

Architect virtuoso

SCDA Architects' founding principal Soo K Chan is a potent mix of creativity and business acumen

By GENEVIEVE CUA

CREATIVE genius is not typically associated with business acumen. But the dapper Soo K Chan, founding principal of SCDA Architects, appears to embody a fortuitous combination of both qualities – in spades.

As if his long track record isn't enough – to date he has worked on projects in 30 locations across four continents – he is making waves in the Big Apple, where two luxe projects in the prestigious High Line district have elicited enthusiastic press. At least one US publication has, for instance, dubbed him the "It" architect of 2014 in Manhattan, arguably elevating him into the ranks of one of Singapore's hottest exports.

He speaks of his career, which has so far spanned 30 years, as an endeavour to "connect the dots" where, starting with architecture, he has extended his firm's capabilities into a myriad of associated skills – landscaping, furniture design, graphic and interior design – all with the vision of creating a unique, identifiable aesthetic. The latest leap into New York is a "big one", he says.

"The jumps we've made are fairly large. Once we set our minds to do it, we go, and deal with the logistics as we go along."

Penang-born Mr Chan obtained a Master of Architecture degree from Yale University in 1987. He set up his own practice in 1995. SCDA spells Soo Chan Design Associates.

In Singapore he is known for luxury condominiums such as The Marq and more recently Leedon Residence. He has also designed the Ladyhill and a public housing project SkyTerrace@Dawson.

His approach towards the export of his services, by fashioning himself as a one-stop full service practice, goes against the grain of today's trend towards specialisation. He believes architecture is "the mother of all arts". "From architecture, I have a strong interest in landscape and interior design, and from there, product design. I went for all the dots and they connect. It has taken a while to establish the dots."

He has garnered more than 70 international and local awards for his work, and is part of the panel of designers for trendy Italian furniture firm Poliform in Milan.

"I want to reclaim the domain of the architect that I think has been lost with technology and specialisation. Buildings have become very complex... The practice has subdivided. You have interior design, landscape and acoustic design. Especially in the US, you have many consultants and the architect becomes more of a conductor in the orchestra. You cease to be close to the control and the making of things.

"So all along I have been trying to pull back. In my practice we have interior designers, landscapers, horticulturist, graphic designers – all this because we want to create a consistent, holistic product. You take away the negotiation with other designers and consultants. You can have a creative collaboration with someone good, and out

of the creative tension you can have something fantastic. Or, you can spend a lot of energy trying to talk to a lot of stakeholders. If we can do it well, why not do it in-house? We have a better product and it saves the client time."

His approach, he says, has helped him to internationalise his practice. "If a company like ours can do landscape and interior equally well, and is able to integrate the disciplines seamlessly, then it's hard to replicate the flow from your chair to the terrace to the landscape. It feels like it's integrated.

"Because of that model, we're able to export our services; we're in 30 different destinations. It takes the risk of coordination out. If you're going to hire an architect from Singapore, an interior designer from UK, and landscapist from Bali, it's more cumbersome even though we can Skype."

In the interest of creative control, Mr Chan has gone a step further than most architects – he is an investor himself in three projects to date. There is the Soori High Line where he has a majority stake, and 515 Highline in New York City where he is a minority investor. And then there is also the Alila Villas Soori in Bali, where the passion to do all things his way arguably began. He is the sole investor in Alila Villas Soori.

"The dots came together in 2007 or 2008, when together with my wife, we decided to build a holiday home in Bali. We were determined to find the best site with the best of nature."

Mr Chan is married to Ling Fu who is herself a designer. They have six sons, age 16 to 23. The name Soori is an amalgamation of his name Soo and his wife Ling's Indonesian name, Sri.

"I remember taking a helicopter looking for sites. After we identified the site, we worked backwards to have the amenities we wanted. The site grew from a single house, into a 48-villa hotel."

The original site was marketed in parcels. "We picked the best spot for our home. For me it was the most spiritual. I designed it to be emotive... You felt it was the perfect place to be. But then you realise, the nature was very strong, the waves, mountains and paddy fields. You feel a little overwhelmed.

"So I said, we can't just have one house. It's too isolated. Why don't we have six houses, we'll get friends and family and we'll have a collective. But six houses didn't seem feasible; it became 48. There was a scaling up. That's pretty much the way I do things."

Mr Chan's hand through SCDA is in almost everything in the Alila Villas Soori from landscaping to lampshades. The resort boasts more than 5200 sq m of beachfront, and is nestled among rice terraces that are a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Mr Chan says prior to Alila Villas Soori he had already dove into projects where he had full creative control, but they were relatively modest in scale. "Even as I ran my own practice, I occasionally bought a house to renovate. In

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1991 or 1992, I bought my own shophouse, gutted it and rebuilt it. I did things like that – bought a piece of land, cut it into three and built three homes.

"But the hotel was a turning point. It was not only that I was designing everything from uniforms and plates to lamps, gardens and writing pads. I wanted to do as much as I could. If I felt like creating a candle and a scent, I did it. It went beyond architecture into the realm of lifestyle."

Breaking into the US market, however, was something of an uphill climb. He currently has five projects under his belt in New York City, three of which – Soori High Line, 515 Highline and 118 East 59th Street – are under construction. It wasn't just that the development model in the US was one of the use of multiple consultants. The risk of litigation also couldn't be ignored.

"We had to adjust our mindset. It hasn't been easy. We have worked in many countries. I knew America well and spent time there, but being on your own still needed adjustment. We realised that we were able to achieve so much in Asia because of the culture. We're not as protective and litigious as New York. So we're able to move to encapsulate a project and own it. In New York, it's process driven. You need to check this, get agreements done, and it's part of risk management.

"At the end of the day, I wouldn't have gone in to be a developer or investor if someone had commissioned me and given me the control and liberty I wanted. But that doesn't happen in real life. My model has been to do whatever I can do within my means. At this point I knew I was ready for New York. I had accumulated knowledge and I'm at an age where I think I should do it. I don't think I could have done it 10 years ago, both from the financial point of view and from the angle of being able to understand and cope with people.

"The impetus to do it was creative. It wasn't so much the numbers and economics. I do have a head for that too, but that was secondary."

The challenge in the 27-unit US\$125 million Soori High Line project in particular was that 16 out of 27 units will have their own heated pools, a feature virtually unheard of in New York City where most condominium pools are shared. Marketing began in Singapore last year. To date slightly more than a third of the units have been sold. The project is marketed by Sotheby's International, and is due to launch in New York next year.

The High Line was formerly an elevated rail track that has been transformed into a public park. The park has become a tourist attraction and the revived Chelsea district has become a mecca for prestige projects by some of the most well known architects such as Frank Gehry. ■

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