

Life

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Design stars

Singapore's creative professionals are making an impact here and abroad with fresh, exciting work. **Natasha Ann Zachariah** reports.

D4 to 9

The Float coffee table by Olivia Lee has real lotus leaves cast in resin.

The Vanke Triple V Gallery (right) in Tianjin, a permanent show gallery and tourist information centre, is one of the international works by Ministry of Design, founded by Colin Seah (below). PHOTOS: MINISTRY OF DESIGN, ST FILE



Taking the bold way forward



Ministry of Design seeks to “question and disturb” the status quo with its work. After all, playing it safe has never been studio founder Colin Seah’s strong suit.

And in the 11 years since the design director started the company out of his home and on his own, being bold has served him and the company well.

The design studio has won twice the country’s top design accolade, the President’s Design Award – Design of the Year: first, in 2006, for transforming traditional shophouses into the edgy New Majestic Hotel in Bukit Pasoh Road; and again in 2008, for turning a pre-war warehouse in Magazine Road into office space for creative agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty.

MOD, as the design studio is known, has more than 70 international and local awards to its name. One of its prized projects is the Vanke Triple V Gallery in Tianjin, a permanent show gallery and tourist information centre. It was commissioned by Vanke, China’s largest residential real estate developer.

Mr Seah, 43, is surprised at the firm’s trajectory through the years. “I’ve always believed that the best design comes when you’re not second-guessing what a client wants, but designing as if it were for yourself,” he says. “So I never imagined our work would have anything more than a limited appeal.”

Ministry of Design’s Singapore office now has 22 staff and his wife

Joy is the firm’s business development director. He opened offices in Beijing in 2010 and Kuala Lumpur in 2013.

Trained in architecture at the University of Arizona, he cut his teeth interning with Polish-American architect Daniel Libeskind in Berlin and later with Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas in Rotterdam – both in the summer before his fourth year started. After graduating at the top of his class in 1999, he worked for a Los Angeles architecture firm, R. L. Binder, for a year.

On a holiday here, he overlooked the American work visa procedures, forcing him to leave the country. His next move was to do his PhD in design pedagogy at the National University of Singapore.

He spent four years in academia, writing papers and teaching classes, but left to work on the New Majestic hotel project before he started on his PhD. He has not looked back since.

Mr Seah says he is staying put in Singapore. “My work is almost always about forging new ground or grappling with new creative challenges. The familiarity of Singapore keeps me in check and grounded. It’s both home and a home base, a safe haven from which to discover and redefine the world around me.”

He hopes to eventually design a civic project, a museum or performance centre. Of designing a non-commercial space, he says: “It’ll be great to shift gears.”