

# PRESTIGE

SINGAPORE  
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**SECRET  
SANTA**  
A FESTIVE  
WISH LIST

**FAMILY  
PORTRAITS**  
A SOCIETY  
X'MAS

**CHERIE LIM**  
TOUGH AS DIAMONDS







# Agent of Design

COLIN SEAH tells SARA YAP about creating groundbreaking architectural and design works around the world



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LOKE THYE KEE RESIDENCES; THE RECEPTION AREA FEATURES PERANAKAN TILES AND A LATTICEWORK WALL; MINISTRY OF DESIGN FOUNDER COLIN SEAH

UPON STEPPING INTO the meeting room of the aptly named Ministry of Design (MOD), one can't help but notice the question and exclamation marks boldly emblazoned on its glossy black wall. According to MOD's founder and design director Colin Seah, the symbols aren't mere decoration — they represent his company's ethos of "question, disturb and redefine." And that is exactly what the 43-year-old aims to achieve with his diverse portfolio spanning hospitality, retail, commercial, residential and educational projects. "My vision has always been to question convention, disturb [the norm] and end up with an innovative design," says Seah.

This desire for reinvention is apparent in one of his recent works: A boutique hotel named Loke Thye Kee Residences, which is set in restored pre-war shophouses in Georgetown,

Penang. Launched in August, the property is inspired by 1900s Penang and the iconic 100-year-old Loke Thye Kee restaurant — the once popular wedding and birthday dinner venue that it is named for. Taking into account the location's rich history, Seah, whose firm designed the interiors and branding collaterals, injected a contemporary twist, while still "imbuing a sense of heritage".

The guest rooms, for example, feature timber hardwood flooring, traditional mosaic tiles and exposed brick walls juxtaposed with hidden LED cove lighting and cantilevered furniture. At





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A GUEST ROOM AT LOKE THYE KEE RESIDENCES; ECOWORLD GALLERY IN PENANG; EXPOSED BRICK WALLS ARE A RECURRING DESIGN MOTIF AT LOKE THYE KEE RESIDENCES

*“My vision has always been to question convention, disturb [the norm] and end up with an innovative design”* – Colin Seah

the reception area, recycled Peranakan floor tiles exude an old-school vibe, while a funky latticework wall lends both textural contrast and a modern spin. “We decided [the hotel] didn’t have to be frozen in time or be a throwback to the past. It needed to be updated and contemporised, so that it’d be a clear balance between the heritage and the future it’s looking towards,” says Seah, an architect who has designed other buildings such as Singapore’s New Majestic Hotel and 100PP, an office block in Pasir Panjang.

Another notable project is EcoWorld Gallery, an office and showroom for a Malaysian property developer. Completed earlier this year, the establishment was previously a century-old colonial bungalow. Not wanting to “create a facsimile of the old” or adding a completely incongruous

building beside it, Seah instead extended the existing structure along Penang’s Macalister Road. He used the same profile and proportions for the new wing, and twisted it to the side of the original building to maximise space. The result is an unconventional yet stylish design that marries traditional and contemporary elements. “It’s all about the notion of timelessness. We set out to create experiences that are relevant to the present,” explains Seah.

A two-time President’s Design Award winner, he has also been commissioned for international projects such as serviced apartments Capri by Fraser in Brisbane, Australia and the Vanke Triple V Gallery, a permanent show gallery and tourist information centre in Tianjin, China. He currently has several ongoing projects, including a 79-villa W Retreat Phuket in Phang Nga Bay. Seah’s firm is in charge of its masterplan, architecture and interior design. Also under construction is Mövenpick Resort & Spa, Quy Nhon in Vietnam, a property comprising 43 cliff and hill villas, 186 hotel rooms, a spa, ballroom and restaurants. Seah has been tasked with its architecture and interior

design, and the place is expected to open in 2018.

He is also in the process of designing a commune-inspired house commissioned by a Malaysian princess. Located in Kuala Lumpur and spanning over 25,000sq-ft, the abode comprises “a series of individual dwelling places for multiple households living together under one roof”. Seah acknowledges such major and unconventional design opportunities do not come by as easily in Singapore: “Here, clients [aren’t as willing] to take risks and there’s a [limited amount] of lifestyle projects. The pull factors [of working overseas] are the availability of land and many more clients willing to explore new things. As a result, we’ve been able to work on projects much bigger than what we would ever do here.”

There is, however, a local building he would love to work on again — the New Majestic Hotel, his firm’s very first project. “I was talking to the owner recently and he said it’s been almost 10 years since the hotel’s been around; it’s time for a refresh. I said I’d love to reimagine it for today,” says Seah. “We’re just talking about it and there’s nothing concrete yet, but when it happens, I hope I’m involved. It has a superbly special place in my heart.”

Set up in 2004, his firm operates satellite offices in Beijing and Kuala Lumpur, and boasts some 81 awards to its name. This looks set to grow, as Seah continues expanding its portfolio of local and international projects. But he remains humble: “The gift of design is something I feel I didn’t earn; it’s something I’ve been fortunate enough to have. And to use it as a ministry to serve the public and society — that’s what matters most.” ■