

# Living heritage

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By Tay Suan Chiang

**W**ITH several conservation projects in his portfolio, is it any wonder that Colin Seah can't walk past an old shophouse without his imagination going into overdrive.

The latest project of the founder/director of Ministry of Design is Loke Thyee Kee (LTK) Residences – a small boutique hotel located in the heart of George Town, Penang. LTK Residences has just five suites, housed in five turn-of-the-century shophouses.

The shophouses are part of a cluster of pre-war heritage buildings abandoned for nearly 20 years, after a redevelopment plan was scrapped following the Asian financial crisis. The cluster includes the landmark Loke Thyee Kee building, designed by renowned early Straits Chinese architect Chew Eng Eam, and originally owned by Penang businessman and philanthropist Khoo Sian Ewe.

Now owned by 1919 Global Sdn Bhd, a premium boutique property development, the cluster is made up of Loke Thyee Kee building (which houses a restaurant), LTK Residences and the upcoming Majestic Theatre just a stone's throw away.

Mr Seah says that the shophouses were beyond derelict and “looked like it had been bombed out” when he first saw the space. “But it had good bones and I got excited thinking about the potential.”

This is his second hotel project in Penang, after Macalister Mansion, housed in a 100-year-old historic mansion. In Singapore, Mr Seah has designed hotels in conservation buildings, such as the New Majestic Hotel, and The Club Hotel, before it recently underwent a revamp.

“I was very inspired by the romance of Penang in the 1900s, the mood and design of that bygone era was beguiling. We wanted to recall a similar charm in our design for LTK Residences, but with an added contemporary twist that would modernise the experience and make it relevant for living today,” says Mr Seah.

Jonathan Foo, CEO and president of 1919 Global, says he believes strongly in “living heritage”. “We focus on developing projects that are not just frozen in time, but can offer a glimpse into the past and continue to build on the heritage of today and tomorrow.”

His brief to Mr Seah was simple: to re-design a space so that it captures the essence of the shophouses' 100-year history but still provide all the benefits and luxuries of modern living. “We didn't want the use of antiques or vintage items as dressings. We wanted the building to speak for itself,” says Mr Foo. In addition, LTK Residences had to be a juxtaposition against the hard concrete structures within George Town and be an “oasis in the city”.

The entrance to LTK Residences is located on Jalan Burma, a very busy street, with endless honking heard throughout the day and night. Block out the noise, and indeed LTK Residences does live up to its aim.

Step into the lobby, and guests will immediately feel a sense of calm enveloping them. The lobby with its exposed brick walls, flooring made from recycled Peranakan tiles and the lattice screen ceiling make the area feel cosy. Push past the lattice door and walk along a corridor to get to the suites. Designed in the footprint of the traditional shophouse courtyard and alleyway, each of the five suites has a lush garden forecourt and a private balcony. The latter is good if you are visiting Penang during durian season and want to devour the fruit without stinking up the suite.

The suites range from 34 square metres to 38 square metres in size, but feel much more spacious with their soaring pitched roofs. The interiors are a mix of traditional and contemporary. For example, there are the original exposed brick walls, and hardwood floors mixed with customised modern fixtures, which are designed to appear as if they are floating, while the vanity and wardrobe spaces are housed in transparent glass boxes.



## TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY LOOKS

Customised modern fixtures in the suites are designed to appear as if they are floating, while the vanity and wardrobe spaces are housed in transparent glass boxes.

Despite having worked on conserved shophouses and buildings previously, Mr Seah says that there were still challenges such as the quality of construction and the fastidiousness of the local conservation committee.

“Penang's construction quality is not as high as we had specified and there were numerous refinements that were required from the carpenters and tradesmen,” says Mr Seah. He and his team also had to navigate through complex approval processes with the conservation committee. “Unlike in Singapore, the rules are not as transparent and rely heavily on the preferences of individual officers, you have to be rather tenacious as a designer working on a heritage project,” he says. Still they persevered

and the project was completed in about two years.

Ministry of Design also designed the branding and in-room collateral to give guests a holistic experience, down to the selection of in-room snacks, such as haw flakes, peanuts and even white curry noodles.

One essential handy item found in all the rooms is the “*makan* map of George Town” with all the neighbouring eating places mapped out. Mr Foo says he's tried the places on the map and guarantees they are all good. The map not only points out the locations, but include recommendations as well, such as the *chendol* and *as-sam laksa* at Jooi Hooi Cafe, which is just across the hotel. With its prime location, the hotel is within walking distance of many hawkers.

Besides coffeeshops for local street food, the map also lists restaurants and foodcourts.

Mr Seah is currently working on another project for 1919 Global: the Majestic Theatre, designed as a cinema themed boutique hotel as the building was previously an old cinema. But due to issues at the conservation committee level, the space is now redesigned as a multipurpose events space perfect for film screenings, weddings, performances, balls, exhibitions and sports related activities.

Room rates for LTK Residences are at RM850++ (S\$280) per night.

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The writer was a guest of Loke Thyee Kee Residences



## PENANG NOSTALGIA

The lobby with its exposed brick walls, flooring made from recycled Peranakan tiles and the lattice screen ceiling make the area feel cosy (below); each of the five suites has a lush garden forecourt and a private balcony (left).

PHOTOS: MINISTRY OF DESIGN





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