

From Lego bricks to designing luxury flats in New York



By Golda Arthur
Business reporter, New York

The Singapore-based 53-year-old uses an app on his mobile phone to keep a close eye on his various projects around the world, such as a new luxury apartment building in New York.

"When I'm in Singapore there's a 12-hour time difference [with New York], so before I go to bed at night, I check on it through this app," says Mr Chan. The app connects to video cameras, which give him a real time view of construction work.

He adds: "I can even zoom in and look closely at the welding."

The founder and design director of Singapore-based SCDA Architects, Mr Chan has over the past 20 years built up a business that today employs more than 100 architects and designers.

For an architect well known for his attention to detail, smart phones are a godsend for Soo Chan.

Its past projects around the world range from luxury hotel resorts in Bali and the Caribbean, the National Design Centre in Singapore, a shopping centre in Beijing, a government building in New Delhi, to private houses from France to Malaysia.

It is quite an achievement for an architect who built the company without the need for outside investors, after starting out with just five members of staff.

'Neo-tropical architecture'

Born in Penang, Malaysia, before being raised in Singapore, Mr Chan says his first work as an architect was building things with Lego bricks as a small child.

He also remembers from his young childhood that he was fascinated by watching his family's new home being constructed.

Yet despite this early interest in architecture, his family had other hopes for him. "In Asia there are three professions - lawyer, doctor and accountant," says Mr Chan.

But determined to study architecture after leaving school, he travelled to the US where he did a degree in the subject at the prestigious Yale University in Connecticut.

Mr Chan subsequently spent two years in New York, working for architectural firm Kohn Pederson Fox. The lure of home then saw him return to Singapore, where in 1995 he started SCDA Architects.

Mixing both Asian and Western design, Mr Chan has developed his own style, which he calls "neo-tropical architecture", and which often aims to blur the lines between the inside and outside of a building, often utilising - in very simple terms - lots of courtyards.

Mr Chan says that the practice has grown slowly but steadily over the years.

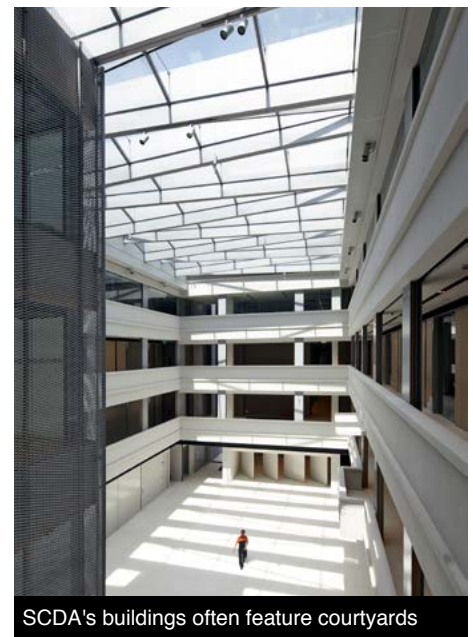
While most staff are based at the headquarters in Singapore, some are located in Shanghai and New York.

And despite his reputation for attention to detail, and regular visits to the other two offices, Mr Chan says he knows the importance of delegating.

"I focus on the bigger picture, and then come in and look selectively at the small, important details. I then find that the middle bit takes care of itself," he says.

He adds that he relies on key employees to handle the day-to-day functioning of the company, confident that everyone at the firm speaks "the same design language".

"We share the same thinking about how you design and use space."

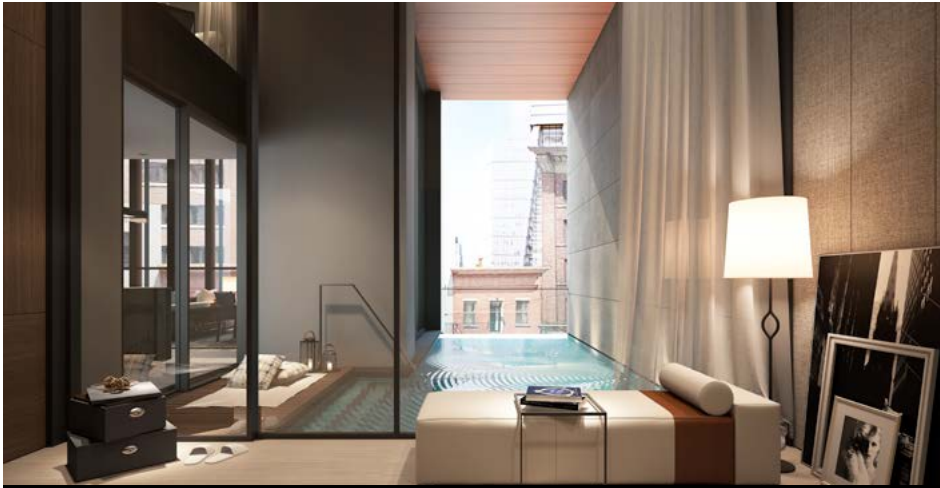


SCDA's buildings often feature courtyards



In Asia there are three professions - lawyer, doctor and accountant

Soo Chan



His latest project is a luxury apartment building in New York with private swimming pools



SCDA now employs more than 100 architects and designers

'Big moment'

Married, and with no less than six sons, Mr Chan's latest big development at work is the Soori High Line apartment building, which is currently being built in Manhattan, New York.

He says it is a "big moment" for him, as it will be the first building he has built in the city where he began his working life as an architect.

The luxury scheme has raised eyebrows in the Big Apple because 16 of the building's 31 apartments will have their own private, indoor swimming pools, something of a rarity in the city.

"The pools are definitely the highlight," says Mr Chan, who has already built apartment blocks in East Asia with private pools.

"It certainly evokes a reaction, you either like it, or you think it's a bit crazy. People think - it's a pool. Do I swim every day? How do I maintain it?"

"But true luxury means never having to worry about all these practicalities.

"The risk is not in the making of it, but in culturally getting everyone - even my own salespeople and consultants - on board."

The building is due to be finished in 2016, and Mr Chan is confident it will be a sell-out. The prices of the apartments range from \$3m (£2m) to \$22m.