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Colin Seah tells us how

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ISSN 1561-781-5



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HK\$80
RMB80
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Colin Seah



Singapore-based firm Ministry of Design's founder Colin Seah was in Hong Kong late June as one of Knowledge of Design Week's key speakers. The American-trained architect was entrenched in academia before Loh Lik Peng's New Majestic Hotel catapulted him to fame and stardom. Since then, he and his team have worked on numerous projects ranging from the Mark Business Park in Beijing to a training campus for Singapore bank OCBC in its hometown. *hinge* catches up with the prolific man to talk about why he considers his studio his best project to date, and how he views design within the overall arc of his life's meaning.

Where did you grow up?

I was born and raised in Singapore.

What informed your decision to pursue architecture as a career?

I didn't consider architecture when I was a kid. At that time, I was interested mostly in photography and theatre. I directed a lot of theatre, designed a lot of sets and was into fashion photography. And I pursued both theatre and photography to some degree, but even though they were fulfilling on some levels, I found them ultimately frustrating.

Photography was not immersive enough for me. I found that two-dimensional images put on a wall inherently create a passive relationship between the artwork and the spectator. While theatre provided more engagement that was both immediate and immersive, there is a temporal quality about productions that last only a matter of weeks. I was looking for something more permanent.

One day, there was a Eureka moment. I thought that I could resolve my frustrations by finding something that allowed for more immersive and more permanent creative output. Architecture provided this release. It was to my parents' surprise, as I hadn't toyed with the idea of architecture till that point!

Why did you study in the States?

When I began looking for a school to attend, I guess I decided on an American liberal arts educational system since it would expose me to a wide range of other subjects and people. I wasn't so keen on schools in Australia or England: they were too specifically focused.

I had a lot schools to choose from. As long as Singapore's government accredited them, I knew I could find a

job when I was back home again. I knew that I preferred to be on the West Coast since I preferred a warmer climate. I can't take the cold too well, being from tropical Singapore. I ended up at the University of Arizona. Oddly enough, I didn't pick it for the quality of its architecture school alone, but because it had the biggest creative photography centre in an American university. You see, I still wanted to keep one foot in the realm of photography. In the end however, I didn't get to sustain this interest for too long as the architecture programme kept me very busy. I got a professional Bachelor's degree there, with the option to take a year out for a work placement.

How did you end up working for both Rem Koolhaas and Daniel Libeskind? And what lessons did you learn from these architects?

I've always had a huge interest in the way that Rem Koolhaas works: the way he thinks about buildings through understanding current culture and how people perceive and use spaces; how he reinvents typology according to how things have evolved. I could relate to it, since it was a way of designing that wasn't solely reliant on an aesthetic agenda. It allowed me the breadth and potential to explore, and I feel that it is a more relevant and upstream way to see world. In my own schoolwork, I was constantly exploring issues the "OMA" way. After working there, I gained a deeper understanding behind his methods. It was a wonderful experience.

When I worked at OMA, Joshua Prince-Ramus - now heading REX in New York - was our team leader and Bjark Ingels sat just around the corner. These young architects are now thought leaders in their own right! At OMA, it didn't matter who thought of the idea, whether it was

an intern or a director, but the power of ideas that mattered. Learning from this, I took away a framework for asking questions, which is how I shape my firm now. As MOD's design director, my role has shifted more to directing design, not only designing itself. Its quite a flat non-hierarchical process and is more fluid for architects from the junior intern to those at my level. It's about a democratic approach to garner the best ideas and critical thinking. It's about a framework to ask essential questions, distill what people are doing and then roll those ideas into a holistic solution.

The time spent at Studio Libeskind was quite different. His studio was much more guru-driven and the design direction much more pre-established. It was about realising the master's sketches. There was a consistency of approach each time, and my creative endeavours were more structured under those conditions. However, I saw the evolution of a singular vision through fine-tuning and how extensive that can be.

In my student years, I was very active. For example, with the AIAS, I was a student rep and accompanied three to four professional reps that travelled around the country to accredit different schools every four to six years. Back at the University of Arizona when I was about to graduate, the school was in a wilderness desertscape and we had lots of space to stew without the influence of the latest architectural trends. After graduation, I wanted a change in scene, so I moved to L.A. and worked for Siegel Diamond for a year before returning to Singapore.

Why only a year?

There was not much premeditation. My American experience was very enjoyable



at the academic level, and professional experience seemed to follow suit. There was no reason to come back. It was strange: there was a whole series of events that predicated my to return to Singapore. Primarily, I was feeling kind of spiritually vacuous living in L.A.: I needed to fill some kind of void that seemed to be nagging at me. I felt that I needed to return home to find some answers.

It felt right to return to Singapore. I was able to spend time regrouping spiritually and reunited with my dormant Christian beliefs. Work alone was never going to be ultimately satisfying however much I enjoyed architecture; I needed to find a greater purpose and root myself spiritually.

What did you do when you initially returned home?

I was offered a teaching and research position at the National University of Singapore. At that point, NUS was looking for architectural graduates from American universities to support their move towards a more liberal arts based curriculum. I loved the teaching environment and spent four years fulltime there. I had primarily teaching responsibilities coupled with some research and was passionate about this new way of approaching architecture.

Then, after four years, I realised that the repressed designer in me was beginning to show up more and more. I was at a crossroads: the university wanted me to get a PhD to become a fulltime member of the staff. I went as far as applying to MIT; my application was already in the making. Then one day at dinner, I met the boyfriend of an old friend. They were over at my place, which at that point was my only completed project since returning to Singapore. This gentleman really liked how my apartment was designed. Three months later, he offered me a hotel project.

And he was...?

He was Loh Lik Peng. Hotel 1929 was already open and he just bought the building for the New Majestic Hotel. For the new project, he knew he needed

to create an even more sophisticated product. He wanted to work with someone young and hungry and maybe I would be interested in working together with him on this hotel?

Peng is my age; we both were returnees to Singapore. We were both new to hotel development; he was previously a lawyer. I jumped at the opportunity. Then he said to me: you can't do this part time, you know! I had to quit the university job and set up my own firm. I thought hard about it and decided that it was too good an opportunity to pass up.

Why the name Ministry of Design for your firm?

If you know Singapore, you know that the perception is that everything here is government run or based. I thought that MOD would be a funny take on that context. If we called someone on the phone and said that we were from the Ministry of Design, the immediate reaction would be: what did we do wrong design wise? (laughs)

I was always interested in the holistic quality of design, not just in solely practising architecture. I also wanted to underpin my gratitude to the Divine for the creative gifts He has given me and my way of doing so was to express that through design. It came from a more Christian context of being a ministry.

What do you feel sets MOD apart in the way you run your studio?

My basic vision for MOD initially is still spot on today. I run the firm more like a studio then an office. There are lots of crits and discussion. Back when I started, I didn't have any idea about size of projects we'd be working on today. But it's always been about the spirit of our projects: the way we seek to question convention and redefine the final experience. We take on mostly lifestyle projects with a holistic approach. It's rational but not as cerebral as in academia.

How has MOD evolved over the years?

The genres have grown but the heart is the same. My role is no different. While previously I was doing everything myself,

now we have many colleagues to share the vision with.

I still review all the design decisions on a daily basis as part of my routine. I've spent almost 10 years in the design field and it has reinforced my belief that architecture is the 'mother of all design'. Through it, there are many overlaps with other creative mediums. We go up the scale to master planning and down the scale to product design, and although our core and passion is still spatial design, our firm is also now involved in strategy and branding work. Sometimes I muse that maybe in my retirement years, I will take on installation art - it is spatial design in its purest form. I've always seen it as a refined version of spatial design, without the functional aspects. I did some installation art courses before and really enjoyed them.

Elaborate upon how you inspire and nurture your team.

Singapore is our head office. Including myself, we have two other directors, Joy Chan Seah for business development and David Tan for projects. Between us, we direct about 30 staff with two thirds of them here in Singapore. We have project offices in Kuala Lumpur and Beijing. China used to be our biggest market and although it's still strong, we are experiencing a boom in Malaysia. Developers are very supportive and open-minded, and their projects range in scale from master plans and urban city plots to small hospitality ones.

We are all in a big studio with a completely open office plan. We have music playing all the time and a big pin up board for inspiration. There is a lot of discussion and talk. In our Singapore office, we have a gallery space dedicated to installation pieces. This gallery space features current installations by our staff and is a gathering space for 40 people. I sit with everyone else but I do get a bit more space!

Is there a MOD aesthetic that informs a theme common among your projects?

The most interesting thing for me is to understand typological relevance: how

a building or experience or space makes sense for us today. It results in the form and materials we use.

If you want to pin it down, our work can be described as very unapologetically modern. We are not necessarily minimal; we could be the opposite and be extremely maximal! Our work also varies according to the needs of each client. We have some projects that are bold through our use of colours and materials, and those tend to be very image-friendly. We also tend to capture our conceptual approach through the design in a crystal clear way. The architecture is reduced to what's required: nothing more.

What has been your favourite project to date?

My home and office. They are closest to my heart. Not necessarily because they have the best design, but because they are the clearest overlap between client and creator. With both projects, I get to evolve the space over time and in my own way. Another favourite project is the development of the firm. I find the living organism of the firm itself fascinating. It involves culture and personalities, and is an ongoing project. It's the project with no terminus point. Eventually, all other projects are handed over to their owners, but the firm is a project that I always have in my lap to nurture.

I'm a designer who is quite keen on the strategic and business aspects of running a firm. It's an exciting thing to be doing this.

What are your thoughts about winning awards such as Designer of the Year by the U.S.'s International Design Awards 2010, Monocle's Rising Star in Architecture and the President's Design Award in Singapore?

It's gratifying to have the validation of others. I may think my work is good and hope that our clients agree. But for a third party to agree raises it to a higher calibre. When we won the Inside Award for an office project three years ago, all the winners had to present their work to a super jury. It consisted of designers like Andre Fu and Jaime

Hayon. It was a real honour to present to these individuals, and it turned out that they also knew our work prior to the competition, so that was an additional accolade.

It is important for us not to be seen as a Singaporean firm. Our work is positioned at an international level and we see ourselves as an international firm based in Singapore. It helps boost our clients' confidence when our peers endorse our work.

How do you recharge and find inspiration after a few too many administrative tasks?

I never bring work home at night or on weekends. I cook, read or entertain guests at home. My primary passions are for other art forms such as poetry and literature. I also love fast cars and driving! I try to keep in mind that at the heart of it all, what we do as designers is a responsibility and a calling. But it has its place and shouldn't be elevated to a position in life where it's not supposed to be. It's just one core aspect of my life, but not all of it. I take the stressful days in stride. I have a lot of passion for what I do. But I understand that at the end of the day it's only work.

Who would be the perfect client for you?

Anybody who is open-minded, is clear about bottom line requirements and the ways to achieve it. I would love to do more cultural projects and we have been actively looking at proposals in this genre. Its bottom lines are different and borders on installation art more. I quite like this idea.

What upcoming projects can you share with us?

We are working on quite a few projects. We will soon open a semi-permanent gallery for a developer in Malaysia. He commissioned us to do a sales gallery with a five to 10 year life span. It's a colonial heritage venture with an addition to it. We took the profile of the building and pushed it through an extrusion, resulting in a U-shaped structure. It's like a long sausage of

itself twisted into a U, with the rear end parallel to the front. It's an interesting and different take on adaptive reuse. It's in Penang and there's really nothing else like it there. It will be ready in two months.

We are also working with one of my favourite brands: W. We are designing a W resort on a virgin island. The site is Yao Noi, off Phuket. We're master planning it along with doing the architecture and interior spaces. It will consist of 80 villas and is not just a response to context but will include an exciting conceptual narrative and storyline.

Discuss what you have in mind for the Singapore Tourism Board to redefine Singapore as a destination for 2020 and beyond.

It's a consultative role; Peng was also invited to brainstorm. It's a total of about eight people including hoteliers and restaurateurs: a healthy representation. We will be forecasting what tourism and hospitality need in the decade to come, what markets to fill and which areas to cover.

You recently participated in events such as Knowledge of Design Week in Hong Kong. What values did you take away from that conference and what do you hope to have contributed?

It was refreshing since it wasn't just about built projects. It was an attitude towards a whole bunch of things: dining, retail, branding, people. Topics such as pop up restaurants. You could see a wide range of expression around the same topic. While Business of Design Week is a much larger conference and with a larger market, KODW is about knowledge and exchange of that knowledge. It was great.

Thanks very much Colin.