

## Discover Soori Penang: how SCDA's Soo Chan reimagined his childhood home as a luxury heritage hotel

SCDA founder Soo Chan transforms the George Town shophouses where he spent his childhood into an intimate 15-suite luxury heritage hotel



COVER Soo K. Chan, founder of SCDA Architects

The shophouses of Penang's George Town Khoo Kongsi compound hold more than architectural interest for Soo K Chan—they're where he spent his first four years, running between courtyards in a close-knit community of related families. Now, three decades after founding SCDA Architects, Chan is transforming 15 of these heritage buildings into Soori Penang, his most personal hospitality project yet. This year marks the firm's 30th anniversary, and today, SCDA operates primarily as an international practice. Chan's hospitality projects span the Maldives and include work with luxury brands Janu and Aman, but it's Soori Bali—which he both designed and operates—that established his reputation in luxury resort design.

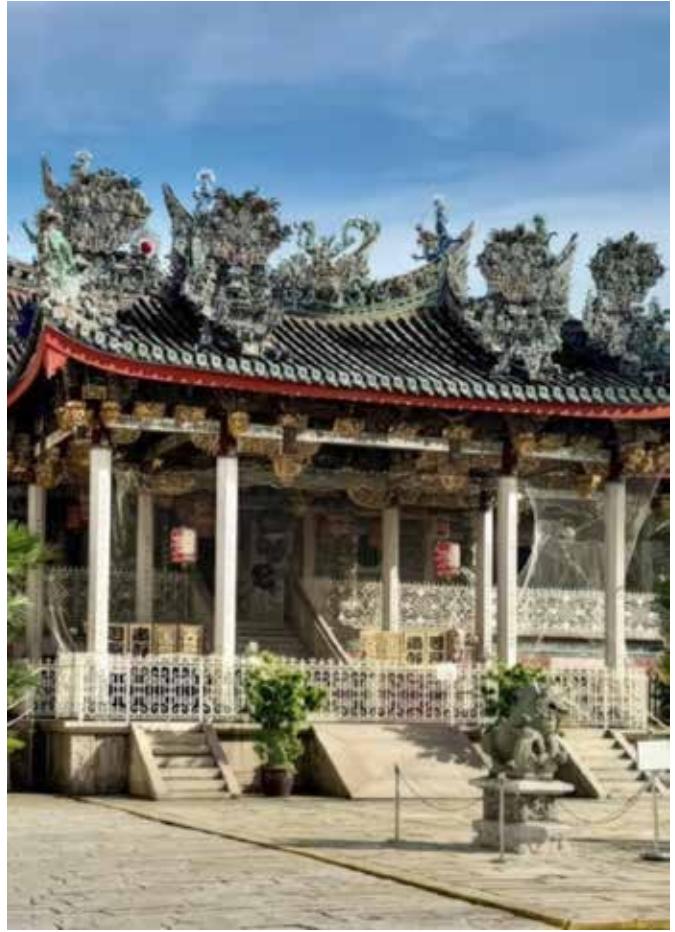
His latest project takes him back to where it all began. Soori Penang occupies 15 heritage shophouses in George Town's Khoo Kongsi compound, the same place where Chan lived as a young child. The boutique hotel joins Leading Hotels of the World as only the second Malaysian property in the consortium, after The Datai Langkawi.

The project opens in January 2026, targeting what Chan calls “temporary locals” - travellers seeking authentic cultural immersion beyond typical tourist experiences. For Chan, it's both a professional challenge in adaptive reuse and a personal journey home.

*Tatler Homes* sits down with the renowned architect to discuss this deeply personal project, his approach to adaptive reuse, and how childhood memories can shape architectural vision.



ABOVE Soo K Chan, founder of SCDA Architects



ABOVE The ornate Khoo Kongsi temple sits at the heart of the compound, where Chan spent his formative years



ABOVE Chan returned the restored shophouses to individual units after they had been subdivided into smaller hotel rooms

**The shophouses at Khoo Kongsi hold deep personal significance for you. How did your memories of living there as a child influence your design approach?**

My design philosophy at SCDA is very humanistic—there's a movement called phenomenology, which is really about designing based on the senses. My memory of the shophouse space comes from living in one

of these shophouses in a multigenerational setting, where two rows of shophouses across from each other housed somewhat related people.

My feeling is that of community—you could run out into a courtyard and everyone would be there. It was a safe space where everybody knew each other. In terms of the feeling of the space, which I translated to the design of the common areas, I adapted it to my memory of what the space was like for me as a young child.



**ABOVE** Oversized rice grinders repurposed as water fountains pay homage to Chan's memories of the communal kitchen activities

First of all, darkness and light. When you live in a shophouse, it's quite dark. I remember light coming through the airwell—punctuations of light just coming in. So I remember darkness and lightness, and that translates quite directly to the design of the common area, which is actually black. The walls are made of black brushwood, punctuated by dramatic sunlight.

But more importantly, what happens when it rains—that's vivid. When it pours, the gutters can't handle the rain, and the airwell, made of granite, fills with water because the drainage system can't keep up. To me, that was a moment where I would actually go in and play in the water. It's living inside and yet outside—that indoor-outdoor quality is reflected in many of my designs as well.

#### **What specific elements from Peranakan culture did you incorporate, and how did you make them contemporary?**

I took some of the icons, like the rice grinder, and reintroduced them into the design, but I tried to make them more contemporary. The rice grinders aren't functioning, but I've made them a lot bigger and repurposed them as landscape features—most of the time they're water fountains.

I also took imagery from the original clan house for the stone lions and had them recreated in southern China, where it's very common to do temple dogs and similar pieces. It wasn't based on any particular detail but rather the feeling of what the quality of the space is like.



**ABOVE** The common areas feature a play of darkness and light, reminiscent of Chan's childhood memories of living in a shophouse



**ABOVE** Contemporary furnishings and traditional screens create intimate spaces within the suites

**Taking on the restoration of part of the Khoo Kongsi compound must have felt like an enormous responsibility. How did you approach this?**

The major temple restoration was undertaken by Lawrence Loh Architects—they did a fantastic job, being very authentic in their approach. My scope was the 15 shophouses, which I took over from what used to be The Clans Hotel, which had gone under.

When they built The Clans Hotel, they created it with approximately 40 rooms, each with a corridor

connecting rooms facing the front and back on the second level. What I did was restore them back to individual houses. While the previous owner combined the 15 units to create a hotel with many rooms, I restored them to 15 houses, with 13 of those houses primarily used for suites.

When you come in, you have the airwell, and I returned it very much back to the memory of what the space was, because for me to create a room with just a toilet in the front and a door, I couldn't capture the memories and feelings I have. I tried to capture the essence of what I remember without translating it literally. There are no Peranakan screens or too many Peranakan objects, but you can still feel it's part of that era, just in a more distilled way.



**ABOVE** The dark timber and dramatic lighting in communal spaces directly translate Chan's childhood memories of shophouse living with the contrast between darkness and punctuations of light coming through airwells

### **How did your success with Soori Bali influence your approach to Penang, and what did you want to do differently?**

Soori Bali was my second or third resort, and I wanted to design something that's a direct expression of what I think a resort should be. Until today, I'm still running it, and I find that being an architect dealing with hospitality operations is extremely important because it provides a full understanding of not just creating the hardware but also the software—service encompasses everything from spa to food and every aspect in between.

On the Bali side, we have 85 keys and 45 villas. On the Penang side, it's very boutique, and that's why I think for Penang we can afford to be more focused—everything needs to be more curated and luxurious because when you only have a few, you can do a lot. Much of Penang's success will centre on how we design the experiences or journeys.

### **You've mentioned wanting to avoid the typical heritage hotel aesthetic. What was your vision for something different?**

If you look at hotels in Penang—Seven Terraces and many others I've stayed at—they tend to be either super contemporary or loaded with antiques, opium beds, and Peranakan objects. I'm trying to do

something that is a true expression of what I feel, based on my own design language that my company has developed over the last 30 years.

At Soori Penang, you'll feel that essence, but you won't be directly referred to in terms of objects and furniture—it won't be literal. I aim to create a distilled luxury experience, meaning the robes must be exceptionally fine, the toiletries will be of the highest quality, and everything should meet the highest standards. However, you want to remove everything extraneous to the experience.



ABOVE A guest suite at Soori Penang with warm wood tones and clean lines that evoke the essence of Peranakan heritage without literal translation



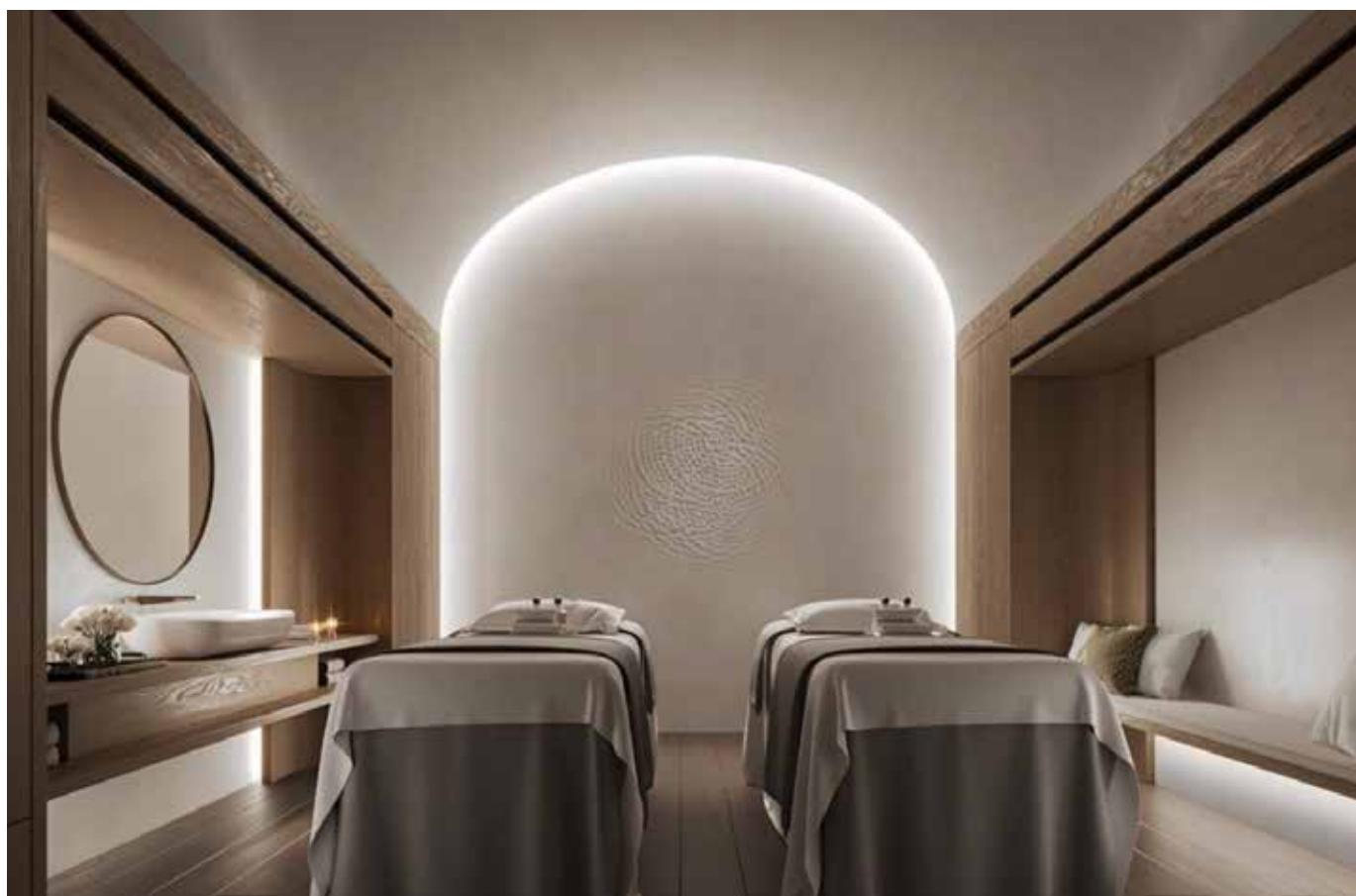
ABOVE Each suite features luxurious amenities that Chan describes as “distilled luxury” - removing extraneous elements while ensuring every detail, from robes to toiletries, meets the highest standards

**The communal living aspect of shophouse life seems to have left a strong impression. Can you tell us more about that experience?**

Totally communal - you could run in and out. I recall that, within the house, newly married couples would typically be given the front room. If you were newly married, they'd give you the suite in the front because it was important for newlyweds to start a family. Then, when the next one got married, they'd move around. It was pretty flexible living.

The facilities were very communal. Even at dinner, you had to respect the hierarchy of who ate first. In the kitchen, there were aunties, grandmothers, helpers—the Peranakan kitchen is where everything happens. You'd hear them chatter with neighbours in the kitchen. I remember the rice grinder, the giling - different tools from a different generation.

Many of these memories resurfaced only when I began working on this project. I excavated the memories, looked at photos, because I'd largely forgotten about it after going overseas to study.



**ABOVE** The spa treatment rooms continue Chan's design language of clean lines and natural materials, offering guests a serene retreat within the historic compound.

**How do you position Soori Penang in the competitive Penang hotel market?**

I visited as many boutique hotels as possible, from E&O, where I always stay, to Shangri-La Golden Sands, as well as various backpacker and heritage hotels. I know this one is not going to be commercially easy, so I positioned it at the very high end of the spectrum and want to really look at hospitality in a different light—introducing Penang as a cultural food destination.

We're part of Leading Hotels of the World. I think in Malaysia, there's only one other Leading Hotel, which is The Datai in Langkawi.



**ABOVE** The landscaped courtyard, formerly a car park, offers multiple dining settings where guests can enjoy breakfast in the Khoo Kongsi courtyard or evening performances after the compound closes to the public

**You've described creating experiences for 'temporary locals.' How does the architecture facilitate this deeper cultural engagement?**

When I designed the space, I considered where guests could dine within the hotel. One thing I managed to secure was a car park lot behind our hotel, which is connected to the hotel, and we transformed it into a landscaped courtyard with large trees planted.

The experience could start in the morning—we've worked out with Khoo Kongsi that we can use the courtyard for breakfast before people pay visits. We want to set up a nice breakfast in the courtyard to experience the space and formality of the area, while taking in the view of the temple, followed by a tour.



**ABOVE** Intricate traditional carvings throughout the Khoo Kongsi compound reflect the rich cultural heritage that Chan draws upon in his contemporary hotel design, translating historical motifs into a modern luxury aesthetic

In the afternoon toward evening, they could have tea with small kuih and cookies in the courtyard or within the villa. In the evenings, when the gate closes at 5 PM, the compound becomes private, allowing us to set up tables and host cultural dance performances.

Throughout their stay, they're engaging with food in different settings—the food is just the excuse to be in the courtyard. Where you eat changes the experience entirely.

**You've described this as more than a hotel—a living tribute to place and memory. What does success look like for such a personal project?**

Success to me is when a guest comes and experiences the full spectrum of what it means to be a temporary local—as if we're compressing our experience as Penang people and sharing it in a very personal way, taking you to see, to eat, explaining the culture.

Success would be establishing Soori Penang, small as it may be, to attract the right kind of guests, because I think my hometown has many untold stories. But I need to find the right people who are really interested in sharing this.

Penang people are highly educated, many of whom have left to study abroad. When I walk into bookstores in Penang, I find a well-curated selection of books on politics and history. There are so many talented people—chefs, artists. I'm hoping that with help, when the hotel is in place, we can host more events to bring together the artistic community and culinary scene. It's a way for me to reconnect with my roots as well.

It's come full circle—where I grew up in Penang, where I lived in Singapore in a shophouse in the '90s, and now the places where I've lived have affected the way I look at spaces, which is generally very ordered, very classical. Now, I'm coming back to design this. The underlying way I design hasn't changed—it responds to each place culturally, but there's a common thread that's quite clear.