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Historical Beginnings

In the UNESCO World Heritage Site of George Town, Penang, a cluster of shophouses hides in its centre a historical treasure. Located in the oldest part of town, Cannon Square is home to the Khoo Kongsi clan house, belonging to the association of the Leong San Tong ('Dragon Mountain Hall') clan. While not a large structure, its extraordinary architecture, completed in 1906, includes intricate wood and stone carvings on almost every element, all awash in brilliant colour. Together with elaborate murals and couplets, it's a fine showcase of the eminence and wealth the clan built in 17th-century Penang.

For Singapore-based architect Soo K Chan, the Kongsi was once home; being part of the Khoo family, he grew up in the compound. Aside from running world-renowned firm SCDA Architects, Chan is also a developer and hotelier of upscale properties such as Soori Bali and Soori High Line in New York. Future projects include Soori Wyoming, Soori Niseko and, now, Soori Khoo Kongsi.

'I've always thought this would be a beautiful place for a hotel,' says Chan. For the past few years, the shophouses surrounding the Kongsi were a nondescript hotel that shuttered during the pandemic. Now Chan wants to introduce something fresh with the Soori brand. 'The biggest draw of the hotel would be the courtyard,' he says. Currently, this is an ad-hoc car park for clan board members and tour buses; however, Chan is in talks with the board to arrange exclusive access in the mornings and evenings before and after it's open to the public, meaning guests would have the rare opportunity to have breakfast or drinks alongside the majestic Kongsi, without the crowds.



In the oldest part of George Town, Singapore-based architect Soo K Chan of SCDA Architects is renovating his family's 1906 clan house to become a boutique accommodation and lifestyle offering, and part of his global Soori collection of upscale properties

'This is a lease opportunity for thirty years, but I really think there's potential for urban rejuvenation,' says Chan. The site has degenerated since the pandemic, but the Kongsi's storied past, the area's pedestrian scale, the charming alleyways and the old architecture peppered with inventive shops and eateries mean there is hope for the area. Chan's goal is to acquire a third row of shophouses to enable a more holistic experience incorporating a cafe, library and gift shop to replace the existing run-of-the-mill souvenir shops.

The boutique accommodation will offer 14 generous one- to three-bedroom suites (or more, if Chan manages to acquire the third shophouse row), a scheme made possible by subsuming the public staircases and air wells into the individual suites, which restores the shophouses back to their original states from the current cloistered layout.

Text

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Images

Courtesy of
SCDA Architects



It's a sentimental project for Chan, and his memories of growing up in a shophouse — small shafts of light entering the shutters, a lotus pond at the air well — come into the interior design. 'It's what influenced me at the beginning, starting my journey as an architect. It's coming full circle,' he muses. Seen in the larger context of the Soori brand, the George Town project is about telling a story of place, building connections and sustaining not just resources but also culture. The project should be finalised and ready to start by the end of 2022, and there's no doubt it has all the makings of a deeply meaningful endeavour for both Chan and the city.