

Purist Pursuits

YOUNG, STYLISH AND TALENTED, ARCHITECT **CHRISTOPHER CHUA** IS BRINGING HIS OWN BRAND OF DESIGN TO THE LUXURY HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY, WRITES **MELISSA GAIL SING**

WHAT STRIKES YOU WHEN you first meet Christopher Chua is his polished style. With neatly combed back hair and clad in a designer shirt from Shanghai under a custom-made suit matched with Zegna pocket square, Ferragamo belt and Bottega Veneta shoes, the associate director of architecture at Blink Design Group greets you with a firm handshake that oozes confidence and sincerity.

It's a powerful first impression, and one that is followed by an eloquent but modest introduction to a remarkable portfolio for a 32-year-old. Over the past decade, he has honed his craft working on the creme de la creme of luxury resorts in the region including Marriott Resort Xiangshui Bay in Sanya, Taj Vivanta resorts in Assam and Chennai, and Four Seasons Resort Krabi.

Lasting impressions are also what Chua likes to create with his architecture works. While the National University of Singapore alumnus doesn't have a signature style, he does have a signature approach to architecture, one where the alchemy that transpires with each spatial intervention is a result of a deep respect for and an understanding of the vernacular. One might call it a celebration of the "pure luxury" around us.

"Every master plan starts with a complete immersion into the surroundings. I draw inspiration from the locale, the landscape, the climate, the people and their culture. That's why no two resorts are treated the same," he says.

Chua is currently based in Bangkok, where he works alongside Blink's founder and creative director, Clint Nagata. Blink was acquired by Singaporean design house Space Matrix in December 2011 and now has a team of 80 staff with offices Singapore, New Delhi and Shanghai. The duo is working on more than 10 projects concurrently, but the one Chua is most excited about is perhaps Hilton Goa. Dubbed as the smallest Hilton in the world, it presents just the kind of architectural challenge that Chua relishes. "Far from the sprawling 400-room

properties I'm used to doing, Hilton Goa sits on a 10,000sqm plot of land and, unlike typical beachfront resorts, is set on a steep slope in the hills," he shares. "Small, purely architectural projects with a luxury theme like this allow me to really concentrate on the details and what creates a unique spatial experience for guests."

Extensive research into Goa's history and culture gave rise to a Santorini-style village concept,

complete with beautiful winding staircases, an open gallery that links the top and bottom of the project, and pockets of little resting spaces that invite discovery and a myriad experiences, even on a small site. Blink is also working on the hotel's interior design with prominent Indian fashion designer Tarun Tahiliani. "I believe the best design comes from being open to others' opinions," says Chua of the partnership.

Yet it has never been his ambition to create an "iconic design" that seeks attention. "As a hotel architect, my emphasis is on functional and experiential components. I find the idea of iconic designs trendy and I don't subscribe to trends. My architecture should last for decades, be sustainable, timeless, something people will remember for a long time to come."

Although he won't call himself fashionable, Chua draws similarities between his favourite brands such as Bottega Veneta, Hermès and Ferragamo and his approach to architecture. "I don't look at the trends but at the details... the collars, piping, the weaves and how the leather is meticulously stitched. The entire design to craftsmanship is so cohesive," he says.

Someone who lives and breathes design, Chua doesn't have a dream project but he does recall bringing his sketchbook drawing of a moon-shaped tower to his mum when he was younger and asking her how the lift would go up. "I love creating things that impact lives, things people can use and live in," he says. "To be recognised for my work is the most rewarding." ■

■ PHOTOGRAPHY MUNSTER ■ GROOMING SHA SHAMSI



AT A GLANCE

INSPIRING FIGURES Kerry Hill, SCDA, Denniston, SANAA (Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa / S A N A A).
LEISURE PURSUITS Travelling, spending time with his mum in Singapore, and collecting boarding passes (he has a foot-high stack of them which he eventually hopes to turn into a piece of art).