

PORTFOLIO



NEW CREATIVE CLASS

COLIN SEAH | SERGIO HERMAN | SIR BEN AINSLIE | LARRY PEH | ALICIA TAI

For two decades, rebel rouser Colin Seah has been turning the industry on its head. Now, as his firm Ministry of Design (MOD) celebrates its 20th anniversary, Seah reflects on his genre-defying career and looks ahead to his most ambitious project yet – redefining luxury at the highly anticipated The Standard, Singapore.

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**TRANSFORMATIVE
CREATIVITY**



Just like that, 20 years have flown past since Colin Seah and his partner in business and life, Joy Chan Seah, set up Ministry of Design (MOD). In that time, the design firm has grown from a two-man team into a 30-strong outfit, with offices in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Beijing. Not to mention the string of awards – 156 to date – that the firm has picked up along the way, including the latest, Seah’s recognition as a Luminary by Australia’s INDE Awards.

As we catch up with the design maverick, he’s preparing to unveil another monumental project: The 143-key The Standard, Singapore, set to open in the last quarter of 2024. Interestingly, there’s somewhat of a poetic story arc connecting MOD’s first major commission – the now-defunct New Majestic Hotel on Bukit Pasoh Road – and The Standard. Not only are both properties executed by DP Architects, but “We found two hotels that have a bit of an edge and express the sort of quirkiness that we’re interested in,” Seah says.

The firm’s mantra since day one has been to “Question, Disturb, Redefine” – a lens through which all projects are filtered, in an effort to present designs that shrewdly subvert convention.

New Majestic (completed in 2006), with its juxtaposition of heritage architecture and contemporary design, plus unconventional room layouts, led the Singapore boutique hotel experience into uncharted waters. The Standard, with its reinterpretation of “A City in a Garden” concept, seeks to do the same for luxury 5-star hotels here.

Things were very different 20 years ago. In the pre-Instagram era, Seah notes that “it took less to shock or surprise you”. These days, his wide-eyed wonderment over infinite design possibilities is tempered by the realities of how and what it takes to make something work. Experience and maturity have led Seah to grow a greater appreciation for what boundaries need to be pushed and when to push them.

“I don’t think I have changed inherently as a creative thinker, because my propensity is still to question convention and overturn it wherever relevant. It’s just now paired with circumstances and experience that allows me to decide how much to throttle it on versus not,” Seah explains.

When Faster Isn’t Always Better

Seah is by no means nostalgic, but he laments the breakneck speed at which the world is currently revolving. The more time designers have to ruminate and refine their thoughts, he believes, the higher the quality of the design output. But tighter and tighter time frames – “because time is money for everyone” – mean that quality is sometimes compromised.

The social media-induced desire for instant gratification has also created a highly disposable culture that’s obsessed with novelty. What’s newer is always better, and yesterday’s news is disposed of with scant regard – the antithesis of sustainability.

“I think the propensity to tire and dispose and always want to have new things with almost superficial change is the bedrock for why we’re at the point we’re at right now,” he says. “If we see things as disposable, then the whole world, in the creation of this vicious cycle, will plunder our resources and waste a heck of a lot of it.”

“So, my view of sustainability is... really curbing your sense of disposability. It’s the ability to create much better, higher quality things which... fits you in a bespoke manner. In what we do, we play a role in either propagating this [sense of disposability] unhelpfully or stemming it in a helpful way,” reveals Seah.

“I’m very proud that the New Majestic went without major refurbishment or renovation for almost a decade and a half, which for any hotel, [is unusual] to remain relevant for that long. So that’s what I personally strive for.”

Setting the Standard

Seah first came across The Standard brand over a decade ago. The cult American hospitality brand, a favorite of A-list celebrities, is known for its provocative, irreverent nature. The original property, which opened in West Hollywood in 1999 (and shuttered in 2021), was known for having models in various states of undress lounging in a glass enclosure behind the reception desk.

The iconic installation was celebrated in a scene in a season three episode of *Sex and the City*. To Seah, the gesture served as a social commentary on how aspiring actors in Hollywood would do anything to achieve fame. Immediately, the brand resonated. In more conservative Singapore, however, don’t expect the same level of provocation; in any case, the hotel group’s leadership has changed tack to appeal to a broader customer base.

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Design-wise, Seah sought to introduce biophilia, just as he did with the Citi Wealth Hub (completed in 2021) in Orchard Road, which scooped up 11 international design awards for reimagining the traditional banking environment within light- and plant-filled volumes. Seah’s biophilic inclinations were first expressed in Beijing’s Vue Hotel Houhai (completed in 2017), where natural elements were integrated into the built environment to enhance wellbeing.

The Standard’s reception area will feature glass display cabinets filled with plants and biophilic objects. In the lobby are a cafe, a sculptural DJ counter, and a destination bar that pours out onto a tiered garden leading up to the pool deck. The 50m pool, which sports a swim-up bar, is nestled under a verdant canopy, the experience akin to swimming in a sea cave. In the main restaurant, patrons will also dine beneath a canopy of green, alongside a biophilia-themed mural imagined by a Thai artist that runs along the walls.

All rooms boast full-length glass windows which provide views of the surroundings. In a nest-like gesture, timber canopies and curved surfaces envelope guests in a warm embrace. Mixed in with The Standard’s penchant for mid-20th century modernist furnishings are thoughtful storage spaces for luggage and other paraphernalia.

Where Order Meets Artistry

“Design, when done well, recalls order and purpose,” Seah says. “To me, that’s one of the biggest joys of design – not so much the creativity or the innovation or the novelty factor – but at the most basic level, it reorders things. In the future, I really hope that there will be greater appreciation of what design really is. It’s... really about finding a deep inherent order to things.”

“My journey as a designer started in my early 20s and now I’m in my early 50s. During that time, my spiritual journey has been [on a rollercoaster]. Now I feel like I’m returning to a very basic understanding of the foundation of my Christian faith, and in doing so, it has made even more sense of my design fascinations and passions.”

Seah shares that he remains somewhat in disbelief that two decades have whizzed past just like that. “We’ve never been the sort who looked back and patted ourselves on the shoulder. Every time we even felt remotely [like we achieved something], we would ask ourselves what else could have been done [better].”

“We are almost amazed that we are here. God has been kind to allow us to have enough creative work to do [and] still be here in a meaningful way. And of course, the energy and passion to continue doing it.” 

