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MAKING HIS MARK

Architect Soo K Chan on his holistic approach to design

By Rachel Eva Lim

Penang-born, Singapore-based architect Soo K Chan's designs can be found all around the globe – from the concrete jungles of Tokyo and New York to tropical locales like Bali and the Maldives. While his diverse portfolio includes residential projects, commercial buildings and national embassies, his designs are all characterised by a signature aesthetic that facilitates a sense of fluidity between the built and natural environments.

Hot on the heels of the Soori High Line – a luxury boutique condominium in New York City where units are equipped with indoor ionised saltwater swimming pools – comes Chan's latest project: Soori Bali, a luxury resort and spa due to launch this March. We asked the master builder to reveal his creative process, and delve into his relationship between design and happiness.

When did you decide you wanted to pursue architecture as a career?

From the time I was old enough to play with Lego bricks!

You grew up in Khoo Kongsi, a Chinese clanhouse in Penang that's also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. How did being raised in this historic locale inform your design process?

Growing up in Khoo Kongsi was certainly unique. The compound's long, narrow houses open into air wells that allow light and rain into the



ABOVE/BELOW: ARCHITECT SOO K CHAN; OMBAK BAR AND GRILL AT SOORI BALI



building. As a result, I became attuned to natural elements, as well as the interplay of light and darkness, from a young age. Today, I always consider the choreography of the spatial experience, and how light, sound and the elements influence the user.

What are some of the factors you consider when designing for different countries?

For me, the starting point of any project is its local and environmental context. By integrating the local culture, flora and fauna, raw materials and craftsmanship, my designs capture the spiritual essence of a place, while remaining environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable.

For instance, I designed Soori Bali in a way that respects the integrity of *subak*, the centuries-old practice of rice field irrigation. The resort's

villas, residences and common areas were built around existing irrigation paths and ceremonial routes for the villagers' religious processions, while several new temples were constructed in accordance with local beliefs. Daily life as it has been in this part of Bali for centuries can therefore continue in harmony with Soori Bali, thanks to this holistic design.

What are some design challenges that preoccupy and inspire you?

I am challenged by bureaucrats who do not contribute to the design process but hinder it. I am inspired by passionate people and those who rise against challenges to achieve their aspirations.

On the next page, Chan highlights his favourite spots across the SilkAir network.



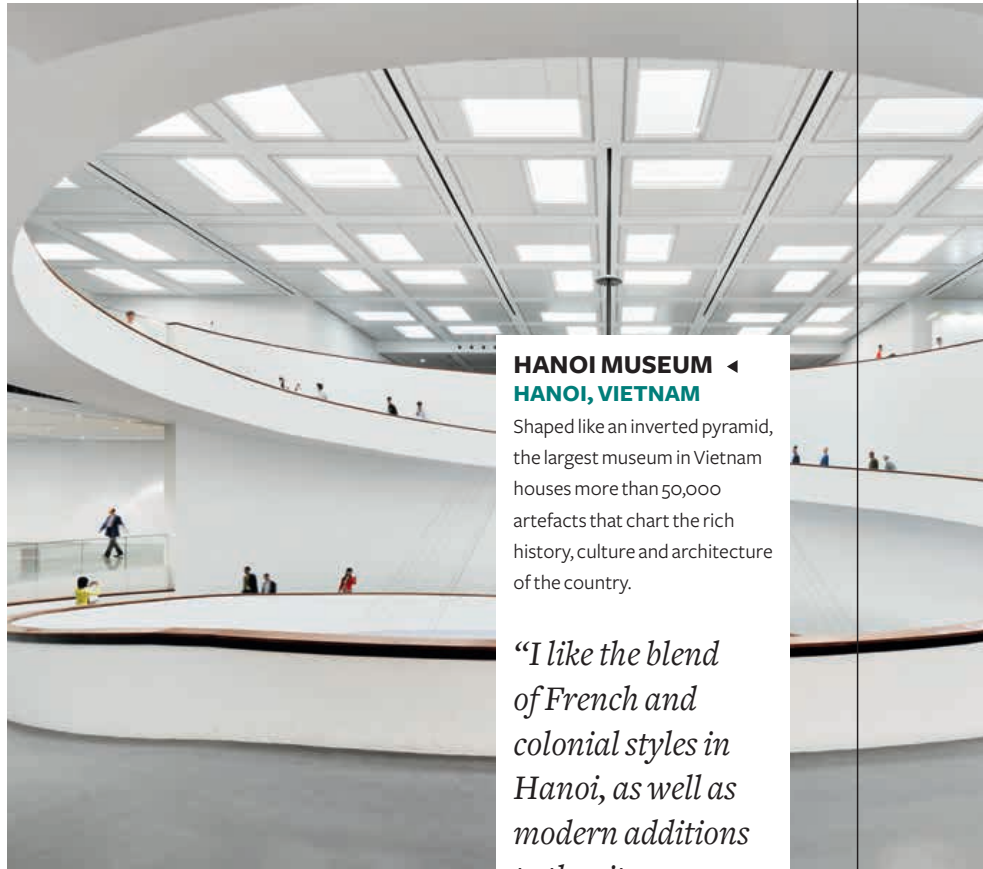
THE ARCHITECT'S HOTSPOTS



BOROBUDUR ▲ **YOGYAKARTA, INDONESIA**

This 9th-century Mahayana Buddhist temple in Central Java takes the shape of a stepped pyramid, with nine stacked platforms and a central dome. Its concentric levels represent the different stages of enlightenment.

"It's massive and monumental, yet still speaks to the individual pursuit of humanist ideals."



HANOI MUSEUM ◀ **HANOI, VIETNAM**

Shaped like an inverted pyramid, the largest museum in Vietnam houses more than 50,000 artefacts that chart the rich history, culture and architecture of the country.

"I like the blend of French and colonial styles in Hanoi, as well as modern additions to the cityscape, such as the Hanoi Museum."

"Set in a former convent school, the National Design Centre melds the old and the new in a way that is emblematic of the ongoing dialogue in the design industry"

NATIONAL DESIGN CENTRE **SINGAPORE** ▶

Designed by Chan's firm, SCDA Architects, this centre serves as a nexus for all things design-related in Singapore, hosting everything from workshops to exhibitions.



GEORGE TOWN ▲ **PENANG, MALAYSIA**

The multicultural capital city of Penang was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, thanks to its colourful mishmash of Asian and colonial architecture.

"I visit George Town at least once a year with my family. It's home to 19th-century shophouses and British colonial buildings, as well as some of the best hawker fare in the world."



BAGAN ◀ **MYANMAR**

Once the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Pagan, the city is laden with more than 2,000 temples and pagodas – relics of Theravada Buddhism, the empire's primary faith.

"With thousands of temples set amid lush greenery, this atmospheric city is definitely one of my favourite spots in the region."