



Some of Chua's current architectural projects include (clockwise from top) a hot-spring resort in Benxi, Liaoning; the Hilton Resort, Goa and the Marriott Xiang Shui Bay in Sanya

Here to stay

Architect Christopher Chua, associate director of BLINK, is at the forefront of Asian hospitality design



Chua says architecture is not about creating iconic structures... It's about creating spaces that are experiential

| BY AARON DE SILVA |

“I’m a bit tired,” says Christopher Chua, almost apologetically, on meeting *Options* at the BLINK Design Group corporate office in Tanglin one afternoon. One wouldn’t have guessed it, though. His energy is, in fact, palpable and infectious in spite of a punishing schedule.

Chua’s self-professed “lethargy” is justified, given the tremendous scope of hospitality design work he is involved in. His current architectural projects include the Sarasvati, a resort for Starwood’s The Luxury Collection in Bali; a Four Seasons in Krabi; the Hilton Resort, Goa; and the Marriott Xiang Shui Bay in Sanya. And that’s just for starters.

As associate director of BLINK, the 32-year-old commandeers a 30-strong team from the company’s head design office in Bangkok. Although just seven years old, the firm has earned a solid reputation among hospitality clients and is riding the Asian hospitality development boom. A February 2012 report by research firm STR Global highlights that there are 1,809 hotels and 422,000 hotel rooms in the pipeline for the

next five years, the bulk of which is in China.

The burgeoning Asia-Pacific travel market, the world’s fastest growing travel region, is worth US\$357 billion (\$449 billion) this year, says research firm PhoCusWright. The study also states that China’s slowing, but growing economy, surging consumer travel demand and double-digit gains across all travel segments will push the country ahead of Japan to become the region’s largest travel market this year. China’s gross travel bookings are expected to hit US\$105.5 billion this year.

“We’re working on about 15 to 20 projects at the moment, both in architecture and interiors. We sign on roughly US\$10 million to US\$12 million of work a year,” says Chua. “I head a team of 30, and we’re going to increase that to 50 in the coming year. It’s a rapid expansion because we can’t keep up with the amount of work. We’re opening an office here. We already have five staff. And we have a representative office in Shanghai, but we’re going to establish a full-fledged one.”

Operating on instinct

Founded in 2006 by Clint Nagata,

a former architect at specialist resort architecture firm WATG, the company designs hotels, resorts, restaurants, clubs, spas and residences. Nagata named his enterprise BLINK after the 2005 Malcolm Gladwell book of the same name. In it, the author posits that spontaneous decisions are often as good as, or even better than, carefully planned and considered ones. This premise forms the basis of BLINK’s design philosophy.

Chua, who joined Nagata in 2010 after a nine-year stint at multi-disciplinary practice eco.id, explains the company’s credo: “Your first instinct is always right. That’s how Clint and I look at it. He has an instinctive point of view, as do I. Although his views are different from mine, we don’t throw out ideas. Instead, we merge them to create something better.”

Chua’s design approach is simple. “It’s all about the hotel operations because that’s the crux of the hotel. If those things don’t work, then the hotel is not going to work. So, I set out to fulfil those things, and then I play with the design.” For Chua, form clearly follows function, to borrow a maxim from the mod-

ernist school of thought.

As a frequent traveller himself, has any particular hotel design inspired him? “Actually, I travel so much that I tend to block things out,” is his reply. “As a designer, I don’t like to be influenced by trends or by hotels that I stay in. Switching my design mind off allows me to design better. Watching how people use a space influences how I design.”

The architect cites eco.id principal Sim Boon Yang as his mentor. “I learnt from him that architecture is not about creating iconic structures like those designed by Ole Scheeren, Norman Foster or Zaha Hadid. It’s about creating spaces that are experiential.”

Realising his love for architecture at a young age, Chua interned at eco.id during his first year of studies at the National

University of Singapore. By the time he finished his Bachelor’s degree, he was already working on projects that ranged from residential and commercial to hospitality. It was then that he discovered his enthusiasm for the latter, and it’s a fascination that has not eroded with time. “I enjoy reading magazines and books, but the ones I tend to pick usually have to do with hospitality and design.”

What’s trending

Just three years with BLINK and Chua has already borne witness to strong trends, particularly in China, a testament to the speed at which the industry is evolving. Among the trends is the propensity for non-specialist hospitality developers to dabble in the trade. “A lot of developers in China view hospitality as their trophy project. It’s

not the crux of their business. They could be property developers or mining magnates, but they have all this money,” he says candidly.

Another trend is the rise of hot-spring resorts. In decades past, city dwellers went to hot springs in urban areas to relax after work. These days, affluent city folk venture into the countryside to seek purpose-built venues for total relaxation. “Developers are now realising the tremendous market potential, especially in the northern and central parts of China,” says Chua. But unlike the Japanese or Taiwanese hot-spring resort model, the Chinese version has its own quirks.

Chua explains: “It’s kind of like a Turkish bath concept mixed with Thai massage. You get yourself washed and groomed, and then you sit in a hot tub [with] hundreds of people around you.

It’s very communal, almost Roman or Greek in style. Then you change into your bathrobe and go for your massage. After that, there are restaurants and country club-style facilities. It’s like a full-service club with the hot-spring component contributing about 70% of the business.”

BLINK is currently building the Qianshen Hotspring Resort in Hefei, where an adjacent hotel complements the spa clubhouse. “This is the opposite of the typical five-star resort where you have a spa to complement the guestrooms,” says Chua.

Outside of the Middle Kingdom, he points to wider trends influencing hospitality design. “I think spaces are more intimate now. Public areas like the lobby, all-day dining restaurants and long bars used to be very large, with double or triple volumes. The trend now is to have smaller,

more intimate zones where people can feel more private.

“In our architecture and master planning, we try and separate these spaces, or create transitional spaces so that people get the sense that they’re moving from one space to another, and within those spaces you have your own private corner. People are looking to have their own personal space in a very big, impersonal city or resort.”

What does Chua want his guests to take away from staying at one of his resorts? “The memory of a setting. It could be a well-designed bar that encourages guests to interact and maybe the guest ends up having a good conversation and remembers the experience.” **E**

Aaron De Silva enjoys experiencing the world, and relishes writing about it afterwards

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