

BEYOND FACE VALUE

Text by Rachel Lee-Leding
Images courtesy of SCDA Architects unless otherwise stated



*There's more than meets the eye
when it comes to the sleek and
sophisticated world of Chan Soo Khian.*

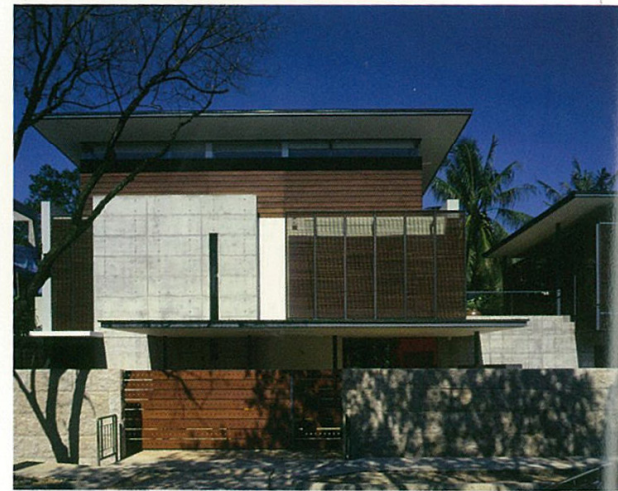


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← **PRINCIPAL OF DESIGN:**
Chan Soo Khian now leads a team of about 80 staff

↓ **COLLAGE WORK:**
SCDA's earlier works like Coronation Road West House (1998) often juxtaposed materials



The architecture of *Chan Soo Khian* could very well be used as a metaphor for the man—polished, sophisticated, exacting. That his works are as refined as they are is no happy accident. The founder and design principal of *SCDA Architects* has spent the past 17 years perfecting his brand of architecture. Yes, it is a brand in its own right.

“Architects don’t really like to talk about it, but they do it. Every architect and their work is a brand,” Chan says pointedly. “It simply means that you’re very consistent in your belief

and you have stayed consistent for a while, until people can associate you with a certain aspect of your design.”

Indeed, Chan is nothing if not consistent. The firm’s projects have hardly ever veered from being clear compositions of slim lines and slender profiles, regardless of scale. From single-dwelling homes to the sleek high-rise apartments and luxury resorts that premium developers seek him out for, Chan’s penchant for modernist design is evident. But the consistency on Chan’s part goes beyond form and stylistic leanings.



↑ **GUIDING HAND:**
SCDA's design principal says that he still enjoys working and guiding junior staff

"I don't want to talk about whether it's a screen box or a wall, because that's not the primary interest," Chan says. What he is interested in talking about is the unlikely intersection between classicism and modernity that SCDA's works falls on.

"Spatially, [I come] from a classical point of view, it's humanist. But in terms of language, it's modern," Chan gives a succinct summary of his design ethos.

One may not guess it at first glance, but his design roots are classical in nature and they owe themselves to his foundational days studying architecture in the liberal halls of *Washington University* and *Yale University*. Post-modernity was all the rage, and consequently historicism came into play with various schools of thought being proposed. "Within the school, you had to think about which camp you belonged to – the classicists, Art Nouveau, and so on," he recalls. "But there was so much going on, so much dialogue that there was actually a bit of confusion."

A very enlightened 22-year-old Chan chose to cut through all the noise and dove headlong into the fundamentals of Western architecture – that is classical architecture, "the least popular camp".

He admits that he never really enjoyed classical studios in school, and while he did do stints in the office of staunch classicist *Allan Greenberg*, Chan never did take to the

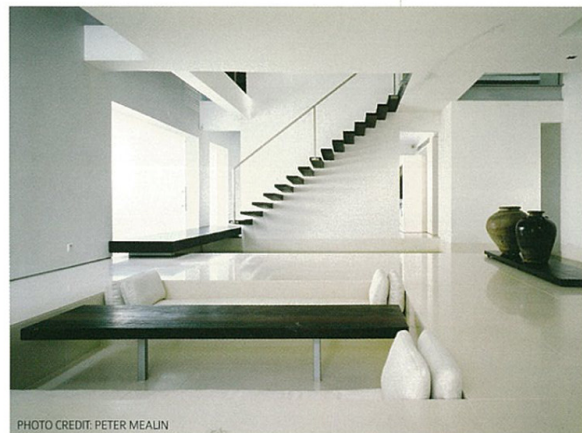


PHOTO CREDIT: PETER MEALIN

"Every architect and their work is a brand."

orthodoxy of classicism. Rather, he counts great modernist architects like *Mies van Der Rohe* and *Louis Kahn* among his design heroes, many of whom were also exposed to classical architecture.

"I was only interested in the organisational principles and in the humanist tradition of classical architecture," he says, making a clear distinction. Scale, feeling of space, courtyards, urban design, figure-ground relationships –

these were the things that Chan took away from his brush with classicism, and up till today, they still come through in his designs.

"I don't talk about it a whole lot," he muses. He probably doesn't consciously think about it a whole lot either. But it's there nonetheless – embedded in his mind, made second nature by now. He tries to articulate it, "When I say humanist, it means the tendency to figuratively complete a space, either by landscape, by walls

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DESIGN LANGUAGE:
A very clear design language surfaced even in earlier works such as East Coast House (1996)

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INSIDE MATTERS:
Interior design remains one of Chan Soo Khian's core passions



PHOTO CREDIT: PETER MEALIN

or by organisation of space. It means that if I draw a room, it may be missing a wall or a corner, but by placing a planter or a sculpture, you can still find a sense of the centre. That's why you feel comfortable."

After 10 years in the States, which included a stint at *Kohn Pederson Fox* in New York, the Penang-born Chan came to Singapore to work, starting out at *Architects 61* doing mostly speculative design work before setting up his own firm in 1995.

"I think I was one of those that was not a direct lineage of either *Kerry Hill*, *William Lim* and so on," Chan says, referring to the fact that many of his peers, all also within the Ivy League of Singapore architecture, had crossed paths with these architecture pioneers who were interested in matters of modern

tropical architecture and critical regionalism. "I was always kind of on the fringe."

His education in Southeast Asian vernacular architecture was an organic one, informed by travels in Asia, in particular Bali. There, he was inspired by the nature of outdoor rooms, buildings with no walls, pavilions and "most importantly", the integration of landscape into architecture.

By now, Chan had begun a very calculated mash-up of classical values, modernist design language and vernacular sensitivity. It created a unique thesis that he fleshed out in houses like *East Coast House*. In turn, these houses became testbeds for ideas that would later be implemented on a larger scale in housing projects like *Lincoln Modern* ("It's a structurally derived building,



PHOTO CREDIT: PATRICK BINGHAM-HALL

↑ **MAKING HISTORY:**
Heeren Street Shophouse (1999) was an exploration of memory and layers

↓ **SCALE UP:**
The Ladyhill (1999) tested the idea of the courtyard on a larger scale





PHOTO CREDIT: ALBERT LIM

↑ **MODULAR LIVING:**
Lincoln Modern (2001) proposed interlocking apartment units

← **EXO-SKELETON:**
Apartments hang from clearly expressed load-bearing structures in Lincoln Modern

"I do not understand this big paranoia of loss of identity."

talking about planes and interlocking elements") and *The Ladyhill* ("It was about courtyards and bringing light into a high-rise building").

With a staff of 80, Chan wishes that he had more time amidst his hectic schedule to have a dialogue with his staff about what he believes in as an architect. "That is the most important job of the design principal. It's to always reiterate what is the fundamental thesis of the studio," he says.

Too often, assumptions (by those within and without the studio) are made about SCDA's works and its principal based on formal readings. It would be easy to presume that Chan might be one to get caught up with issues of architectural identity and the preservation of a Southeast Asian architecture language given the track record of vernacular influences on his work. But he's not.

"I have no baggage," he quips. "I was not born here, I spent a lot of time in the States and

“Spatially, [I come] from a classical point of view, it’s humanist. But in terms of language, it’s modern”

I still spend a large proportion of my time in New York. So from that perspective, I do not understand this big paranoia of loss of identity. You keep talking about your *kampung* days, using very localised references. But Singapore is not local. It’s so wide open.”

Chan makes a clear distinction between identity and preservation of heritage (“That, you have to do”). What he doesn’t subscribe to is nostalgia towards vernacular architecture. “How do you create Singapore architecture? I don’t think it’s a caricature or iconography of what is Singaporean or what is Malaysian,” he says. “But it will come. Some critic will come and realise that there’s this group of

‘neo-tropical’ architects doing something, and I think it’s already happened.”

He admits to doing what is “politically correct” in many of his earlier housing projects – exploring vernacular architecture and expressing them in ways that were accepted norms (timber screens, louvres and such). Today, however, his projects tend towards more pure forms. Recent projects like *Grange Road House 1* bear a sense of monumentality, which harks back to his fascination with buildings like the Pantheon.

“When I look at my earlier projects, I think, ‘Wow, it’s nice, but it looks a bit overwrought.’” Chan points out projects

BUILDING SIGNATURE: *TwentyOne Angullia Park (2014)* is yet another one of SCDA’s signature sleek high-rise apartments





PHOTO CREDIT: AMIR SULTAN

GIVING WEIGHT: ↑
Grange Road House I (2012) exemplifies a sense of monumentality in SCDA's current houses

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DISTILLED DESIGN:
Chan Soo Khian leans towards purer designs these days (Ocean Drive House, 2006)



in his monograph, “I look at something like this and, it’s a sampler! You’ve got a stone wall, you’ve got a concrete wall, you’ve got screens...it hangs together, but there’s a sense that you have so many ideas that you’re trying to bring together.”

“So when you’re a bit more mature, you say, ‘Ah, I’m just going to go with one idea and push it a bit more,’ and not worry about what your critics will say.”

Today, SCDA keeps to its core focus of designing, luxury resorts and apartments, of which *TwentyOne Angullia Park* and *OneKL*, which recently won a *RIBA International Award 2012* for its clever cross-ventilating structure, are two such examples.

However, the firm is also taking the time to delve into other project types such as the



PHOTO CREDIT: MARTIN KREUZER

9@Tagore factory building and *Dhoby Ghaut Green*, a public space intervention, both of which were shortlisted for the *World Architecture Festival*. Most interesting is the firm's undertaking of HDB flats at *Dawson Estate*, where its design proposes a solution for multi-generational living through the interlocking and connecting of studio apartments and three-room apartments.

Overseas, projects like a private columbarium in France and the *Singapore*

High Commission in New Delhi have allowed the firm to explore new ideas like symbolism and iconography respectively.

Still, it is luxury resort *Alila Villas Soori* that Chan has been most excited about in recent years. Being both developer and architect, Chan wholeheartedly played to his interest not just in architecture, but also landscape design, product design and hospitality. It led to the genesis of *Soori Living*, a furniture retail arm and *Bistro Soori*, an intimate eatery just a few

↑ **PUBLIC SERVICE:**
SCDA's HDB proposal encourages multi-generational living

← **PASSION POINT:**
Alila Villa Soori marks Chan Soo Khian's foray into hospitality development

units away from SCDA's office on Teck Lim Road in Chinatown.

Most importantly, however, it gave Chan the courage and know-how to launch *Soori High Line New York*, a luxury hospitality and residential development in Manhattan along the famed train-track-turned-public-park *High Line*.

"It's not like I want to be a developer in a big way, but I wanted to build in Manhattan and since it's so hard to break into the market, I thought, 'Why not we generate our own project?'" Chan explains. It's taken him five years to get to this point where the project is just starting and is due for completion in three years' time.

Chan readily confesses that *Soori High Line New York* is a personal indulgence for him. But it also allows him to test out his own ideas about architecture. "We're testing our spatial paradigm on a totally different place, climate, culture, but believing in the thesis that people [around the world] are not that different. This is an argument for universality. It's the opposite of the argument for cultural identity," he shares.

Soori High Line New York's significance also has something to do with how Chan

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SKY HIGH:
OneKL explores the idea of villas in the sky

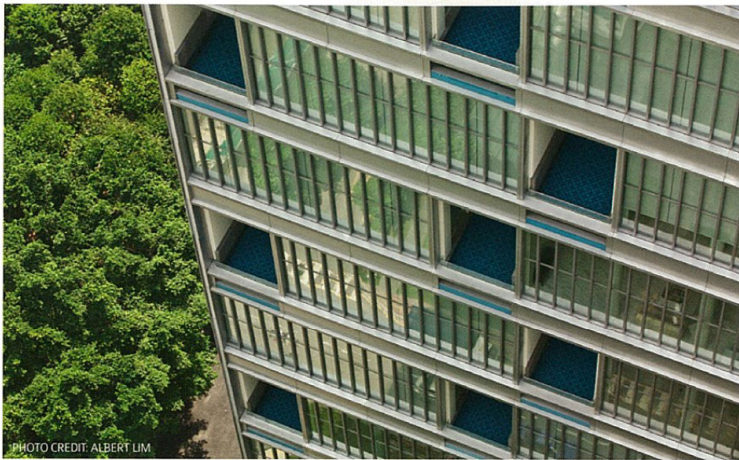


PHOTO CREDIT: ALBERT LIM

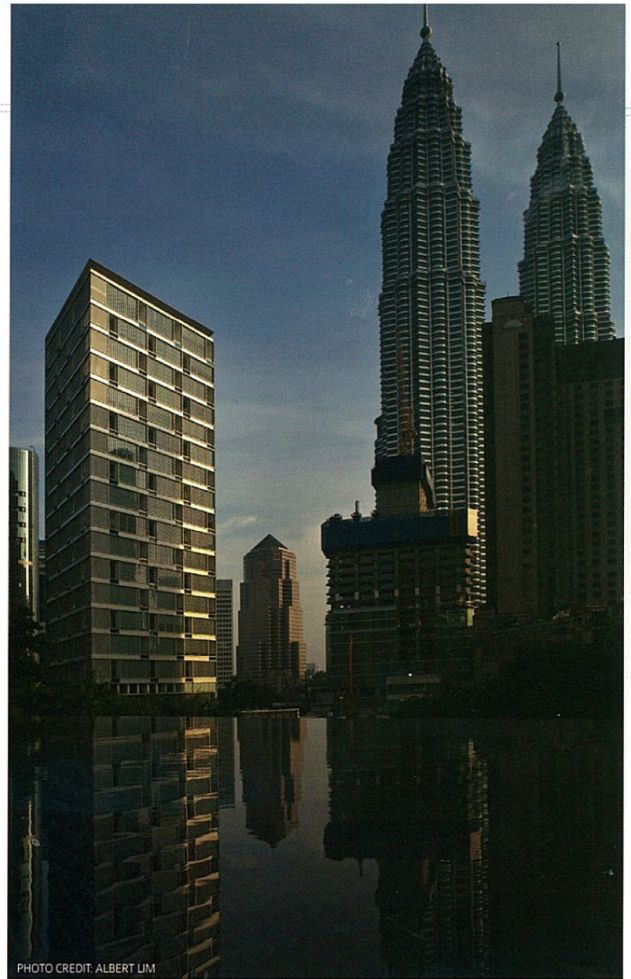


PHOTO CREDIT: ALBERT LIM



PHOTO CREDIT: AARON POCKOCK

views the role of the architect. For him, beyond composing floors and walls, the architect should be composing experiences, including the softer, lifestyle aspects of living. “If you look at some of the turn of the century architects, the Viennese Secession architects, they used to design more than just buildings,” he points out.

“Architects those days were controlling everything. That’s the only way, going forward. You have to be multi-disciplinary. Today, the architect’s role has been diminished to that of a coordinator. We have to claim back the ground.”

It’s the reason why he is still so heavily involved in the creative running of his studio. While principals of studios his size might allow for a bit more personal expression among staff, Chan is careful to watch over the direction of the firm.

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CENTRESTAGE:
Dhoby Ghaut Green is a public theatre that remains sensitive to its surrounds

PEOPLE



TESTING THEORIES:
Soori High Line New York
takes SCDA's design thesis
to Manhattan

"I think more than ever, I'm imposing the creative aspects because as the firm grows larger, the design culture of the firm needs to be reinforced even more," he says, adding that he works a lot with junior staff, even on mundane issues like where to drop the ceiling for the air-conditioning, or how to hide a structure. It all points back to his belief that the firm's works are a direct representation of himself as an architect, and he makes no bones about it.

Chan is many things: an artful marketer, an astute businessman, a persistent teacher, an idealistic developer. But above and beyond all this, he is an architect of the most determined kind with glorious ambitions that few dare to dream of. ♦

scdaarchitects.com

bistrosoori.com

alilahotels.com/soori



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