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PAST AND FUTURE

MINISTRY OF DESIGN EXPRESSES THE TRADITIONAL AND THE CONTEMPORARY WITH A DUALISTIC PALETTE OF MATERIALS AND SPATIAL EXPERIENCES AT THE LOKE THYE KEE RESIDENCES IN PENANG.

TEXT » MAVIS ANG
PHOTOGRAPHY » EDWARD HENDRICKS (COURTESY OF MINISTRY OF DESIGN)



Above: The rear courtyards are linked, creating a laneway of sorts that provides access to the upstairs suites

“OUR DESIGN ISN’T A THROWBACK TO THE PAST. WE USE IT AS A STARTING POINT BUT EVENTUALLY CREATE SOMETHING THAT’S RELEVANT AND CONTEMPORARY.”

» COLIN SEAH



This page: Custom-designed carpets, glass wardrobe and vanity enclosures, and concealed light sources speak of modern times



Top: Recycled Peranakan tiles on the five-foot way are a prelude to a richly patterned lobby space

Bottom: Private balconies precede the upstairs rooms and feature contemporary Malaysian furniture



FOR CENTURIES, Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Europeans have congregated in Penang to trade, moulding it into a vibrant cosmopolitan town known for its dynamic blend of cultures. The Malaysian island’s colourful multicultural history has manifested in the numerous examples of heritage architecture that still line the streets of its capital Georgetown. The city’s wide array of well-conserved shophouses is one of the main factors that enabled it to be inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

It is easy for new establishments in Penang to fall back on the island’s much-celebrated past in order to build appeal. Premium boutique property development and management company 1919 Global Sdn Bhd, however, was determined that its transformation of a row of five turn-of-the-century shophouses adjacent to the former premises of the famed century-old Loke Thye Kee restaurant on Jalan Penang would not result in a venue that remained in the shadows of a bygone era.

“Building a living heritage,” is the developer’s mantra when it comes to heritage properties, and its CEO and President Jonathan Foo emphasises that “heritage is not about buildings frozen in time.” His approach to the Georgetown shophouses, which had been left to decay over the past 20 years, was to transform them into a hospitality venue where guests can experience the essence of Penang’s heritage and enjoy the pleasures of a modern space concurrently.

The developer’s search for the right design firm to execute their vision led them to Singapore-based architectural and interior design studio Ministry of Design (MOD), which had already established its ability to contemporise tradition with other historic hospitality projects such as the award-winning Macalister Hotel (also within the Georgetown vicinity). For the Loke Thye Kee Residences, MOD worked with local submission architect K.H. Tan Architect.

According to Colin Seah, the founder and Director of MOD, heritage should be represented in relation to current times. “Our design isn’t a throwback to the past. We use it as a starting point but eventually create something that’s relevant and contemporary,” he says.

In order to abide by the property’s conservation restrictions, the design team had to thoroughly investigate how accurately they could replicate the workmanship that defines the shophouses – especially the Straits Chinese-style intricate plaster reliefs on the facade. The row of five shophouse units that make up Loke Thye Kee Residences feature

archetypal Straits Eclectic-style architectural elements such as classical pilasters, French windows crowned with an arched transom, and the quintessential five-foot way. The latter is finished with colourful vintage Peranakan tiles – a material ubiquitous with Penang’s old shophouses.

Inside the Residences, visitors are treated to a rather different interpretation of what it means to live in a conserved shophouse. The reception area sets the tone with a richly patterned rear wall and ceiling of CNC-routed board edged by hidden lighting. The effect is that the ceiling appears to be levitating.

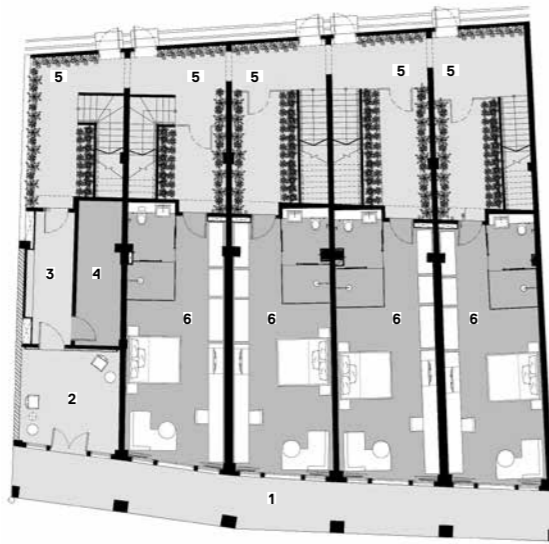
This space paves the way to linked open-air courtyards at the rear of the property. For MOD, it was crucial to retain the open courtyard concept – not only because courtyards are a defining feature of Penang’s nineteenth-century shophouses, but also because they aid in the flow of natural light and ventilation through the elongated units. Each courtyard is now also a circulation space, leading guests up to the upper-floor suites.

The suites have been designed as modern spaces with an industrial edge. Each suite features the original load-bearing brick walls that separate the shophouses. Seah explains that the heritage elements in the design had to be “abstracted”. MOD shied away from an overtly traditional aesthetic, aside from the patterns on the soft furnishings and the curvilinear silhouette of the bathroom mirrors, which both loosely reference vintage Peranakan-style floral motifs. Rather, the rooms are defined chiefly by clean lines and crisp built-in features (including glass-box vanity and wardrobe spaces) that reflect a refined and modern narrative of luxury.

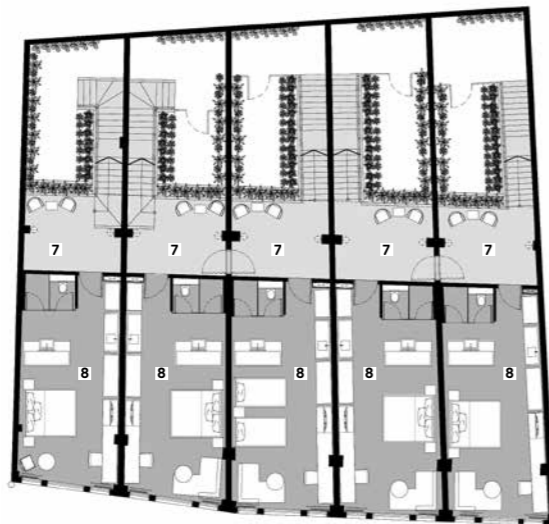
The brass wall and table lamps bring additional warmth and character, as do drawings in each room by Penang artist Ch’ng Kiah Kiean. These pay homage to Penang’s history by depicting significant buildings around the island including the Pinang Peranakan Mansion and Wisma Kastam (Malayan Railway Building).

MOD’s unexpected take on a heritage property’s interiors aligns with 1919 Global’s vision for Loke Thye Kee Residences, which is to capture the soul of the architecture’s 100-year history without falling back on clichés. Foo reveals that Penang is now attracting travellers with deeper pockets, who are seeking high-end experiences in addition to the island’s popular heritage trails and hawker food – a niche that this new luxury boutique establishment can serve.

“Some restoration projects could end up irrelevant or as white elephants,” says Foo. “But in another hundred years from now, we want the future generations to be able to look back and see how Loke Thye Kee has seamlessly evolved, stayed relevant and impacted upon Penang and its people. If the world still knows Loke Thye Kee then, it would have been a job well done,” he proudly proclaims.

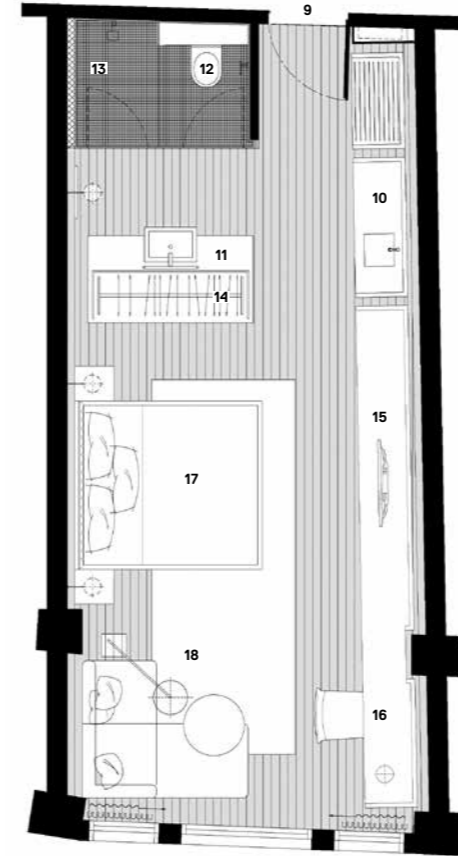


GROUND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

LEGEND
 1 Five-Foot Way | 2 Foyer | 3 Passageway | 4 Storage | 5 Rear Garden | 6 Guest Room | 7 Private Balcony | 8 Guest Room | 9 Entrance | 10 Pantry | 11 Vanity | 12 Toilet | 13 Shower | 14 Wardrobe | 15 TV Ledge | 16 Desk | 17 Bed | 18 Lounge



TYPICAL ROOM PLAN



Left: The controlled palette of forms and materials allows the rich texture of the original brickwork to dominate

Top right: The Residences are situated within five turn-of-the-century shophouses on Jalan Penang



LOKE THYE KEE RESIDENCES

CLIENT 1919 Global Sdn Bhd
DESIGNER Ministry of Design
PROJECT TEAM MEMBERS Colin Seah, Kevin Leong, Joyce Low, Ruth Chong, Tiang Yuping, Sarah Conceicao, Don Washington Castaneda, Richard Herman, Norberto Olegario, Noel Banta, Lolleth Alejandro, Aliza Suarez, Danielle Liu, Ron Sim
SUBMISSION ARCHITECT K.H. Tan Architect
MAIN CONTRACTOR AND ID CONTRACTOR SeriousBiz Sdn Bhd
LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR Camellia Landscape Sdn Bhd
C&S ENGINEER Perunding Pakatan Cergas
M&E ENGINEER O&A Consult Sdn Bhd
QUANTITY SURVEYOR Kuantibina Sdn Bhd
ARTIST Ch’ng Kiah Kiean

TIME TO COMPLETE 21 Months
TOTAL FLOOR AREA 633 sqm

MINISTRY OF DESIGN
 (65) 6222 5780 modonline.com

K.H. TAN ARCHITECT
 (60) 4 227 7348

FINISHES
 At Five-Foot Way, Recycled Peranakan Floor Tiles. In Reception, Lattice Feature Wall and Ceiling is CNC-routed MDF Board Supplied by Series Supplies; Laminate Wall Finish Supplied by Admira. At Balconies, Black and White Floor Tiles Supplied by Muda House. In Guest Suites, Stained Solid Timber

Flooring Supplied by SeriousBiz; Original Brick Walls Restored and Sealed; Mosaic Tiles Supplied by Opiocolour Mosaic; Laminate Finish on Joinery Supplied by Formica; Solid Surface Worktop (Pantry Zone) Supplied by LG Hi-Macs; Rugs Custom-Designed by Ministry of Design and Tai Ping Carpets. Supplied by Tai Ping Carpets. Nippon Easywash Paint Supplied by Nippon Paint.

FIXED AND FITTED
 In Guest Suites, Joinery Custom-Made by SeriousBiz. All Sanitary Wares, Fittings and Accessories Supplied by Rigel. Switches and Sockets are Schneider Zencelo Silver Satin Supplied by Schneider Electric. Heavy Curtains are Lights Out Fabric Supplied by Roselle Mont-Clair. Sheer Curtains are Acacia Twin Supplied by Acacia Fine Fabrics.

FURNITURE
 On Balconies, Merdeke Chairs and XX-Marble Tables Supplied by Studio Bikin (Kedai Bikin). In Guest Suites, Sofa is Custom-Made by SeriousBiz. Upholstered in Pepe Penalver Fabric Supplied by Tatum; Sofa Accent Cushions Custom-Made with Christian Fischbacher Fabric from Roselle Mont-Clair and Verel de Belval Fontainebleau Fabric Supplied by Tatum; Plywood-Framed Bed Custom-Made by SeriousBiz and Upholstered in Metaphores Fabric Supplied by Tatum; Bed Accent Cushion Custom-Made with Verel de Belval Tuileries Fabric Supplied by Tatum.

LIGHTING
 Outdoor Architectural Lighting Supplied by Lumiplan. Cove Lights Supplied by Hutec. Downlights Supplied by Lumiplan. In Guest Suites, Customised Table Lamps, Wall Lamps and Floor Lamps Supplied by Lightcraft.

ARTWORK
 Various Sketches of Penang Landmarks by Ch’ng Kiah Kiean.

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“[H]ERITAGE IS NOT ABOUT BUILDINGS FROZEN IN TIME.”

» JONATHAN FOO