



Connecting the dots

THE series of dots that comprise star architect Soo K Chan's career is set to coalesce into a comprehensive whole that may well culminate in a real estate fund.

Mr Chan, founding principal of SCDA Architects, has a full service firm offering not just architectural services but also interior design, product design and landscaping among others – skills that he refers to as “dots”.

“It has taken a while to establish the dots,” he says. “Everytime we go to a new locale, we test our ideas to see if they work. We acquire skills, knowledge and cross-cultural understanding. I look at all the pieces; I have all the dots including the lifestyle aspects such as being a hotel owner and understanding service.”

“Now I want to connect all of them. The development aspect is the connector. The next step up is to have a real estate fund... a collective or a group of discretionary funds where with the experience acquired you take the risk out of the product.”

“With the right support, we can identify opportunities globally where we can have control and deliver a good product.”

In Mr Chan's most recent foray into New York's luxury condominium space, he is the developer as well as architect for two projects – Soori High Line and 515 Highline. He also developed and designed the luxury holiday resort Alila Villas Soori in Bali. These projects have helped him to build a development track record.

The next step is service and asset management expertise – aspects, he says, that are currently “missing but in the works”. “You can't have true luxury in the hardware of building without the soft skills of service, and to complete the story you need to provide services beyond security and concierge... If you can integrate an asset management service that goes beyond the ordinary, that would complete the product. And it would be replicable. We can do it in London, Vietnam, Paris.”

Mr Chan, who has distinguished himself in the ultra wealthy space through

luxury condominiums such as The Marq and more recently Leedon Residence, says designing for a high net worth client in Asia is not so different from one in the US or anywhere else. “The luxury space is what we happen to be doing consistently and so we've carved a niche. But as I see it, it's not that different. People don't behave so differently; we're in such a globalised world. People who enjoy luxury have multiple homes, and they travel.”

Space is one key element of luxe design, he says. “By the luxury of space, I mean qualitatively not just quantitatively. It starts from imagining the volume and light and imagining being in that space... It doesn't need to be big; it's just proportionally right.”

“Then you add other things, the niceties such as facilities, a spa. The basic luxury is how you design the conveniences, the layout, quality and proportion of space.”

He credits his distinctive perspective on light and space, and his penchant for water features to his childhood. He grew up in Penang at Khoo Kongsi, a compound with an ornate temple and a granite square, which belonged to the Khoo clan on his maternal side. The site, which is still owned by the clan, is now a Unesco World Heritage Site and a popular tourist destination. “If you go there, it's about the courtyard, and space and light. The house I grew up in was a shophouse. It didn't have air-conditioning but there are real airwells. When it rains, water flows through a chain into a big urn, and it overflows into a sunken courtyard.”

“When it rains you're in touch with the weather. You hear the sounds, and remember the light coming in. It influences you, as opposed to being in an apartment. You play in the courtyard with stone steps.” His current office at Teck Lim Rd also has a courtyard with a water feature.

He appreciates his years of architectural studies. He obtained his undergraduate degree at the Washington University School of Architecture, where the first two years were spent in liberal arts studies. He



PHOTOS: SCDAARCHITECTS

obtained a Master of Architecture degree from Yale University in 1987. “You can't underestimate the value of a liberal arts education. You study art history and all kinds of things. When you do your professional degree you can draw inspiration from liberal arts.”

Through the years in the effort to develop talent, he has made it a point to teach and has published a number of books. He is professor in practice at the National University of Singapore. He has also taught overseas through the years, as a visiting professor in design at New York's Syracuse University, for instance, and also in the University of Paris, among other institutions. He also funds a scholarship programme at Washington University School of Architecture. Every year two students are selected; the programme includes a two month summer internship in SCDA in Singapore. ■

LAP OF LUXURY
Among projects designed by Mr Chan are Leedon Residence (above), a luxury condominium in Singapore, and Alila Villas Soori in Bali

