all the more interesting as they talk about risk-taking, neighbourhoods, the groundbreaking effects of collaboration and escaping to foreign lands.

Colin Seah Maybe I'll start. Besides asking you whether I can come visit you in Mexico... I think it's really interesting to see what the parallels are between a design hotel and the greater environment of lifestyle and culture. Have you noticed that with the cities where there are more or fewer design hotels, there is a corresponding level of inventiveness for the other aspects of culture?

Claus Sendlinger Maybe in the old world, like Europe, North America, the coastal areas, there is more affluence, because there's more history of travel, so they're really experimental and they're looking for something really edgy. But here in Asia, it's not spread as wide from a demand point of view. That would be my question to you: Asia is one of the fastest growing luxury markets in the world in terms of consumer goods. But why is there not an equal amount of development in more experimental design and hospitality?

Seah You're talking about fringe design right? What we call "boutique" design, almost, as opposed to mass market luxury. I think it's got to do with the perception of luxury in Asia. And I know this for a fact because we don't just do hotels, we also do residential development and my goodness, you try to put in a Tom Dixon-designed lamp and people are like "Is that expensive?"

Above: One of the many fantasy themed rooms in Wanderlust Hotel designed by fFurious

Sendlinger My theory around this is that real estate is expensive in Asia, especially on the high streets. What I believe is still missing is the braveness of some investors going into new territories of the city – that's what [Loh Lik Peng] did. When he went to Chinatown, there was nothing [contemporary] in Chinatown. [Same as] when he came here [to Little India]. Now there are three hotels down the street.

And we have seen that phenomenon in London, in Berlin, in Paris, in New York, in Milan, all over the place. The minute you come into a neighbourhood where more the art crowd hangs out, and you build the first hotel – it's still affordable – you have a real influence on the neighbourhood.

Seah When I went to Dubai maybe five years ago, I stayed at this hotel – it wasn't bad, but it wasn't great. The funny thing is that it was isolated in the middle of construction sites... it illustrates the emptiness of this standalone icon – no matter how nice it is.

Sendlinger I would say the future [of hospitality] is curating the neighbourhood. It doesn't stop within four walls. You need to know where you're going to send your customers in the neighbourhood. Not only to find the best book and the new gallery, a nice bar and a nice restaurant, but also the gym, maybe yoga.

Seah Are people travelling for different reasons? Before, people would sign up with a tour. Now, you book almost everything on your own and you chart your own adventure.

Sendlinger But because of that, the boundaries into the experimental are pushed further and further. That's why you now find National Geographic cruise lines and the surfer surfing the wave in Papua New Guinea and people finding truffles in Italy, or going through Umbria with shepherds.

Seah Sounds like a good itinerary for a next holiday. I don't know if there'll ever be a day when the design hotel will become the norm or if it's actually healthy for it to always be outside the norm. I think there should be almost a focused mass and [then separately], "design" and edgy because you're on the edge.

Sendlinger [Let me] put this question to you. [When developers] come to you, is it because they've seen a great room that you did somewhere else and they say 'can you copy this for me'? Or, how does it work?

Seah There are architects whose signature is so strong you have to go to them for that. You can't go to them for anything else. We're not one of those firms – not because I don't have a strong opinion of what it should be. I like to use the word "authentic". It's not so much authentic in that it's traditional. But it's authentic in the fact that the choices that were made came from being in a specific place

Top: The restored facade of the New Majestic Hotel, a member of Design Hotels™, whose interiors were designed by Seah

Bottom: The 'Living Room' of Macalister Mansion in Penang, designed by MOD and a member of Design Hotels™

and a specific time and specific person

Sendlinger But that creates premium. To me, this is luxury, because it's artisanship and it's not a copy paste. It's a fresh idea and lucky enough there are more and more people looking for fresh ideas.

Seah I think in terms of developers outside of the hotel realm, let's say developers who do residential, especially with the price of land being so high, it's tougher. They're looking for formulas that work so that they can be assured a certain level of sales. They're not necessarily interested in innovation. The only time they innovate is when the next guy innovates and they go "oh, we better be better than him". It's about predictability more than it is about creativity.

Sendlinger I think in general, our interpretation of authenticity is to be honest about what you are. You shouldn't try to be everything and you shouldn't try to be something that you're not. And that is the image you present and also with the copy you write to them. And then you can get around with a 14sqm room if you tell people, look, it's 14sqm, but it's a great design firm who did and we give you access to this and this... And it's a fair value for money and it's up to the consumer.

Seah What drives you to do what you do? We're very familiar with what Design Hotels does now. Is there a new chapter?

Sendlinger One thing that drives me is this real sustainability. I'm 100 per cent convinced of that and I'm looking for the absolute champions, and not only in hospitality. I was in Bali this weekend, I saw a hotel that is not open yet. It's above Padang Padang [Beach]. 95 per cent of the house is natural



or recycled (without furniture). It took the guy four years. He was burning every brick on the ground. And all the wood part was recycled.

Seah I've always seen sustainability in a broader sense. For example, the hotel we're in now (Wanderlust), the New Majestic, Macalister Mansion, I think these projects are sustainable for more inherent reasons other than the way they're constructed. The fact that they're old buildings and they're being adapted to reuse and give a new purpose. That, to me, needs to be the core tenet of sustainability. Sustainability needs to transcend technique. It needs to be inherently an attitude and then it's applied to technique, applied to your choice of location, applied to a whole bunch of other things.



Sendlinger [In] how you run your business! I believe it needs to be in the DNA, just as design. At the moment there are sustainability officers. In hotels, they're engineers. But I think it needs to come up...

Seab Yeah, on a higher level,

Sendlinger Eight years ago, I read that A.G. Lafley, CEO of Procter & Gamble wanted to bring design to the centre [of the company]. So it was the first time a chief designer worked with the CEO – and the design was not coming in at a stage after the CFO...

Seab Which is always the case...

Sendlinger Which is mostly the case. I was reading [the website] Fast Company, and they were showing phenomenal collaborations and one of the ones at the forefront was Burberry. Angela Ahrendts, former CEO of Burberry, brought the digital world and the retail space together at Burberry. The flagship store on Regent Street is really utopia. Now, she's at Apple as Senior Vice President of Retail and Online Stores.

Seab I recently returned from Taipei and went to this bookstore, Eslite. The guy is Taipei's biggest book operator and he's now moving into retail. I could not believe this is where I would find innovative retail – you would think it's in Milan or New York. I was shocked in a very pleasant way. They sell ceramics, they sell bed linens, but instead of

just selling it, beside the ceramics sales, there's a glass blowing studio. And it's a Sunday, and there's a little girl there who is sitting on a high stool, she's blowing and everyone is watching. After that, you go and buy the glass. Beside the upholstery for the bed linen, someone had set up a kiosk where you could get your pillowcases monogrammed.

It's moving beyond just the brand and the product for sure. I find that very fascinating, and in our work, the reason why we're interested to move towards more holistic design is not business driven. It's not because we want a bigger piece of the consultant's pie. But with more scope, we can then have more control.

Sendlinger You want a stronger product.

Seab Exactly. Much stronger product, and a more multi-layered product.

Sendlinger Do the developer's understand that? Do they understand it more and more?

Seab Yes! We're going into presentations these days where we're not just pitching for the idea of the job, but we're pitching for the strategy of the hotel, the branding, the architectural – with a local architect – and the interiors. So they're beginning to see, our ability to design an experience is not limited to the physical space.

Sendlinger Developers in the past have been very much about brick and mortar and less about brands. But today, if you want to pump up a building like this (Wanderlust), it needs a brand... I think here, like Shanghai, HK, SG, Bangkok, Seoul, Tokyo, there's lots of potential.

Seab With the kind of new cities, city fringes, there's a need for instant memories, almost. Or an instant vibe to be created. You can't wait, like in Dubai – you build something and you hope in 20 years the surrounding neighbourhoods get generated. Have you been told by certain Singaporeans that Johor Bahru is becoming quite the investment hotspot for Singaporeans because of the relatively more affordable housing prices. So we're selling all these dreams to people, which is fine, but they're not supported by a neighbourhood or an infrastructure – the things that made you and I want to live someplace. I think the new towns, if they're going to be liveable at all, need to have that very

quickly put into place. And somebody needs to envision that.

Sendlinger And there we're still talking about masterplanning and not curating. Masterplanning creates these pliable cites, because then there's the Starbucks, there's the King Pin... That's why the most creative people of the world live in the SOHOs of the planet.

Seab You in live Mexico...

Sendlinger I'm off the grid. I had a 350sqm apartment in Berlin that I rented and now I have an 80sqm cabana with two bedrooms. One for the kids and one for us, but we live outdoors. And it's right on the beach and the cabanas are on our land, which we are still managing in collaboration with the owner. It's a project where half of the cabanas have no bathrooms but during the high season, the best people came.

Seab I have a small version of your Mexico [in mind]. My wife Joy and I run the company and we would like to go to a city of interest to us, rent an apartment and set up a home office there. We fly the team there for maybe three-week periods and they take a room, maybe work in the living room. We call it the Everywhere Here studio. Realistically, we don't want to uproot and leave this place behind. But what you do, a semi-permanent move, six months, nine months, you live like a local. You have friends over, party dinners. Not a tourist, that's what we want to do.

Sendlinger It was always good for us, travelling and meeting lots of interesting people. But then when you come back home, you're easily trapped in your routine. You hardly can digest the trip. You make the follow up, make nice little emails and boom! You're already caught up in the next thing. Now I have a great team that takes care of the business, so I can go to the jungle, walk on the beach and think about things.

Look out for more on Design Hotels' new book in Cubes Extras on indesignlive.sg

DESIGNHOTELS.COM

MODONLINE.COM



“YOU SHOULDN'T TRY TO BE EVERYTHING AND YOU SHOULDN'T TRY TO BE SOMETHING THAT YOU'RE NOT.”

» CLAUDIUS SENDLINGER

Top: rocksresort, a member of Design Hotels™, in Laax, Switzerland harnesses hot springs from the mountain and powers the entire village

Bottom: Papaya Playa, a Design Hotels™ project, is a resort in Mexico Sendlinger co-manages and is currently residing at