



The charming entrance to the reception area.



Heritage row: The facade of the Loke Thye Kee Residences maintains details from the buildings' past. — Photos: EDWARD HENDRICKS/Ministry of Design

# Heritage vibes and contemporary chic

We find out what went into the design of this George Town boutique hotel that has been shortlisted for the upcoming Asia Hotel Design Awards.

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IT rekindles the romantic bygone era of Penang in the 1900s, and is a marriage between historic Straits Chinese architecture and modern luxuries.

Completed last year, the Loke Thye Kee Residences is an exclusive boutique hotel comprising five suites situated within a row of restored heritage shophouses along Penang Road in George Town.

The hotel has been shortlisted under the Suites category of the Asia Hotel Design Awards 2016 that will be held in Singapore on March 10.

Designed by Singapore-based design practice Ministry of Design (MOD), each of the suites is accompanied by a garden forecourt and a private balcony.

MOD design director Colin Seah elaborates on the property's unique design and heritage values in an e-mail Q&A.

**The Loke Thye Kee (LTK) Residences is inspired by the Loke Thye Kee restaurant that dates back to the early 1900s and is reminiscent of a bygone era but with a modern, contemporary touch. Can you share the key design aspects of the hotel that reflect this?**

The piece de resistance for the interior was the original brickwork parti-walls. They provided lovely texture and a foil against which we placed our modern and sleeker interventions, like glass wardrobes, chrome mirrors (abstracted from traditional colonial culture) and hovering, timber-clad desks/TV ledges.



The reception has original brick walls and lattice-work recalling old tile patterns.

There's also the specially commissioned modern art work by Penang artist Ch'ng Kiah Kiean, featuring paintings of historic sites in Penang, and the finishes – solid timber floors, original brick walls and brass accents – all reflect a nouveau colonial approach in the way that heritage elements are abstracted and contemporised.

**What were the key challenges in getting the right balance between old and new in designing the LTK Residences?**

The five shophouse units we have on Penang Road were built in the 1890s and were left derelict for more than two decades. These buildings were not in the best structural shape, and there were rotting floorboards, leaking roofs, and even tilted parti-walls. MOD replaced all of these and ensured that all floors, walls and structural elements were repaired and befitting of a hotel.

The building's roof and floors had to be redone completely, but the structural elements, thankfully, were fine.

We kept certain key elements (or

recreated them when they were too damaged or missing even), which we felt were visually rich, and linked the project to its heritage, such as the articulation of the window and door frames, and the external facade's ornamentation.

We salvaged as many of the original tiles as we could but had to replace some in certain areas, though we made sure we found tiles that were as similar as possible. We consolidated the original tiles in the reception area primarily.

I think the two main challenges were 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.

Alongside this, we had to navigate through complex approval processes with the conservation committee. Unlike 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.



The lush and airy courtyard entry.

**What are you most proud of, design-wise?**

The buildings were beyond derelict and looked like they had been bombed out, but they had good bones and I got excited thinking about the potential. Our designs give these older buildings (which are often disused or abandoned) a new lease of life, and allow them to be part of a living heritage, not merely something resigned to the static past.

We believe in drawing from the past in a quirky, contemporary way. In Macalister Mansion (a boutique hotel located within a colonial mansion), we drew from Penang's colonial British heritage and integrated not only the existing historic architectural cues but also the tale of Norman Macalister as an underlying quasi-historical narrative – in a way, history itself has been “adaptively reused”.

**What are the three main interior design elements that make LTK stand out from other heritage-based hotels?**

I was very inspired by the romance of Penang in the 1900s;



The in-room info box also reflects the heritage of the buildings. — Ministry of Design

the mood and design of that bygone era was beguiling. We wanted to recall a similar charm in our design for the LTK Residences, but with an added contemporary twist that would modernise the experience and make it relevant for living today.

Living heritage is a continuum: it is dynamic and it evolves with the times. Our design isn't a throwback to the past; neither does it attempt to preserve it. Instead, we use the past as a point of inspiration and a starting point, eventually creating something that's rooted in heritage but still contemporary. For instance, in the way that heritage elements are



The suites are furnished with modern luxuries.



abstracted and contemporary, we designed the contents of the box containing the “in-room” info.

Much of the collateral is styled to respond to the heritage of LTK. Another example is the lattice-work in the reception area which was inspired by the intricate tile patterns that are typical of shophouse typology. The idea was to “continue” the tiling pattern three dimensionally but in a more abstract and subtle way.

**What kind of experience do you want visitors to take away from LTK and how is that achieved?**



We believe that underpinning each project with a singular idea, and helping consumers to understand the singular concept's translation into experience, would enable them to appreciate the overall experience better. We call this “question, disturb, redefine”.

While our earlier award-winning heritage projects like The New Majestic in Singapore attempted to capture heritage in an unfiltered way, and the Macalister Mansion was designed around a quasi-historical narrative, the Loke Thye Kee Residences attempt to contemporise elements of heritage through materials and their aesthetics.



Crane sculpture with a uniquely-shaped piece of teak wood for the body, a head and wings of sterling silver, legs of steel and eyes of tiger-eye quartz. — Handout



The three Chinese gods Fu, Lu, Shou designed around a ping pong-sized ball of Galuchat leather, with embellished faces and ornaments from sterling silver; the gilded parts are done in 24k gold leaves. — Handout



Ostrich egg and sterling silver dragon container based on the ‘dragon chasing the pearl of wisdom’ mythology. The dragon's eyes are made with red coral. — Photos: S.S.KANESAN/The Star



Teak wood, dual crocodile head sculpture decorated with sterling silver, on a granite stand.

## House of art

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UPON entering, a dark brown bowl made with cinnamon wood and embellished with silver frog figurines around it is the first thing that greets visitors. Two baby elephants made of fibre glass and steel serve as adorable stools on the floor while on the walls, paintings from different artists are hung.

The venue is House of Lotus Arts de Vivre, the Thai-based luxury jewellery, homeware and accessories brand that recently set up home in Kuala Lumpur with a private retail boutique.

The new outlet houses the brand's full repertoire of products, which includes jewellery, home furnishings, paintings and carpets.

Established over 30 years ago, Lotus Arts de Vivre began as a mere hobby for Helen von Bueren in Bangkok when her two sons went to study abroad.

Today, the family-owned company's products are found in Lotus Arts de Vivre boutiques in luxury hotels and jewellery stores in 15 countries, led by von Bueren's husband, Rolf, and their sons, Nicki and Sri.

Known for its one-of-a-kind creations, Lotus Arts' designs feature Asian themes, animal-inspired items, and, always, some ornate pieces.

One piece we notice is a double-headed crocodile sculpture designed from free form teak wood, with the spine crafted in sterling silver.

Apart from standard materials like wood, lacquer and silver, the company also uses more unusual materials like coconut shells, nuts and ostrich egg shells in its designs.

With these materials, they seek out traditional craft techniques – India for gem-cutting, Indonesia for wood carving, Thailand for silverwork, Japan for makie (gold) lacquer and China for cinnabar lacquer – and produce both one-off and limited pieces.

“We are inspired by materials and techniques generally,” says Nicki at a



According to Nicki, Lotus Arts de Vivre collaborates with craftsmen throughout Asia.

recent meeting in Kuala Lumpur. “What we like to work with are materials and techniques that we pick up throughout the world.”

“We then take it back to our workshop in Bangkok and redesign and reuse those materials to make something more modern and appealing.”

“I think that's what's unique about us. Let's say we find an interesting piece of stone or wood, then we work around it, creating a unique piece, and that's how we differ from other brands. Every piece has a story and uniqueness to it.”

“A lot of our work is a collaboration with other craftsmen and uses materials that are in abundance in Asia,” he adds.

Nicki then explains that the cinnamon bowl is laboriously handmade with spice sticks from Indonesia. “The bowl is great for flowers at a reception area, for example.”

He proceeds to show me some plates made with mother-of-pearl adorned with silver animals and insects. There's a carved, wooden bowl that is perfect for keys too.

On the coffee table is a cinnabar

lacquer flat bowl from China, which Lotus Arts redesigned with cloud patterns on the inside of the bowl, topped with floral motifs. Many of their pieces make great corporate and personal gifts.

“People are looking for interesting and special gifts these days. Our wood art pieces do well too,” says Nicki.

On to the mezzanine level, a dining table is set out with dinnerware that includes glasses with colourful Chinese enamel cloisonne bases, and wood and silver candelabras.

On shelves facing the table are an ostrich egg shell surrounded and clasped by a sterling silver dragon, inspired by the “dragon chasing the pearl of wisdom” mythology.

The company has long-standing relationships with artists and material suppliers.

“For instance, we've been working for 15 years with an artist from north Japan in fine lacquer for jewellery pieces.”

“We just give him the forms, and let him have free hand to design them. Then we embellish and finish the product in Bangkok.”

In homeware and furniture, the company uses a lot of lacquer (cinnabar and synthetic) and wood (teak, root wood, burwood) and silver.

Half of the products are one-off pieces, and although designs are repeated, they are mostly not identical.

“For us, 100 is a big number (of pieces),” Nicki says.

The elephant stools are also available in the bulldog, rhinoceros, hippopotamus and dachshund collections too.

“They are cute, fun, decorative and they make you smile,” he says with a smile.

The key designers in the business are Rolf and Sri, who travel, go to museums, walk high streets and visit art fairs to find inspiration and keep Lotus Arts designs fresh and unique.

**The House of Lotus is located at No. 261, Jalan Maarof, Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur. Prices start from RM1,000.**