

City & Country

The South Beach in Singapore

Positioned as a city resort, the 654-room hotel with a giant \$3 billion mixed-use scheme is being opened progressively and will be the new landmark on Beach Road

Is Singapore 'green' enough?

Going underground, building more densely packed skyscrapers may erode the city state's Garden City image, say experts

Colin Seah, 'Minister of Design'

From boutique hotels to large-scale projects and beyond



Colin Seah — 'Minister of Design'

| BY CECILIA CHOW |

Colin Seah, founder and director of design at Ministry of Design (MOD), remembers his first encounter four years ago with the original row of shophouses built in the 1900s behind Loke Thye Kee Restaurant in Penang. The owner, 1919 Global Sdn Bhd, wanted Seah to conserve and repurpose the row of shophouses as a boutique hotel.

The buildings had been gutted, and had been vacant for more than 20 years. "From the ground floor, you could look up and see the sky because the rafters and beams had all rotted," says Seah, 43. "It looked like a war zone."

In addition to restoring the buildings, in one of the earlier plans, Seah had originally wanted to add hotel rooms by straddling them over the courtyards. The Penang Heritage Trust, the conservation and heritage body, did not approve. "It wasn't enough just to keep the façade; they wanted to keep the spirit of the old building," says Seah. "So, if the original building had a central courtyard, we had to keep it as a central courtyard."

The result is that Loke Thye Kee Residences (LTK Residences) contains just five residences. Each room occupies the entire floor plate on the second level of a shophouse and measures 34 to 38 sq m. The rooms have exposed brick walls, hardwood timber flooring with streamlined furniture, finishing and fittings, which lend a contemporary twist to the setting. "The idea was not to have an unfiltered preservation, but to draw certain vignettes of the old and transform it completely as an aesthetic," he explains.

For the lobby, Seah insisted on using only the original old tiles of the shophouses, and had to scavenge across all five shophouses to cobble them up. Because there were not

enough tiles to reach the edges, he added a border trimming.

The project took three years to complete and the hotel opened in August.

Prior to LTK Residences, MOD had designed the Macalister Mansion, a colonial bungalow which was transformed into an eight bedroom boutique hotel in 2012. MOD is also repurposing the oldest cinema in Penang, The Majestic, as a boutique hotel.

Fortuitous entrepreneur

It all started in 2005, when Seah took on his first project in Singapore: the New Majestic Hotel on Bukit Pasoh Road in Chinatown. It was unplanned. Seah had no intention of starting his own business, as he was involved in researching design pedagogy and serving as a design critic at the School of Architecture at the National University of Singapore (NUS) for the past four years. He was contemplating returning to the US to obtain a doctorate to further his academic career in architecture.

Even the meeting with hotelier-restaurateur Loh Lik Peng, owner and operator of the New Majestic, was fortuitous. Two years earlier, in 2003, Loh had opened his first boutique hotel, the 32-room 1929 on Keong Saik Street, which sparked a boom in that sector. Loh transformed a former distressed property purchased at an auction for less than \$4 million into a hip boutique hotel. His next purchase in 2005 was the Majestic Hotel, and it was also a distressed sale.

Loh was a dinner guest at Seah's home one evening in early 2005. Seah had completely gutted the 80 sqm flat and transformed it into a contemporary home with raw concrete finish and an industrial-style kitchen. "We had modular furniture so you could move them around," he says. "We had all these wires hanging from hooks in the ceiling so the lights could follow



Seah: Our goal is still to create memorable experiences but in a different context beyond space

the furniture across the room."

Little did Seah know that his home would become the showcase that would persuade Loh to engage him as the design architect for the New Majestic. Seah recounts how Loh walked around the apartment and said to him, "I wonder what you would do if you had something bigger."

When first approached to take on the New Majestic Hotel project, Seah thought he could juggle designing the project with his full-time job at the National University of Singapore. It was impossible, however, so he decided to quit his job at NUS. That led to the setting-up of the Ministry of Design. He chanced upon the name when he was reading the Bible one day, where it talked about the different ministries, he says. In Singapore, there are also many different ministries, for example, the Ministry of Defence, he adds.

"I think I should change my card and call myself 'minister of design' and, as I get older, I can refer to myself as senior minister and then minister mentor eventually," says Seah jokingly.

'Re-visioning heritage'

The design of the New Majestic and the attention it garnered propelled Seah and MOD to fame and on to more projects, particularly the transformation of conservation shophouses into boutique hotels. The design of The Club hotel, a boutique 22-room hotel on Ann Siang Hill in 2010, as well as the series of properties in Penang such as Macalister Mansion and LTK Residences, have since followed.

"We might want to work on a renovation of the New Majestic soon," says Seah. "It opened in 2006, so it's coming to its 10th year." A decade ago, when the New Majestic was created, a new attitude towards conservation was heralded. Most projects were just tapping on the colonial past but, here, there was no recalling of the past, he says. "It was a re-visioning of heritage, a direct editing of certain things from the past, which are then left in its raw, unfiltered form." This is most visible in the ceiling of the reception.

Beyond Singapore and Malaysia, MOD has designed the five-star luxury resort W Retreat in Phuket and the Capri in Brisbane, and is in the midst of designing a luxury resort on the island of St Martin's in the Caribbean.



The vanity area of a suite at Loke Thye Kee Residences



The reception of Loke Thye Kee Residences



The courtyard garden on the second level of Loke Thye Kee Residences

MOD takes on large-scale, mixed-use projects in China

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Beyond lifestyle

About 70% of MOD's work is involved in "lifestyle projects" such as hotels and restaurants, but it is also involved in bigger commercial and mixed-use developments. In Penang, for instance, MOD is designing a mixed-use project on Church Street with a 100-room hotel sitting on top of a mall. In Kuala Lumpur, MOD was involved in the design of Sunway Velocity, a mixed-use development.

Other large-scale, mixed-use developments MOD has designed include Ascendas Guangzhou Knowledge City in China, where construction is currently underway. The project has 5.7 million sq ft of gross floor area and a mix of commercial, retail and residential buildings, with the clubhouse as the central feature.

Another project in China that MOD is working on is a 1.6 million sq ft mixed-use scheme for giant developer China Vanke in Qingdao. The development will have two residential towers and an office block sitting on top of a retail and F&B podium. So far, MOD has designed seven projects for China Vanke in China, including the dramatic Vanke Triple V Gallery along the coast of Dongjiang Bay in Tianjin.

In Houhai, Beijing, MOD is involved in the design of a new hotel called Vue, scheduled for opening in the middle of next year. Vue will be a new hotel brand under the Crystal Orange Hotel Group, which runs a chain of affordable hotels across China under its "Orange" brand. MOD is not just the design architect for the hotel, but also the brand designer and strategist, according to Seah.

From designing spaces to products
Beyond spaces, Seah is interested in the design of brands and products. MOD has already designed products such as the Ming 647 chair,

the SG50 tote bag, the Kallang Wave bench, a mirror called "A measure of reflection" and a reinterpretation of the Kvadrat pouf. "Furniture is an obvious candidate, but what other iterations?" says Seah.

Recently, two interesting things caught Seah's attention. One was the world of virtual reality. "So far, virtual reality has been used as a visualisation tool to pre-empt what the actual space is going to look like," he explains. "To me, it's a very direct and binary usage of the technology, and so it's now more as a design tool."

What Seah is more interested in is using virtual reality to enhance all interactions for a more "immersive experience". For instance, one could go online shopping, don virtual reality goggles, enter a virtual three-dimensional boutique, browse the items and even try them on, he reckons. "But it will be years before that takes off," he concedes.

In the meantime, he is starting a new design studio within MOD to include the design of products under the name A Good Thing. The products will be made from a new biodegradable and non-toxic plastic called Lumin X. For a start, Seah sees potential in developing a line of baby and toddler products, ranging from feeding bottles and eating utensils to toys. "For such items, the toxic-free element is very important," he says.

He believes there is room for well-designed quality products that can be produced for the masses. Seah sees MOD evolving as a design firm. "Our goal is still to create memorable experiences, but just in a different context," he says. "It will still be totally coherent with what we're doing."



A China Vanke master planned development in Dongjiang Bay, Tianjin



MOD designed the Vanke Triple V Gallery, on the coast of Dongjiang Bay, Tianjin

PICTURES: MOD

DoneDeals

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Residential transactions with contracts dated Oct 26 to Nov 1

PROJECT	PROPERTY TYPE	TENURE	SALE DATE	LAND AREA/FLOOR AREA (SQ FR)	TRANSACTION PRICE (\$)	NETT PRICE (\$)	UNIT PRICE (\$ PSF)	COMPLETION DATE	TYPE OF SALE
BISHAN LOFT	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 27, 2015	1,173	1,290,000	-	1,099	2003	Resale
LAKEVIEW ESTATE	Apartment	99 years	Oct 27, 2015	1,615	1,300,000	-	805	1977	Resale
THE PANORAMA	Condominium	99 years	Oct 27, 2015	797	959,340	-	1,204	Uncompleted	New Sale
THOMSON GARDEN ESTATE	Terrace House	Freehold	Oct 27, 2015	1,206	2,060,000	-	1,716	Unknown	Resale
ADANA @ THOMSON	Apartment	Freehold	Oct 27, 2015	721	1,151,500	-	1,597	Uncompleted	New Sale
District 21									
THE CREEK @ BUKIT	Condominium	Freehold	Oct 28, 2015	1,292	1,700,000	-	1,316	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE CREEK @ BUKIT	Condominium	Freehold	Oct 28, 2015	807	1,200,000	-	1,486	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE BLOSSOMVALE	Condominium	999 years	Oct 26, 2015	840	1,230,000	-	1,465	1998	Resale
District 22									
LAKEVILLE	Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	969	1,181,169	-	1,219	Uncompleted	New Sale
LAKEVILLE	Condominium	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	1,141	1,294,484	-	1,135	Uncompleted	New Sale
LAKEVILLE	Condominium	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	936	1,318,492	-	1,408	Uncompleted	New Sale
LAKEVILLE	Condominium	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	969	1,186,931	-	1,225	Uncompleted	New Sale
LAKEVILLE	Condominium	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	1,163	1,431,807	1,429,307	1,229	Uncompleted	New Sale
LAKEVILLE	Condominium	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	1,119	1,473,100	-	1,316	Uncompleted	New Sale
LAKEVILLE	Condominium	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	1,119	1,469,259	-	1,312	Uncompleted	New Sale
LAKEVILLE	Condominium	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	1,119	1,469,259	-	1,312	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE LAKEFRONT RESIDENCES	Condominium	99 years	Oct 27, 2015	1,216	1,510,900	-	1,241	2014	Resale
WESTWOOD RESIDENCES	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 27, 2015	1,475	1,173,900	-	796	Uncompleted	New Sale
District 23									
SOL ACRES	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	1,227	987,000	-	804	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE SKYWOODS	Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	1,249	1,440,500	-	1,154	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE SKYWOODS	Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	947	1,112,000	-	1,174	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE SKYWOODS	Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	1,173	1,312,883	-	1,119	Uncompleted	New Sale
ECO SANCTUARY	Condominium	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	915	846,040	-	925	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE SKYWOODS	Condominium	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	1,173	1,313,800	-	1,120	Uncompleted	New Sale
SOL ACRES	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	1,184	946,000	-	799	Uncompleted	New Sale
MAYS SPRINGS	Apartment	99 years	Oct 29, 2015	818	730,000	-	892	1998	Resale
SOL ACRES	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 29, 2015	1,216	919,000	-	756	Uncompleted	New Sale
PARK NATURA	Condominium	Freehold	Oct 26, 2015	2,034	2,198,000	-	1,080	2011	Resale
HILLVIEW REGENCY	Condominium	99 years	Oct 26, 2015	1,109	975,000	-	879	2005	Resale
District 25									
FORESTVILLE	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	1,033	770,000	-	745	Uncompleted	New Sale
TWIN FOUNTAINS	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 27, 2015	1,098	772,850	-	704	Uncompleted	New Sale
ROSEWOOD	Condominium	99 years	Oct 26, 2015	1,023	815,000	-	797	2003	Resale
District 27									
THE BROWNSTONE	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	1,130	848,400	-	751	Uncompleted	New Sale
SKYPARK RESIDENCES	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	1,528	1,172,500	-	767	Uncompleted	New Sale
SKYPARK RESIDENCES	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	1,302	1,100,000	-	845	Uncompleted	New Sale
SKYPARK RESIDENCES	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	1,302	1,042,000	-	800	Uncompleted	New Sale
SKYPARK RESIDENCES	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	1,528	1,176,500	-	770	Uncompleted	New Sale

PROJECT	PROPERTY TYPE	TENURE	SALE DATE	LAND AREA/FLOOR AREA (SQ FR)	TRANSACTION PRICE (\$)	NETT PRICE (\$)	UNIT PRICE (\$ PSF)	COMPLETION DATE	TYPE OF SALE
THE CRITERION	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	721	593,600	-	823	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE CRITERION	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	786	664,200	-	845	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE CRITERION	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	786	654,400	-	833	Uncompleted	New Sale
SIGNATURE AT YISHUN	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	947	682,800	-	721	Uncompleted	New Sale
SIGNATURE AT YISHUN	Executive Condominium	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	1,184	917,100	-	775	Uncompleted	New Sale
NORTH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	829	1,106,100	-	1,335	Uncompleted	New Sale
SYMPHONY SUITES	Condominium	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	1,023	999,000	-	977	Uncompleted	New Sale
SYMPHONY SUITES	Condominium	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	689	702,000	-	1,019	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE BROWNSTONE	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	1,109	887,500	-	800	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE CRITERION	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	1,055	781,200	-	741	Uncompleted	New Sale
SKYPARK RESIDENCES	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	1,356	1,016,500	-	749	Uncompleted	New Sale
SYMPHONY SUITES	Condominium	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	689	680,000	-	987	Uncompleted	New Sale
SYMPHONY SUITES	Condominium	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	786	825,000	-	1,050	Uncompleted	New Sale
NORTH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	1,206	1,553,940	-	1,289	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE CRITERION	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 29, 2015	1,119	912,000	-	815	Uncompleted	New Sale
SYMPHONY SUITES	Condominium	99 years	Oct 29, 2015	786	837,000	-	1,065	Uncompleted	New Sale
12B ANDREWS AVENUE	Terrace House	Freehold	Oct 29, 2015	1,615	2,450,000	-	1,521	Unknown	Resale
SYMPHONY SUITES	Condominium	99 years	Oct 28, 2015	689	705,000	-	1,023	Uncompleted	New Sale
THE BROWNSTONE	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 28, 2015	1,356	1,029,200	-	759	Uncompleted	New Sale
SEMBAWANG SPRINGS ESTATE	Semi-Detached House	999 years	Oct 28, 2015	4,273	2,950,000	-	690	Unknown	Resale
THE SENSORIA	Condominium	Freehold	Oct 28, 2015	1,184	950,000	-	802	2007	Resale
CANBERRA RESIDENCES	Condominium	99 years	Oct 27, 2015	614	660,000	-	1,076	2013	Resale
THE BROWNSTONE	Executive Condominium	99 years	Oct 27, 2015	915	741,600	-	811	Uncompleted	New Sale
NORTH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Oct 26, 2015	969	1,271,700	-	1,313	Uncompleted	New Sale
District 28									
HIGH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	947	971,000	-	1,025	Uncompleted	New Sale
HIGH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Nov 1, 2015	893	879,000	-	984	Uncompleted	New Sale
HIGH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	1,227	1,029,000	-	839	Uncompleted	New Sale
HIGH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	1,238	1,166,000	-	942	Uncompleted	New Sale
HIGH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Oct 31, 2015	1,238	1,160,000	-	937	Uncompleted	New Sale
HIGH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Oct 30, 2015	667	722,000	-	1,082	Uncompleted	New Sale
RIVERBANK @ FERNVALE	Condominium	99 years	Oct 29, 2015	1,012	1,014,000	-	1,002	Uncompleted	New Sale
HOCK SWEE HILL	Semi-Detached House	Freehold	Oct 29, 2015	3,757	3,500,000	-	931	1979	Resale
HIGH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Oct 28, 2015	1,238	1,021,000	-	825	Uncompleted	New Sale
HIGH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Oct 26, 2015	667	736,000	-	1,103	Uncompleted	New Sale
HIGH PARK RESIDENCES	Apartment	99 years	Oct 26, 2015	980	978,000	-	998	Uncompleted	New Sale

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