



MINISTRY OF DESIGN

Emboldened by risks at Ministry of Design

BY CHARLENE CHIN

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A hodgepodge of punctuation marks grouped together, such as “????%*#@!!!!!!”, often conveys strong emotions: Frustration, bewilderment, or even censored expletives. However, at architecture firm Ministry of Design, they take on a different meaning.

This set of punctuation marks, in white, hangs starkly against the dark walls of the company's boardroom. “The firm's ethos, which is best shown through the graphic here, is to question convention, disturb it and then to redefine it,” Colin Seah, founder and director of design at Ministry of Design, tells *EdgeProp Singapore*.

“The reason why we do that is because of the belief of how culture and society, and practices and trades, use spaces and what is expected from these spaces, is evolving very quickly. This belief today holds more ground than it did 20 years ago,” says Seah.

As a result, the design of modern spaces has to adapt to its new function. So “you can either evolve, as a designer to respond to these needs, or you can also play a more leadership role to shape and guide these needs, and almost create a point of view that didn't exist before,” he says. In both cases, taking risks to make bold, predictive design moves are key.

The evolution of spaces

One example of the evolution of spaces is the kitchen, which used to be relegated to a service area. “The kitchen was out of sight, and if you were very well-heeled, it might even have been an area that you've never stepped into. In olden days, this is where the servants would inhabit,” Seah says.

But today, the kitchen has taken centre stage, and attached a social function to it. “Even in the high-end projects, the display kitchen in showrooms are now upfront and centre, because people get their hands dirty with culinary experiments,” says Seah. “It's part of socialising, to host someone and have them be involved in the cooking.” In newer project layouts, units often open up to the kitchen first, before leading way into the living room.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also added an

other layer of purpose to kitchens — as a refuge for wellness. As worldwide lockdowns were imposed, people, cooped up at home and being bored, took to the kitchen to relieve their stresses. At one point, pictures of sourdough bread and whipped coffee flooded Instagram feeds. Over Singapore's “circuit breaker” period, baking utensils in physical stores were largely out of stock. Even former US president Barack Obama is not exempt from the

influence of the kitchen, who briefly talked about his “mean sourdough starter” in a social media address to the youth of the country last month.

Smaller homes need smarter layouts

With changes in lifestyles, the relevant design of spaces will need to accommodate those needs. Small homes, for instance, require smarter layouts, says Seah. His notion of questioning con-

vention plays out as a series of questions: “If I'm going to have a smaller apartment, what then might change living-wise? How can someone accept a smaller space and live comfortably in it? How might their lifestyle and the way they socialise suggest a completely new typology?” he asks.

In smaller spaces, good design, then, has to capture the transformability of spaces. Take for example the concept of a tatami room: “It's the ultimate transformable room, where the futon can be kept, and other activities can be carried out through the day in the same space,” says Seah. “What this design says is, 'I'm going to change the use of this space each time because I don't do things simultaneously, I don't sleep and eat at the same time,'” explains Seah. This is in contrast to an un inventive solution, which would be to cram all of the functions that are needed — the living room, dining area and bedroom — into a tighter, more compressed space.

Seah has attempted this concept in a residential project called Kerry Chengdu Residences in China, featuring units with average sizes of 45 sqm. Instead of having distinct spaces for sleeping, living and dining, the firm instead created the largest space possible and interspersed all the different functions through clever permutations of furniture within the same space. With this, the studio unit could transform into various configurations, accommodating an exercise session for one, or a dinner party for a group of six.

With flexible furniture, bedrooms can double up as study rooms too. One of the stars of the agile furniture is the murphy bed, which is a solution that allows the folding in of the mattress vertically to the wall, opening up possibilities of the space below it. Some of these clever mechanisms feature an in-built study desk that emerges on the other side when the bed is tucked against the wall.

Abstract versus actual

Seah is foremost an abstract thinker, and sometimes intangible concepts guide the way he designs projects. One of those is Canvas House, a co-living space nestled in a traditional shophouse along Blair Road in Singapore. Almost all of the interior for the whole four

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The preservation of buildings is death. It's not about resetting the clock to the original, but about continuing the life of a building to its new future: Seah



At the request of the client, some structures at the Movenpick Resort & Spa Quy Nhon, in Vietnam, will have grass roofs, blending in the buildings with its natural terrain

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stories are blanketed in white, save for a random, disparate selection of surfaces, some of which include: a patch of brickwork on one wall, an old face allowed to peek out from the surface of vintage china, and some circular cutouts on the stairs, revealing their original timber surface.

The idea that drove the project's design was the layering of time, describes Seah. With some interiors of the house left unpainted by white, the house reveals glimpses of its past through the untouched surfaces.

Then there are also projects that respond to the lay of the land, which sometimes offers constraints that "generates a building that you may not have created, to begin with," says Seah. Such was the beginnings for the Zig Zag House, a single-storey bungalow in Singapore with an internal gross floor area of 6,458 sq ft. The house sits on a triangular piece of land, the result of subdividing a larger, Good Class Bungalow-sized plot — categorised as exceeding 15,000 sq ft — into seven distinct sites. A Tembusu tree, gazetted as a heritage treasure, stood in the middle of the carved out plot, and could not be felled. Unswayed by its girth, Seah's team built a house around it.

Meanwhile, the Movenpick Resort & Spa Quy Nhon in Vietnam is an upcoming project that is planned along the edges of water, mountains and cliffs. "This was very much about working with the very rugged and very steep, challenging landscape, which starts off quite high, almost I think, probably, 60-70m off sea level, and then cascades down to sea level," notes Seah. "We played with concealment — some of the villas are embedded into the rock phase with sort of grass roofs or roofs that follow the natural terrain — so that you don't see them. That was one of the requests

from the client," he says.

"If you stay there for a couple of days, you will be able to explore these different architectural manifestations. Across the different terrains, your impression of nature will change as you either descend or ascend along the waterline, to the cliff's edge."

The development, still under the approval stage, will comprise 239 keys, with 17 of those built within the hill, and 28 keys carved into the cliffs.

'Preservation is death'

Ministry of Design is not alien to conservation projects. In the past, it has worked on multiple developments in Penang, Malaysia. Among these: The Prestige Hotel, with 162 keys, set within Penang's Unesco World Her-



In the New Majestic Hotel in Singapore, the ceiling of the lobby was kept unfinished, showing off the layers of the previous owners' paint

itage Neighbourhood of Georgetown; Malacca Mansion, branded as a lifestyle residence of eight keys, with five F&B entities on-site; and Majestic Theatre, a boutique hotel that was transformed from what used to be Penang's oldest cinema.

But working on conservation projects does not equal to their preservation, Seah says. "We're not interested in preservation because anyone can do it. Neither are we interested in erasure because then that's completely insensitive and not acknowledging what existed before," he says. "It's not about resetting the clock to the original, but about continuing the life of a building to its new future," he says, adding that outside of educational purposes, "preservation, to me, is basically death. It's like formaldehyde", referring to

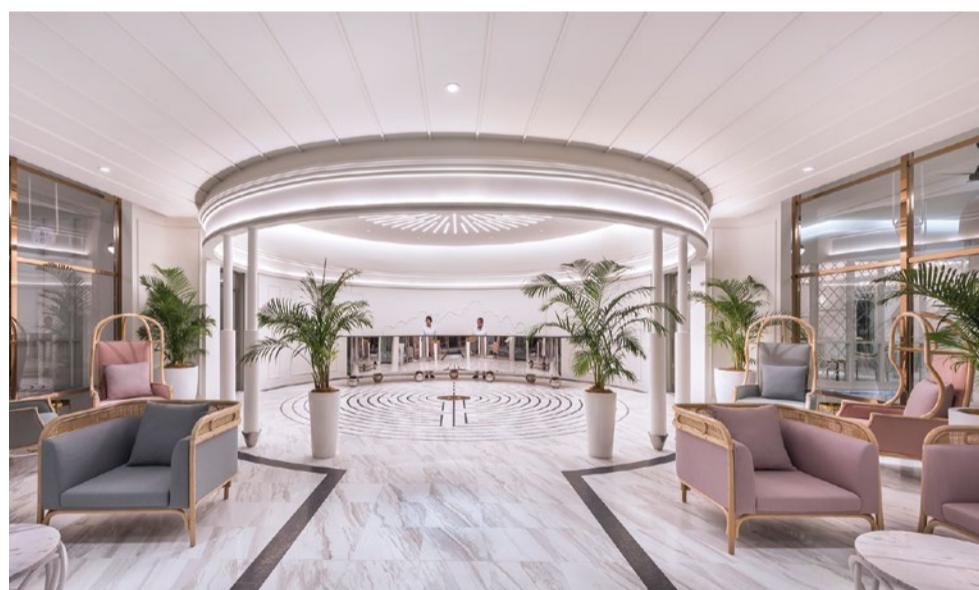
the solvent in embalming fluid which is used to preserve a corpse.

If Ministry of Design has to keep an original aspect of a building, it has to be for a purpose. In the New Majestic Hotel in Singapore, the ceiling of the lobby was kept unfinished, showing off the layers of the previous owners' paint. "To us, that was layers of time, even though it didn't really look very good, it was beautiful as an idea."

At the moment, one of the projects occupying Ministry of Design's time is the 1,000 Moons Hotel, under Hilton's Curio Collection in Anji County, China. Planned for completion in 2023, the getaway is set in a mountain site, among plains of hilly greens, where some scenes of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* were filmed, says Seah. The design for the project was guided by the fact that "time seemed to slow down in such places", he says. As design works are currently still ongoing, the firm is unable to provide more concrete design details.

But to be sure, as Ministry of Design marches forward to uncharted paths and unexplored terrains, the practice will take risks and deftly pull it off. "That's the core of what we do — we don't just evolve or revolutionise or innovate to whatever degree, just because we are bored or we have itchy fingers, but because we sincerely observe and believe that the function of spaces are changing, and design will have to improve accordingly." ■

The winners of the Design Excellence Award will be announced during the virtual ceremony of EdgeProp Excellence Awards on Oct 29, 2pm. Awards will also be given to developers who excel in innovation, marketing, sustainability, and showflat and landscape design.



The reception lobby at The Prestige Hotel, in Georgetown, Penang



Ministry of Design had to work around a Tembusu tree that stood at the centre of the land, and built a house around it



Majestic Theatre is a boutique hotel that was transformed from what used to be Penang's oldest cinema