

**SOO CHAN**

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# Soo Chan

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In Leon van Schaik's introduction to SCDA's second monograph, he notes that Soo K Chan's works are consistently logical, created with a "rational compositional ease". In Chan's houses, hotels and resorts, he sees a peaceful perfection of form; nothing ever left unfinished, nothing extrinsic, nothing confused. For Van Schaik, a shared feature at site—a perk not unique to Southeast Asia but certainly less common elsewhere—has aided the architect's realisations. "Close observation reveals a base condition that allows for this seamless resolution: there is always enough space for the logic to play out without contradiction," Van Schaik writes. Chan revels in space, holding the space itself in the highest regard—how does it look, how will it be affected by the built form, what is the relationship between the space and the object within?

Soo Chan is today one of Asia's most respected architects. Studying architecture at Washington then Yale, he set up his practice in Singapore in 1995. In the beginning, the projects were residential, often small, but

through these projects he developed his holistic approach to design—taking care of the landscaping, the interiors, the lighting and so forth. Today, SCDA employs around 70 architects and designers, and the firm's work—almost 90 percent of it currently outside Singapore—ranges from mixed-use developments, hotels and resorts to exclusive hi-rise apartments and tropical villas.

Despite its growth, SCDA still maintains a boutique feel, and each of its projects achieves that graceful rationality to which Van Schaik refers. "In the beginning, you're exploring," Chan says of his early career. "You see that designs are shaping up towards a direction, but there's a tendency to over-express." As time goes by, "you become more certain of who you are and what you want to do. The projects tend to be clearer, more distilled and more nuanced. A project looks more effortless—the same DNA, but a little bit simpler, a little bit easier, not trying too hard." From there, Chan says that he began to build in different places and test his design language. His myriad projects in Southeast Asia and the

wider continent are testament to the firm's prestige and the universal appeal of the SCDA aesthetic.

Now, Chan is taking on New York. At 522 West 29th Street, SCDA is in the process of building a resort-inspired residential development, Soori High Line. Co-developed by Chan, the 27-apartment project presented an exciting new challenge. As Van Schaik commented, the availability of space has informed and enabled Chan's compositions, but in New York, the story is completely different.

"New York is about imperfection, and working in a real context," Chan says. "The starting point for the work is the environment. The considerations are very different from when working in Asia, where you have space to create. When you're part of a context [like New York] you have to decide whether your lot allows you to be the sculptural part or whether you are the background, where some buildings are very polite and simple. So it's more interesting when working in this context; you don't always have to stand out."







**All your projects have a recognisable fingerprint. How would you describe the design language that connects them?**

Simple question, long answer! I think there's a certain formality in the way I approach design. I'm concerned about the clarity of how the forms come together and also about what the form does to the exterior space. I'm very interested in the relationship between the space formed by the object and the clarity and assemblage of the object itself. I distil things down to the essence of what I try to convey in space, and within each space I take a very holistic approach. For example, in this room [within the SCDA office], I would do the lighting, the interior, the architecture, the material, so in general I like to do the whole assemblage across the different disciplines. SCDA is set up so that we have in-house interior design, landscape design and graphic design.

**These days, you must receive a wide variety of briefs and clients. How do you decide who you are going to work with?**

I think most of the clients who come to us have already identified with what we do, so in general there are no problems with expectations because they've seen the body of work or seen something that we've done and they've liked that. So, in terms of alignment, it's not an issue. But within the choice of new projects that come into our office, we try to select those in interesting locales.

**Yes, your portfolio covers many interesting cities and places. Is that because you're tired of working on projects in Singapore?**

No, Singapore is very important to us because this is where we have a real connection to building, you see what you design. But Singapore is a small place, so very early on in the practice we decided we were going to look regionally and internationally, and that has served us well.

**When you undertake a hotel or a resort project, what are the first things you have to consider?**

No matter what, you have to visit the site. You're trying to understand the terrain, but you're also trying to understand the culture of the place. The topography of the site will help you determine where you put your entrance, where the common areas are. When you design—especially a resort hotel—the hotel has to sit naturally. It has to fit into the site and seem like it grew out from the place. You have to get the feel of the place and try to pick up on what makes that particular locale different. If it's a place with very strong cultural references, it definitely makes it easier. Within that, on a very local level, you look at what's immediately surrounding the site: the flora and fauna, the craft that you find—you're always looking for something to latch on to, to make it place-specific.

**So this would be the process with, for example, a project like the Park Hyatt in the Maldives?**

We visited the site several times. It was hard to get a feel of what Maldivian culture really is, because if you look at existing hotel types, with thatch and all that, they are not necessarily of the indigenous architecture because they did not have that many trees. That was probably some Western architect's idea of Bora Bora or Fiji, and they transplanted "island architecture." So we visited sites and found one of the things they do well is build boats. They are a seafaring nation, so to build a boat is a natural thing. They're very well-versed in making curved structures, so it was almost easier to ask them to do an inverted boat, for example, for the reception. I went to one island specifically which is a boat-building island, and I saw them make fairly large hulls. The beauty of the ribs before the boat was completed was such an inspiration. We tried to draw them out and the engineers tried to size them, but it wasn't that easy to do once you put engineering in the mix. The islanders traditionally make the boats that make the most economic sense, so it strikes just the right balance of structure and economy, so in the end we asked the older boatbuilders to interpret and build the structure, and it was really beautiful. It wasn't over-structured, it was just right. The engineers proposed adding bits of steel plates and anchoring down the concrete foundations—they were afraid of uplift from the wind and all those other things, right? These guys said, why not build a giant boat? And the beauty actually came from the fact that the form of the boat and the proportions came out just right according to what is needed. Nothing is excessive.

(BELOW) Park Hyatt Maldives, photo courtesy SCDA Architects. (OPPOSITE) Soo Chan in his showroom at SCDA's office, photographed by Kevin Ou.









**What do you look for in a great hotel?**

I think the service and the experience of the place are most important as a guest. You have to have both. Your idea of what makes a good hotel and a bad hotel is also formed by your expectations of what the hotel is going to be. As an architect, when I go to a hotel I'm looking for the experience of the locale, the place and the service. On a personal level, sometimes I shut myself off from the design, but there are times when I go specifically to look at design. But I would say service is paramount. And having interesting rooms is very important.

**Does service play an important part from the beginning of your resort designs?**

So many architects approach hospitality design from a formal kind of way, no different from the way they would design another building type. But to be a hospitality designer you really need to understand the service aspect of the hotel. If your design at the back of house is not well thought out, it has a big impact on the service itself. You have to be more practical because you're designing for a user of the place for the next 30 years, whereas if you're designing speculative condominiums you're designing a shell to sell off. I experienced this even more when I did my own hotel, Alila Villas Soori, where I was the owner and also the architect.

**So you were thinking long term?**

Actually, I wasn't thinking that long term then, but now it's four or five years later, I can start to see which aspects of the design I could have done differently. You realise when you're not appropriate in your choice of design or material or even siting, the elements and the weather come in, maintenance becomes a big issue, you're always fighting things.

**And yet in terms of design it's timeless—it's not going to go out of fashion.**

And that's very important—a timeless design is key.

**So what's the secret?**

The secret for me is to get the site planning correct and the forms clear and well-proportioned. Add a layer of metaphor or reference to it to make it of its place—then it will be timeless. The other more difficult way—which I don't really subscribe to—is to try to do iconic or metaphorical images of what a particular culture is, maybe by exaggerating the roof form like a Thai roof or a Balinese roof. That tends to me to be less authentic and timeless, unless you build the actual local way. Sometimes the requirements of a new hotel—fire ratings, sprinklers, air conditioning—would not allow you to build with those flammable materials. It's hard to interpret a vernacular form and blow it up and put all this engineering into it; it often looks a bit...strange, or artificial.

**So you'd never dream of doing it?**

Like that, with a very expressive roof? I would do it, maybe as an all-day dining area or free-standing structure here or there. But I would make it as authentic as possible. Generally, my buildings are more distilled, and almost disappear—using local material and stone so it blends with the site, and placing heavy emphasis on landscape.

**Can you elaborate on how you go about incorporating references to the locality of the project—the religions, customs, culture or geography?**

For example, at Alila Villa Soori, cultural and social sustainability was very important because we were building in an agrarian, agricultural, rice-planting village. When we planned the site we met with the villagers and there were two aspects that were very important to them. One was their ceremonies, how they walk to the temple—there was a temple on the hill—and so by incorporating these daily rituals, it informed how we planned the villas. The second aspect was that we were building in a working paddy field, so the irrigation systems are quite intricate. If you cut off the water, it would affect the rice fields below, so we had to understand how the water is distributed and make sure our buildings were sited in such a way to allow the working rice fields to happen within parts of our development—there are working paddy fields within the grounds. When you integrate the local beliefs and ways of living, at the end of the day the hotel tends to be more natural and authentic.

Another example is our project in the Himalayan foothills, in Rishikesh. We were trying to figure out the best orientation, the best views, and the easiest way to do that is by looking at the vernacular buildings that have been built for the past few-hundred years. The people have lived there so long that they understand the climatic change of the seasons, the tidal shifts. They know where to site the buildings because they probably did it by trial and error until they found the right formula. Instead of reinventing, we asked ourselves why their buildings were oriented a certain way. And there were good reasons: heat gain, views of the river, the flood plains. You need to be able to pick up on the cues that are there. The same applies to the landscape, too. Rather than introduce a lot of plants, document what is there already, start a nursery and use the local plants. We also explore the readily available building materials. If you find them in the vernacular buildings, you will probably find them around the area. Here, a cladding stone can be found if you dig deep enough. In the Maldives, you have coral stone, from compressed coral—and so on and so forth. It works well to use what you find.

**That's a sustainable approach. What other aspects of sustainability do you try to incorporate?**

It depends on the hotel type. If it's a city hotel it can be harder to impose certain things because it will be more dependent on climate control, air conditioning. But in a resort, if you plan it right you can minimise the use of air conditioning, practice rainwater harvesting and run-off collection, tailor guest activities so they are less impactful, even create toiletries from local materials.

**The Maldives has a particularly difficult situation, with a lack of building materials and its environmentally critical position. Did that affect your planning?**

Of course. The first thing really was that we didn't want to destroy the coral. We had to do an environmental impact study and we had to make sure there were multiple jetties to cater for the tidal shifts, so as not to destroy the coral. When we constructed the water villas, we placed the piles in a random fashion to avoid the coral, and then built a thick raft-like structure on top to build the buildings. It's not like the imposed structure affects the coral; we're avoiding it. Actually there's no wood and very little we can use on the island, so we had to get the wood from Malaysia. We built the mock-up in Malaysia and we shipped it over. It's very hard to build on the Maldives—in fact, you hardly even find coconut trees.

**You often do the interiors too. What kind of experience do you want to create for the guests?**

I believe, especially for resorts, the interior and architecture has to be as one, because the transition between indoor and outdoor is often blurred. You slide the doors open, you flow in from the pool to the terrace to the bedroom, and by planning the interior you can plan the guest experience from where he or she experiences the space both internally, and experiences the views looking out—the way they experience the sunrise and the sunset. It's all very central. Unless you have control of both aspects, it's very hard to pull that together.



(PREVIOUS SPREAD AND OPPOSITE)  
Park Hyatt Maldives, photos courtesy  
SCDA Architects.





**Have you noticed any trends in high-end hospitality and what ways do you see this particular industry developing in the next five to ten years?**

I think there's a shift with globalisation. There are a lot of big companies who transport their brand standards everywhere, so even five-star hotels become very homogenous. It's good for business travellers, but not for leisure travellers who want to experience something different. More and more big brands are creating special assets that have their own personalities, and now they have all these categories like "luxury collection" that allow the asset to express itself, and that's very good because you can incorporate a more customised, boutique brand that offers more flexibility. New luxury is all about flexibility: when you want to eat, what you want to do on demand, more personalised service. Increasingly I think that's the trend.

**Yes, the trend seems to be departing from when every hotel looked the same.**

Because they were designed by the same franchise, by the same designers, like Hirsch Bedner or Wilsons. They dominated the brands, and the brands piggybacked on the designers and stamped it all over the place. But I think

people today are looking for a variety of experiences. In certain markets, the brand itself is not as important as the experience. In Bali, the well-heeled travellers don't want to go to a Westin or St. Regis or Sheraton necessarily, even though some new Asian guests still like that, but rather they're looking for a surprise, a unique property.

**And of course, you did the W Seminyak in Bali.**

There's a very big question when you do a strong brand like W. I had to attend what they call the W Immersion Programme—they call their staff "talent" and things like that—and it's a big clash with a place like Bali. In the end, it's a question of how you position this brand in Bali, which has such strong cultural references. It was the second resort W had done—the first was Maldives. In the end it was decided it would have a W vibe, a Miami vibe, so that's the brand and the brand standards are very strong.

**Was it easy working with them?**

It wasn't easy because you are working with an international chain that is trying to understand what is local. So the executives, design directors,

fly in and they do a quick visit of hotels for two or three days, and then they try to formulate what W Bali is. It wasn't easy, and in particular with the interior design...I mean, our way of working on interiors and W interiors are very different. In the end, we had to get in other people to do this W style, because it's not in our DNA. So we did the villa interiors, a few of the rooms, but when it came to really doing it, well, it's a question of belief, right? So in times like that we will work with other people, other consultants, to finish off the project. The way we dealt with the site was good. [Though] there are aspects that could be improved.

(ABOVE) W Hotel Seminyak.  
(OPPOSITE) Alila Villas Soori Bali.  
Photos courtesy SCDA Architects.





#### Would you work with them again?

I would, but it would have to be in the right location. Not all Ws are meant to be flamboyant. The early Ws in New York City are not, but in Asia the association tends to be much more jazzy, more disco. But that's just one example. Waldorf Astoria is a very classic hotel, and we're doing the Waldorf in Bali. Again there's a lot of questions about what a Waldorf is, so we spend a lot of time working with the brand as they're trying to figure out how to export their brand values and transform it of the place. They are all commercial, they all want to do it. So they might say something like it might not be a traditional Waldorf but it has the Waldorf service—it's trying to stretch the brand to include more hotels.

#### Do you have any misgivings about contemporary hospitality architecture in Asia?

Southeast Asia and Asia are going through a very high-growth phase, particularly China, and big brands are in a hurry to build. So the big brands spin sub-brands; one brand will have seven or eight sub-brands. Sometimes the sub-brands are all built within a very close area. The danger is to overbuild quickly and then have the city populated by these big brand hotels. This means there is no chance for the organic growth of local hospitality chains. Bali is one of those lucky places where you can find a good balance of local brands, as well as people doing bed and breakfast, villas and all of that. It balances out the hospitality industry. But in a city like Guangzhou, you'll see the same brands; it's like main street shopping. You'll find the St. Regis and you'll find the Westin. But it's like going to a main street anywhere; you'll find the same designer brands, so it's becoming more and more homogenous. Some of these cities are still developing. Whereas in Europe and in America, there's a long history

of heritage hotels, art deco hotels, old palaces, converted buildings. Here we have the Raffles, we have just a few—and even Raffles was sold to Fairmont.

#### What's your opinion of the profession here in Southeast Asia at the moment?

I think architects themselves tend to be a bit... how would I say?...they tend to cater to the client more, and compete among themselves a bit too much compared to architects in other areas. It's just the way the industry is structured; architects tend to service the client more and work more quickly. The expectation of the timeline for a project is always very fast in Asia. For Southeast Asian architects, we're in a very small place, and I think we could collaborate more as a group so that creatively, as a region, we can promote a Southeast Asian architecture, or South Asian architecture. We're not big enough to be like the Spanish influence or the Japanese influence, but collectively our climates are so similar that if the architecture was curated as a region and promoted as such, we'd have a big impact as a place of architectural design. There needs to be more discourse about practice and curation and theory. You need people to promote and to write about it, especially as there is so much talent in Southeast Asia, with its traditions of craft.

#### Is there a building or a typology that you would like to design that you haven't yet designed?

Yes, something that is less programmatic. A hotel is very programme-oriented. It's really like an exercise in function. Something less so would be like a memorial or a museum, something that involves the ability to translate metaphors and stories into architectural form. Something more poetic, so much is about zoning, FAR, marketing, sales—so much of

architecture is commercial. Everybody who buys a piece of land is trying to make money. But if it's something symbolic or very important, about national pride or history or remembrance, then that's a different approach. You have to research to understand the psyche of what it is. For example, the Holocaust museum that Moshe Safdie did [the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum, Jerusalem] or the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall [by Qi Kang], there's obviously a very deep history. You need to understand the people and understand what to display. It's completely different; you start from a different point of view. You have to create an experience for the public.

#### In Leon van Shaick's foreword in your recent monograph, he says he suspects you have "an idealist mind, one that pictures perfection and tries to manifest it through the specifics of projects" and mentions an "architecture of perfection." Are you a perfectionist? An idealist?

Perfection in trying to define the space, because the way I look at things is in a very classic way. Classical architecture is all about clarity of form, or the completeness of a Platonic space. Not only am I interested in creating very strong formal buildings that look very complete, I'm interested in the way the building lands on the ground and how it shapes the spaces formed by the structure. I also want the spaces on the ground to look complete, to feel complete, for example, with a courtyard or a formal garden or a formal water body. There's always this instinctive urge to create things that are balanced.

(BELOW) One Bedroom Villa, Waldorf Astoria Bali, photo courtesy SCDA Architects. (OPPOSITE) Soo Chan outside of his office, photographed by Kevin Ou.

