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THE WAYS WE WORK

ALLIANZ SINGAPORE BY REALYS | THE GREAT ROOM BY HASSELL | CO-WORKING
RHODA BY JOYCE WANG STUDIO | CHRISTIAN DADA BY +FT+ | MOD | SOU FUJIMOTO

“I WASN’T BROUGHT UP IN A TIME WHEN KIDS WERE TOLD THEY CAN BE ANYTHING THEY WANT. BUT THERE HAD ALWAYS BEEN A CLEAR INTUITION THAT I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING CREATIVE.”

• COLIN SEAH

Ever looking upstream, next in MOD’s sights is an exploration of augmented reality and the integration of the digital and physical realms. This integration can be seen in the firm’s latest completed project in Outram Road, the hostel COO. Designed for digital-savvy millennials, the hostel provides a digital space to mingle and share interest in form of an app called Coo Connect, which was developed in collaboration with BBH. Guests staying at the hostel can create a profile and make connections with guests who have shared interests. The digital interactions will impact the activity in the physical space, encouraging breakfast and supper clubs for example. (Read more about COO in next issue of *Cubes Indesign*.)

One more ‘upstream’ issue that MOD is particularly interested in is the working relationship between clients and designers. “Right now,” says Colin, “the gulf between the client as the commissioner of the project and the designer as the consultant is very big. We’ve been asking ourselves, can we move into a more collaborative model? What if the client and the design team become one? An implication of that is that we share both the risk and the profit. The second implication could be the merging of minds and know-how from different realms. I think we’re also at a point where MOD is mature enough, both in terms of repute and finance, to be able to take on a couple of these types of projects as experiments,” he says. All will be answered in due time.

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Top: The folded mirror *Measure of Reflection* (designed in 2015 for Industry+) is finished with two tints – achieved by hot dipping one side at a time. Photo courtesy of Industry+

Bottom: The interior of Zhang Xin’s house at ‘Commune by the Great Wall’ (completed 2007), which was MOD’s first project in China. Photo by Colin Seah

CAPTURING



THE ZEITGEIST

QUESTIONING THE STATUS QUO, LOOKING FOR NEW MEANING AND PUSHING FOR GREATER POTENTIAL – THE ASPIRATIONAL APPROACH AND BOLD STYLE OF MINISTRY OF DESIGN HAS SEEN THE STUDIO ATTAIN WIDESPREAD RECOGNITION AND INTERNATIONAL GROWTH IN JUST TWELVE YEARS OF OPERATION.



ENTERING MINISTRY OF DESIGN'S (MOD'S) OFFICE is in itself an experience. The entrance is a massive pivoting black door that opens up to a sun-drenched, all-white space. On the right-hand side is a gallery of steps – functioning as both display and seating – and behind it, the meeting rooms. On the left, beyond the gallery's wall, are the rows of desks that gave the office its moniker: the Barcode Office. Inhabiting six converted shophouses in Chinatown, the award-winning office interior is mostly dressed in black and white, with the exception of a single room that staff have dubbed the 'panic room'. It is dressed entirely in red.

The space has been home to MOD for six years. "The firm runs a bit like a studio. We have crits and a lot of debates," says founder and Design Director Colin Seah. We chat over a cool, tall glass of Ribena in the library at the back of the office – the designated space for decompression. "Often, at the beginning of a project, I don't know what the best route ahead is, so we collectively talk about it. It's democratic; it's not like a master-sitting-under-the-bodhi-tree kind of environment," he says.

He runs MOD with his wife Joy Chan Seah, MOD's Business Development Director, and Partner David Tan, who is the Director of MOD's Kuala Lumpur office. Colin established MOD as a one-man studio operating from his living room in 2004 while Joy officially joined the company in 2007. Nowadays the integrated spatial design practice employs 30 staff spread across three offices in Singapore, Beijing and Kuala Lumpur, and has 85 international awards to its name.

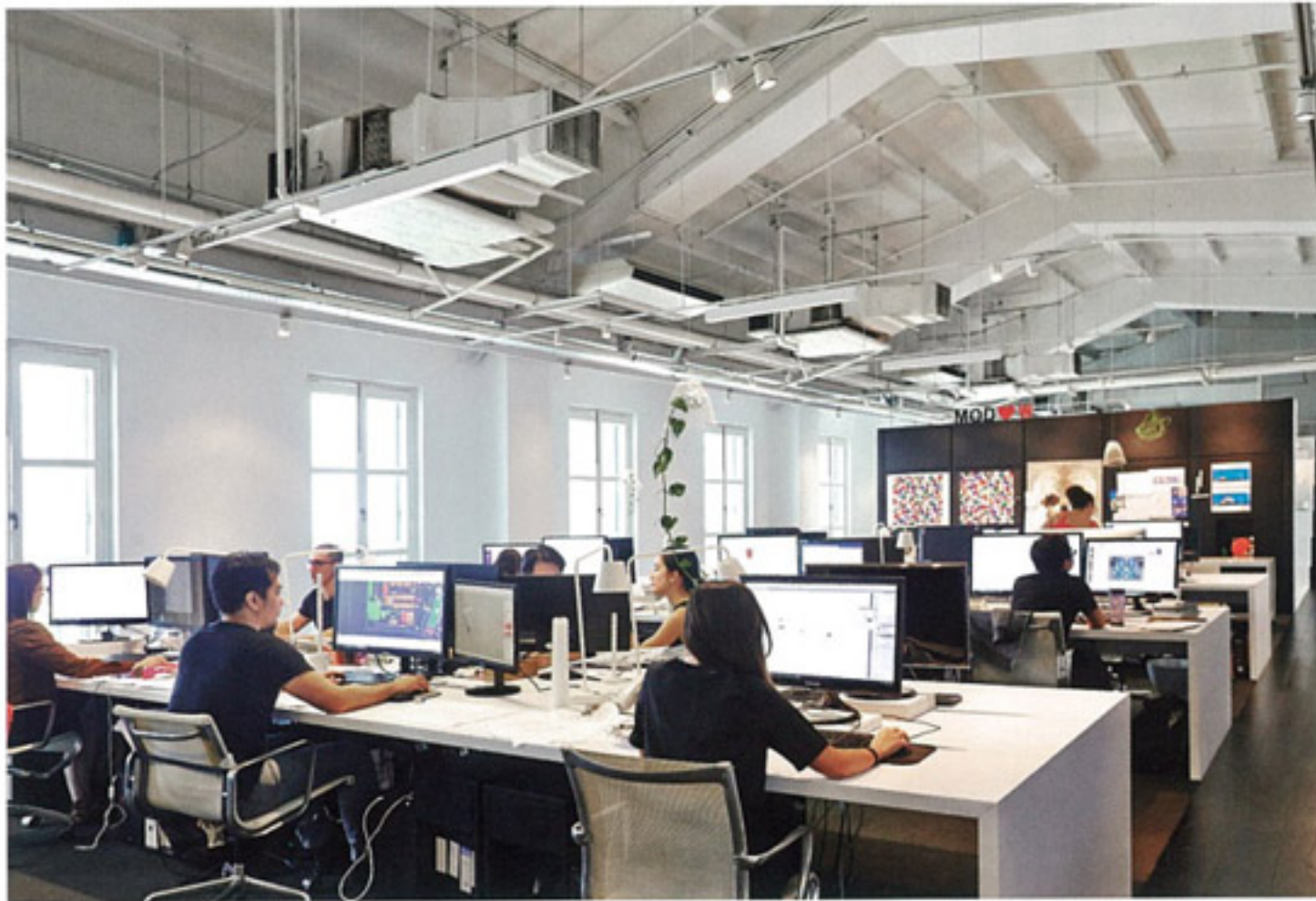
It's difficult to categorise the work of Ministry of Design according to genres. The studio's portfolio is made up of widely diverse projects at widely diverse scales – from a small boutique hotel to a million-square-foot mixed-use development. Each endeavours to be delightfully surprising yet relevant. The unifying thread in the projects is the methodology with which they were designed. MOD has distilled this into a mantra – Question, Disturb, Redefine. Think of it as a standard operating procedure, but less standard and more tailored.

Explains Joy, "We are intentional in reiterating this. Clients don't come to us because we have a particular aesthetic. With us, I think there's a bit of discomfort because there isn't the guarantee of a

TEXT * ASIH JENIE
 PORTRAIT AND STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHS * JUSTIN LOH (UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED)
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Opposite: Colin Seah and Joy Chan Seah at Ministry of Design's award-winning Barcode Office (completed 2010). MOD also has offices in Beijing and Kuala Lumpur

Above: Visitors are received into an all-white space with a gallery of steps. The multifunctional space currently displays the Ming 647 chair (designed in 2015 for Industry+)



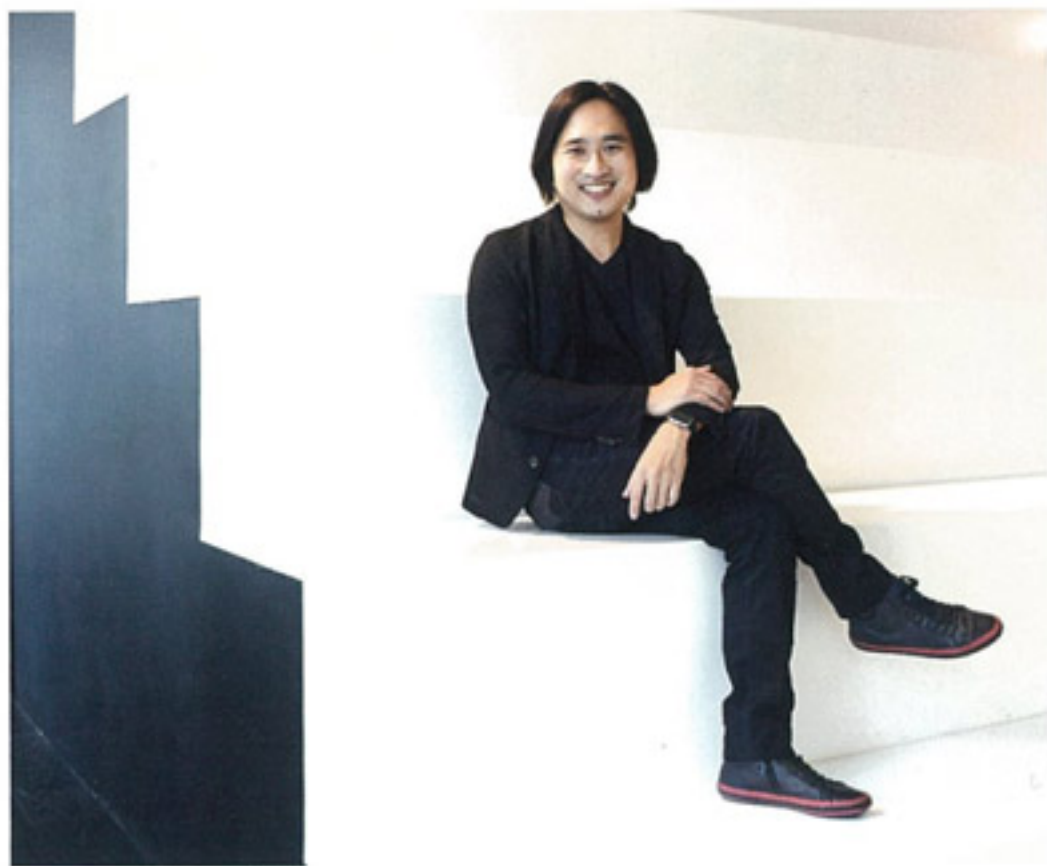
certain aesthetic. So it takes more effort to help them decide if we are the right fit for them, or if they do want to question the current space they are in."

Growing up, Colin had no close creative industry influences in his family. "I didn't have any influential relatives or friends who were in the creative disciplines – there was no cool aunty who was a potter or anything like that," he recalls. "I wasn't brought up in a time when kids were told they can be anything they want. But there had always been a clear intuition that I wanted to do something creative." In junior college he was a member the photography club and president of the drama society. After completing his national service, he took a job in a theatre production company and was a freelance photographer.

The idea of studying architecture hit him like an epiphany one day. "I enjoyed photography and theatre because they can be very logical and problem-solving in nature, but they can also be incredibly subjective and whimsical. I thought those two things could also be found in architecture. There's an incredibly rational quality to architecture, but the best architects always manage to make things magical. Architecture allows the creative process to yield a product that would outlast that process," he says.

He embarked on architectural studies at the University of Arizona and gained work experience doing internships with Daniel Libeskind in Berlin and Rem Koolhaas in Rotterdam. His first job after graduation was as a junior architect in R.L Binder's practice in California. Upon returning to Singapore in 2000 he took on a research and teaching post with the National University of Singapore (NUS) – a job he described as an iron rice bowl. Yet the lingering feeling that he was missing something persisted. "Research was not his strongest suit," recalls Joy. "I used to tease him by saying that he was a repressed designer because he had to constantly resist the urge to do the designs for the students."

Opportunities came in 2003 when the Seahs invited a friend over to their apartment in Little India for dinner. The friend brought a date – the



Top: The 315-square-metre office occupies six converted shophouses and houses around 20 people – a mix of architects, interior designers, graphic designers and administration staff

Bottom: Partner David Tan, a registered architect in Malaysia, helms MOD's Kuala Lumpur office. Photo courtesy of MOD

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- JOY CHAN SEAH

Above: A tourist information centre, a show gallery and a sales office, the Vanke Triple V Gallery (completed 2011) in Tianjin, China was oriented to three directions. Photo by Edward Hendricks

“RIGHT NOW, THE GULF BETWEEN THE CLIENT AS THE COMMISSIONER OF THE PROJECT AND THE DESIGNER AS THE CONSULTANT IS VERY BIG. WE’VE BEEN ASKING OURSELVES, CAN WE MOVE INTO A MORE COLLABORATIVE MODEL?”

◀ COLIN SEAH



Above: One of the guest rooms at the New Majestic Hotel (completed 2006). This was the first hotel in Singapore to be included in the Design Hotels collection. Photo by Edward Hendricks

nascent hotelier Loh Lik Peng, who had just opened Hotel 1929, Singapore's first boutique hotel. Loh was impressed with the interior of the Seahs' home, which was conceptually based on a theatre. In the apartment, most of the existing interior walls had been demolished, surfaces had been stripped off to reveal the concrete shell, and spaces were demarcated with hanging fabric, lighting and objects that could be easily reconfigured like a set in a theatre production. "He said to me at that time, 'Interesting space. I wonder what you'd do with more space,' to which I said, 'I also wonder *lah*, you wonder, I wonder!' We had no idea he was a hotelier at that time," recalls Colin.

Three months later, Loh called with an offer to design a 30-room boutique hotel in Bukit Pasoh Road. It was a crossroads moment for Colin, who at that time was in the midst of preparation to relocate to United States with Joy to pursue a PhD – a move that would have secured his tenure at NUS for the foreseeable future.

Colin decided to choose the project and resigned from his full-time position at the university. Thus, Ministry of Design was born. The name of the firm was both a tongue-in-cheek reference to Singapore's many ministries and a reflection of his belief that his passion and talent for design were God-given. He regarded the studio as a vehicle to exercise these gifts. Colin spent the following two years designing the hotel and teaching part-time, which he says was "quite the perfect combination of teaching and the practice."

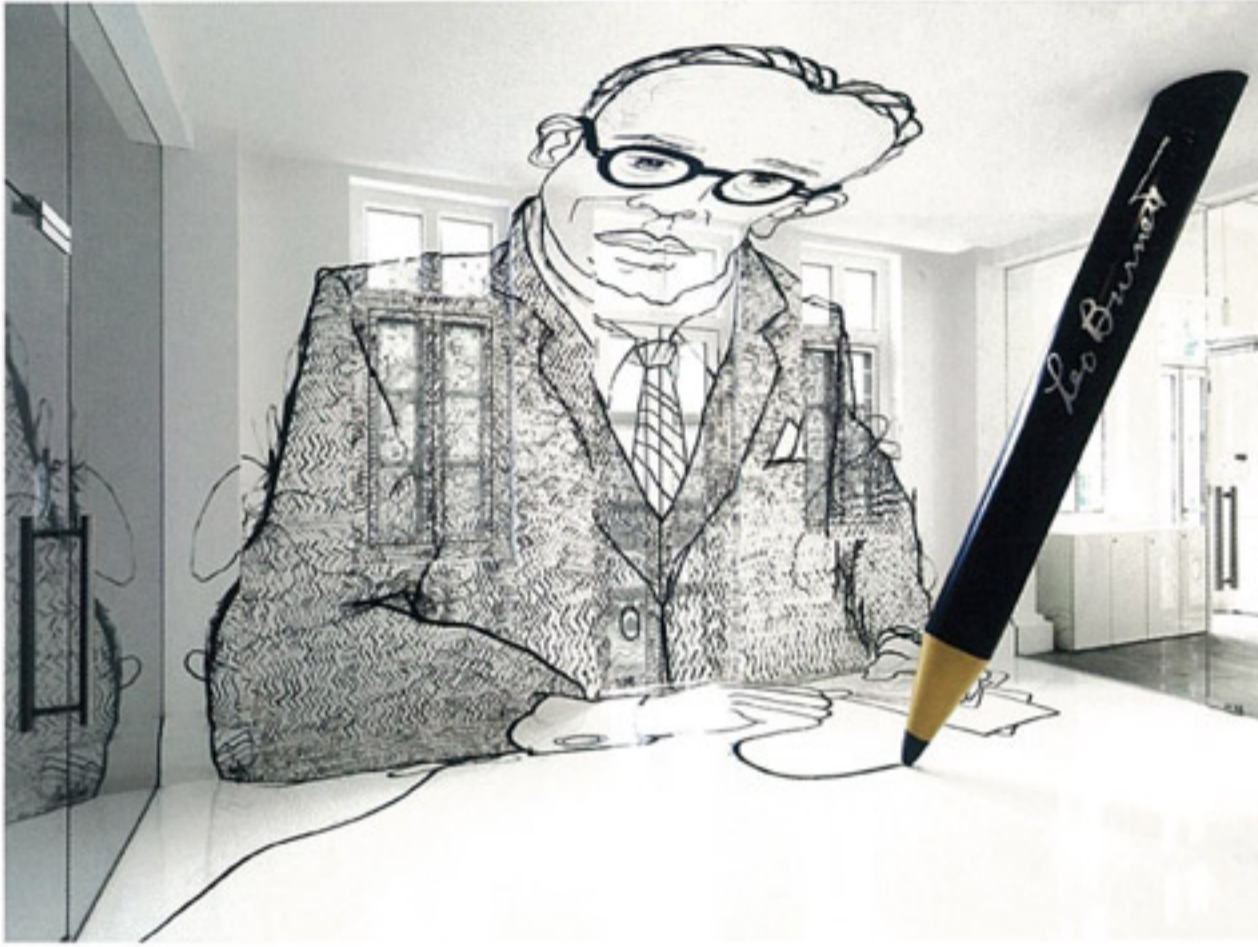
The New Majestic Hotel, completed in 2006, catapulted MOD to design stardom. It also gave birth to the Question-Disturb-Redefine approach. Colin approached the project by questioning the conventional hotel room design and experience, subverting it and redefining it to satisfy the new global hotel consumer's appetite for distinctive experiences. He did this by introducing five new playful new room typologies, which included the 'Hanging Bed Room', the 'Loft Room', and the 'Aquarium Room'. The hotel became the first in Singapore to be included in the Design Hotels collection, and it was crowned with the 'Design of the Year' award at the inaugural President's Design Award, among other accolades.

MOD has a knack for capturing the zeitgeist. From the early years the firm has had a strong desire to start each project by thinking far upstream to establish a central idea that will guide the team through the entire design process. This upstream



Top: The W Retreat Phuket (to be completed in 2018) on the island of Koh Yao Noi will have 79 standalone villas in a striking angular formation. Rendering by MOD

Bottom: MOD questioned the 'birthday cake' podium in the mixed-use typology and redefined it with a continuous sculptural form for the Vanke Yan Tai development (proposed 2011). Rendering by MOD



approach translates into a wide variety of possible downstream design solutions that includes, but is not limited to, architecture, product design, interior design, graphic design, branding strategy and various hybrids thereof, making their service both holistic and bespoke – two words that have always been heavily associated with lifestyle.

This approach developed organically, and was started, in Joy's words, by "naivety and the gung-ho-ness to try." She elaborates, "We never had a pre-established model of what an ideal firm would be, and it was both good and bad. The bad side was that we made all kinds of rookie mistakes. The good side was that you didn't have to conform to any preconceived notion. Slowly we grew and over time we developed the ability to formalise and itemise all the services."

MOD's next milestone was in 2007. Joy officially joined the firm full time and MOD was looking to work on bigger projects – quite a difficult ambition to fulfil in Singapore where risk-averse developers tended to give projects only to the usual suspects. The firm turned its sights overseas, and sent out ten beautifully crafted portfolios to ten international developers that they admired. They

received only one response. It was from business magnate Zhang Xin, CEO and co-founder of Soho China, the largest property developer in Beijing (one of the rarer design-oriented ones).

Zhang invited the Seahs to a breakfast in Beijing, and several months after, followed up with an interior commission for her own house in the project 'Commune by the Great Wall'. Colin comments, "It was pure, minimal space – just timber and white paint with gorgeous proportions, as opposed to the typical chandelier and velvet, which, for China then, was mind-blowing." Happy with the result, Soho China commissioned six more projects, prompting MOD to open a satellite office in Beijing in 2009. Commissions in increasingly larger scales in China also came from other developers.

Having found patrons in China enabled the firm to take on smaller, more prestigious projects on home soil and around the region. Among these notable projects were the BBH Office, Prologue Bookstore, Leo Burnett Office, Zig Zag House, and Macalister Mansion in Penang. All of these became award-winning projects, and offered unique experiential qualities.



Left: Crowned 'Interior Design of the Year' in the International Design Awards 2010, the Leo Burnett office (completed 2009) features a gigantic mural. Photo by Edward Hendricks

Right: The communal 'living room' at Macalister Mansion (completed 2012) features Peranakan-style decorative tiles and eclectic furniture. Photo by Edward Hendricks

