

Architect Soo K. Chan's inspiration is his childhood home in a Unesco World Heritage Site

Row houses and courtyards in an historic family compound in Malaysia inform Mr. Chan's architecture.



ARCHITECT SOO K. CHAN at his family's ancestral Khoo Kongsi clan house in George Town, on the Malaysian island of Penang. Photo: Sanjit Das for The Wall Street Journal.

PLENTY OF PEOPLE SPEND THEIR formative years in beautiful settings. But few can make the claim that architect Soo K. Chan can—to have been raised in a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Mr. Chan, 53, was born and raised in Penang, a Malaysian island that was an important stop for spice merchants in 18th and 19th centuries. Mr. Chan's maternal side, the Khoo clan, settled on the island and in the mid-1800s built Khoo Kongsi, a compound with gilded temple and central granite square from which the clan's row houses radiated.

The quality of life didn't change much during the century that followed, he says. "I remember people gathering around and sitting in the courtyard to watch the performances on the stage across from the temple," says Mr. Chan, the head of Singapore-based design firm SCDA.

Today Khoo Kongsi is still owned by the Khoo clan and is part of the Unesco World Heritage Site of the city of George Town. It is one of the most-visited tourist sites in Malaysia, though no one lives in the clan houses anymore.

The compound's medieval plan and use of negative space, like open-air courtyards, help bring balance, Mr. Chan says. And it informs his buildings today. His work on projects such as the Alila Villas Soori in Bali and the National Design Centre in Singapore have earned him awards, including the President's sign Award in Singapore and two Royal Institute of British Architects Worldwide awards.

“Going through the long row houses is a processional experience,” says the Yale-trained architect. The buildings are narrow and long, with up to four courtyards where rain could come in. “I can picture distinctly being in those spaces and the entire courtyard filling up with water,” he says.

Until Khoo Kongsi was vacated, newlyweds would take over the front room of the long houses, then move to the back rooms “after they procreated,” Mr. Chan says with a laugh. He and his cousins spent days roaming and playing at neighbors’ houses, which all belonged to aunts and uncles. “We would slide down the stone banister on the temple and just run wild,” Mr. Chan says. “Everyone was related somehow and looked after us, so we were safe.”

Mr. Chan goes back to Penang to visit his mother annually, and makes it a point, when possible, to bring his six sons with him to experience his ancestral home. He is convinced that the way life went on in Khoo Kongsi defined his vision of modern living, which he calls neo-tropical architecture.

“Even when I started my career, in 1993, my first house was long and narrow, with moments of light coming in,” he says. “When you have a linear procession, you can choreograph the experience so that entering a home is sequential: first a dark room, then a light room, then a low ceiling, then a high ceiling.”

He always incorporates skylights and courtyards into his designs so he can play with natural light. “I like to offer little surprises,” he says. His design for his hotel in Bali encourages guests to perambulate a courtyard upon arrival, rather than enter a typical interior check-in area.

“You see a water court at first, and then walk around and go up,” he explains. “You force people to experience the void and the solid, which is a recurring theme in my work.”

Mr. Chan believes negative spaces delight and replenish the resident. Even in his three current New York City projects, he alternates ceiling height, light, water (with the help of indoor-outdoor pools) and courtyards.

“I love negative space,” Mr. Chan says. “And I’m sure I learned that from growing up running around in the Khoo Kongsi courtyard.”



ARCHITECT SOO K. CHAN at his family’s ancestral Khoo Kongsi clan house in George Town, on the Malaysian island of Penang. Photo: Sanjit Das for The Wall Street Journal.



THE WAY LIGHT AND SHADOW fill the negative spaces in Khoo Kongsi is a source of inspiration today for Mr. Chan’s ‘neo-tropical’ designs. Photo: Sanjit Das for the Wall Street Journal