

MAKEOVER MAESTRO

BY BRIAN YIM AND LIM JIAYI

Hotelier extraordinaire Loh Lik Peng enjoys opening designer hotels in unusual locations, putting a twist on how he revitalizes historical buildings.

It may look like a dilapidated building, an abandoned school, a ramshackle townhouse or even a seemingly non-descript industrial structure, but put it in the hands of Loh Lik Peng a lawyer turned hotelier and restaurateur, and a transformation occurs.

He relishes seeking out creative talents to design quirky, unconventional boutique hotels that are made from restored historical buildings. Lik Peng has perfected this talent of making over heritage buildings into an art form, and has to date acquired 6 hotels and 6 restaurants to his fast growing portfolio, each with its unique identity.

To him, there's no common brand or type of architecture. For each hotel, Lik Peng works with a different designer to get a new flavour each time so as to "deliberately break the mould of the last one so we don't replicate ourselves," he says.

Lik Peng has a checklist of sorts when he goes searching for the right project to whet his creative fancy, be it in Singapore, Sydney, Shanghai or London. The buildings must be in unusual locations, have an interesting structure with a lot of character and history so that the whole package will be compelling.

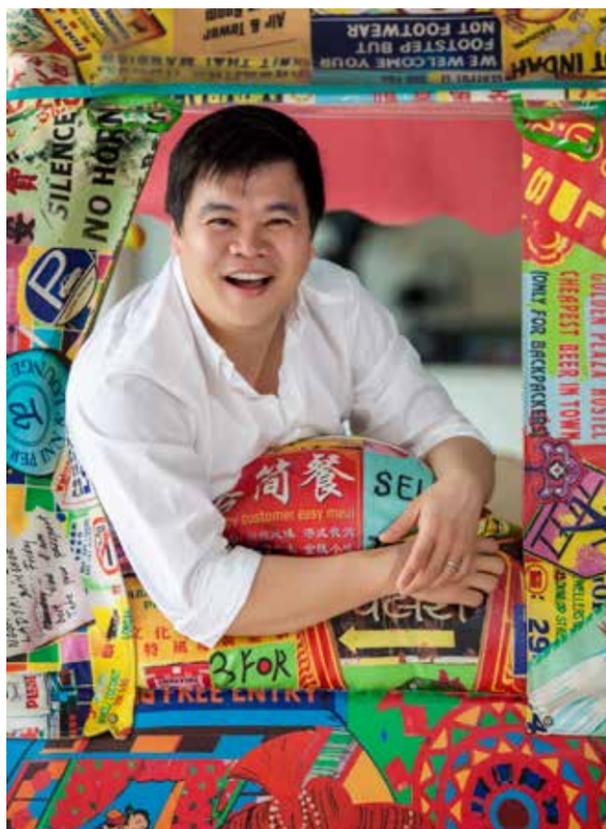
"What's common is that we like to work with local artists to create fascinating things within the spaces simply because I think it gives you a nice perspective about local culture, local scene, and local creative industries. It brings a different creative edge to the properties. Each time you work with a different artist, you're bringing a different type of challenge to the project," he enthused.

Restoration talents aside, Lik Peng also has a "Midas" touch and impeccable timing. Born into a family of doctors, he picked up his first hotel during the depths of the recession for a mere S\$3.4m in 2003. He spent another \$1m renovating Hotel 1929 which sat in a former red light district along Keong Siak Street. The newly graduated lawyer then was handling piles of bankruptcy cases and felt he had to do something else less depressing.

A couple of years later in 2008, Lik Peng opened the 30-room New Majestic Hotel at Bukit Pasoh Road, bought for a mere S\$7m and restored for another \$3m, quite a steal at today's astronomical prices for hotels in Singapore.

Hotel 1929 and New Majestic Hotel proved to be a hit and went on to become a popular destination for travellers and locals alike.

The gutsy entrepreneur went on to open three new hotels in 2010 (another in Singapore, called Wanderlust, and one each in Shanghai and London). Just into 2013, news reported of his Group's (The Unlisted Collection) purchase of the 15-room St. John Hotel in London. The new hotel will join a portfolio of six boutique hotels and six restaurants located in Singapore, Shanghai and London. These include the Town Hall Hotel, London opened in Spring 2010 with the Michelin starred restaurant Viajante by Portuguese chef Nuno Mendes. Totalling 12 properties to date since its first property in year 2000, the collection of unique, high quality boutique hotels and restaurants



include, 196 Bishopsgate, London (2000), Restaurant Ember, Singapore (2002), Hotel 1929, Singapore (2003), Majestic Restaurant, Singapore (2006), New Majestic Hotel, Singapore (2006), Jing, Singapore (2008), London Town Hall & Apartments, London (2010), Viajante, London (2010), The Waterhouse at South Bund, Shanghai (2010), Table No 1 by Jason Atherton, Shanghai (2010), Cocotte, Singapore (2010) and Wanderlust, Singapore (2010). He is busy currently working on a 60-room hotel in Sydney.

Of all the projects that he has done, Lik Peng considers The Town Hall Hotel, a 1910 Edwardian building in London the "most challenging" because of the size and the complexity to restore it to its former grandeur. "It was obviously an important building and I would say that up to date, that was the biggest challenge. I was at London at that time, and my manager said to me "Hey there's an interesting property for sale in Bishopsgate." I said no initially but I was in London anyway so I went for a look and was blown away. I could see such great potential in the building. It was perfect as a hotel! That's how it started. I just couldn't turn it down. You only get that sort of chance once in a lifetime. So I said to myself, I got to do it."



Whimsical Room



Mono Room

If an interesting offer came along, would he consider selling some or all of his assets, which is still family owned? "Presently, I don't think I'll be interested in selling anything. I am primarily, a hotelier first rather than a restaurateur. Restaurants have a much quicker turnaround though. A lot of my projects start out as a hotel first. Then we add a restaurant to it. Very seldom do I start off with a restaurant that grows into a hotel. I would like to open a hotel in New York one day. Just because I think it'd be fun."

Meanwhile, Lik Peng casts his eyes on new acquisitions. "I love restoration projects. The operating part is not as much fun to me. I prefer to start projects rather than run them."



Town Hall Hotel London



Facade of Wanderlust at Night