

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.

By **LEONG SIOK HUI**
star2@thestar.com.my

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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



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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.

spanking 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.

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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, minimalistic reception (above) complete with a reflective copper reception counter and video art of abstracted Penang scenes by contemporary Malaysian artist Masnoor 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 contrasting 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 storied 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?

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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 constantly moved around to follow where the modular 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.

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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 informs 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?

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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's lobby was left unfinished to show layers of peeling paint, revealing the century-old building's history.





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Lifestyle

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Designer aims to change the way we think about home space

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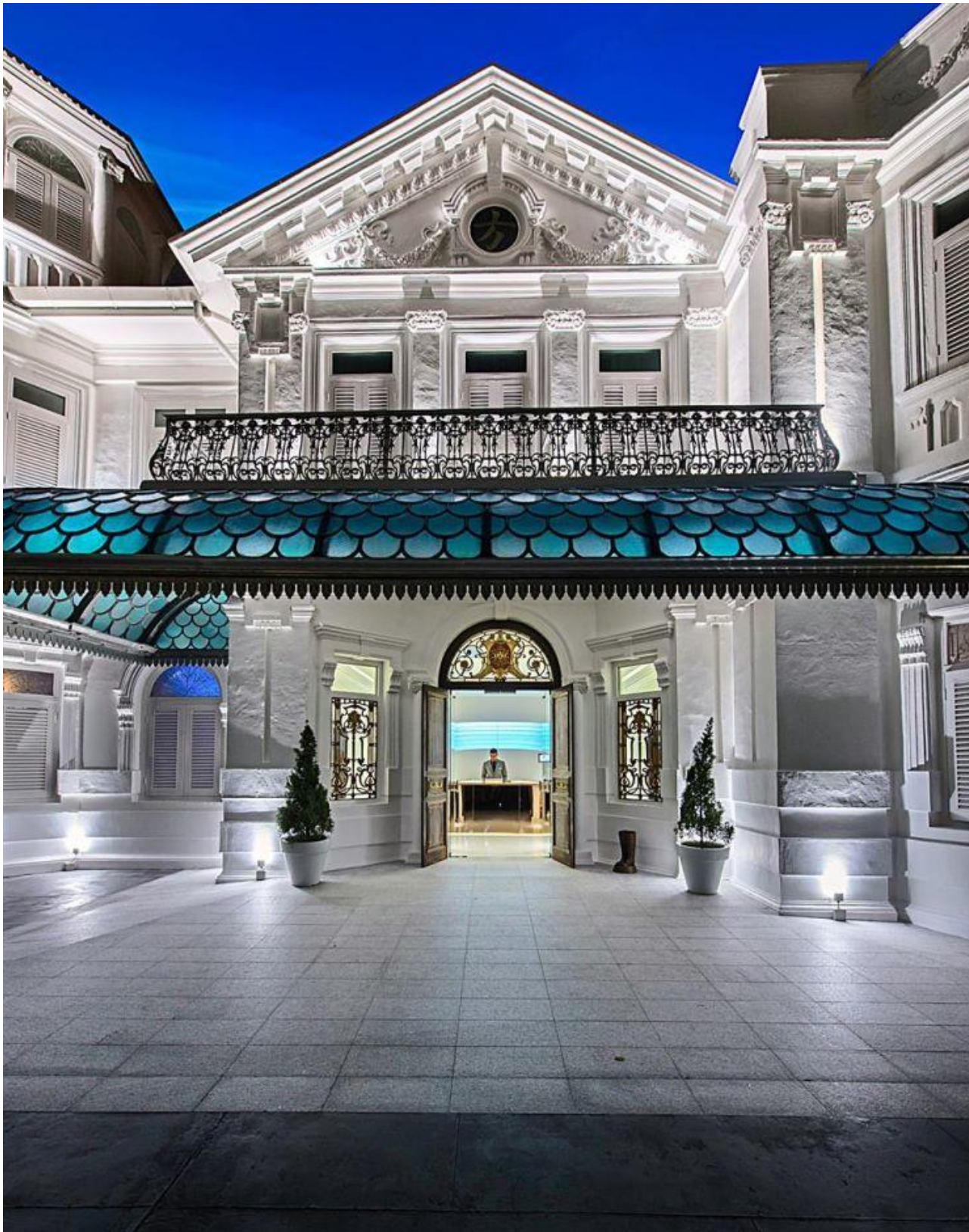
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