

Redefining condo living

Christopher Lee, co-founder of Serie, talks about the firm's brand of architecture, and the thinking and inspiration behind its design for Desa ParkCity's latest condo development, Park Regent By The Water

“I have always been interested in urban and architecture history, and architecture's ability to act as a framework or mute background — becoming almost like an open platform, which allows for the richness and diversity of life to unfold.” Christopher Lee, founder and principal of Serie Architects, an architectural practice with offices in London, Mumbai and Singapore, says this by way of describing his, and by extension, the firm's philosophy.

Among the distinct attributes that define the firm's buildings is architecture that is always simple, elegant and light. Every building expresses a clear spatial organisation, is well proportioned and has a close integration with nature.

A graduate of the prestigious Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) in London, where he received his AA Diploma (Honours) and the RIBA President's Medal Commendation Award, Lee knew early on that this was the kind of architecture that he wanted to pursue.

“I didn't even need to ponder too much about it,” he says of the setting up of Serie in 2007 with Mumbai-based architect Kapil Gupta.

The firm's name encapsulates the intentions of the partners — to work in a series, with every ensuing project contributing to the firm's cumulative intelligence.

As a result, over the last 12 years, Serie has developed its distinctive language and embedded intelligence, which Lee reckons should contribute to the discourse and cumulative intelligence of architecture as a knowledge. As a built artefact, the hope is for the firm's architecture to evoke great affection from its users, and for it to stir both the emotion and intellect.

The firm's projects over the years include the National University of Singapore's School of Design & Environment, Jameel Art Centre in Dubai, and Oasis Terraces in Singapore.

Serie has been the recipient of the BD Young Architect of the Year Award and has also been named one of 10 visionary architects for the new decade by the Leading European Architects Forum, it was also selected by *ICON* (one of the world's leading architecture and design magazines) as one of the 20 Essential Young Architects in the world in 2008.

In 2017, Lee, who is based in the UK, was appointed the London Mayor's Design Advocate — providing guidance and expertise on the Mayor's Good Growth Programme, which addresses key challenges facing London's built environment.

An Associate Professor in Practice of Urban Design at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, Lee traces his interest in architecture to his secondary school days when he picked up the books of renowned architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Peter Eisenman.

“I was in the school library studying for my SPM and I picked up two books about these architects, and comparing their works I saw that they could not be more different,” he says.

Wright's style of architecture has been described as one which emphasises simplicity and natural beauty, whereas Eisenman's works have been labelled as being close to conceptual art and deconstructivism.

“Looking at their works, it struck me that if architecture could be that different then I would like to have



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a go at finding my own architecture. It is that degree and breadth of expression that is possible, and the promise of being able to shape the environment to such a degree that attracted me,” says the 47-year-old.

The Taiping boy furthered his higher secondary education in Singapore as an Asean scholar where he completed his undergraduate studies at the National University of Singapore before furthering his studies at the AA. Lee then pursued his postgraduate studies, receiving a Doctor of Philosophy in Architecture and Urbanism from the Berlage Institute and TU Delft in the Netherlands.

Elaborating on his approach to architecture, Lee says it stems from the fact that he is what one would call a third generation global architect (IM Pei and Rem Koolhaas are respectively considered as first- and second-generation global architects).

“Typically, global architects in the earlier generations are those who work in several locations, having already amassed a large body of work. They have a very clear architectural style to proliferate their work, and in a sense, their work is the same everywhere, but for our generation we found that we were already working in different parts of the world from day one.

“So we couldn't rely on a large body of work before starting out. In that sense we realised very quickly that we had to be far more attuned to the culture, environment and history of every city that we work in.

“If you look at our work, there is a lot of use of open frame,” says Lee, pointing to the Singapore State Courts project, a high-rise court building comprising two 150m towers.

“What's key about it is the use of open frame to support a series of shared terraces on which the courtrooms are placed. It has no external façade. It's open — people can freely use the space, and the use itself is also visible to the city.

“So there is that sense of occupation, freedom of use, and expression of the users,” explains Lee, adding that this is a departure from architecture that

“twists and bends, and makes a statement because of its funny form”.

The open framework, he adds offers a sense of generosity that in a way addresses a paradox of sorts. “It's become more important today especially because we see that all around the world the more connected societies are people are more in conflict with one another precisely because of this proximity and hyper connectivity in society,” he says, adding that it is important then for architecture to play a role in cultivating this sense of what is common among society.

RESHAPING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

Lee's architecture is also thoughtful in that it is mindful of existing typologies, and seeks to rethink the urban landscape. This is apparent in his maiden project in Malaysia — Desa ParkCity's Park Regent By The Water.

“With this project, you see the way in which we have completely subverted the most dominant urban architecture in Kuala Lumpur, which is the ubiquitous car park podium,” he says, describing the car park podium as one of the most “anti-urban, or anti-city typology”.

“It's a large mass that creates an impenetrable wall to the periphery of any site, so here we have completely subverted that...here, that huge car park disappears into a hill, which now offers all the common amenities,” Lee says. The car park, he adds, has been amalgamated into the base of the tower — dissolving at the edge of the tower.

“Where it dissolves at the edge of the tower, that open framework becomes the lantern lobbies where residents enter. It's incredibly open and porous, and you see the life of the building.”

This innovation won over the developer, says Lee in describing the architect-developer relationship as having an early synergy and rapport. “They could see the innovation that we've brought so we were lucky that we found each other.”

A joint venture between ParkCity Group and CapitaLand, Park Regent By The Water is a freehold development spanning over 5.6 acres. It comprises a total of 505 units located in two towers. The units boast built-ups ranging from 872 sq ft to 4,887 sq ft, and are pegged from RM1,100 psf. The project is slated to be launched in the third quarter of 2019.

For Lee, subverting the car park podium and disguising it as a cascading hill also offers more interesting and picturesque landscaping opportunities within the condo development.

“One of the key aspects that really impresses upon you when you are in Desa ParkCity is the way landscape is integrated in every corner of the development. The lake too was such a huge asset to us...we really reacted to the lake, and one of the gestures was to draw upon the Chinese principle of borrowed landscape,” he says. Borrowed landscape or borrowed scenery is the philosophy of melding the background or wider landscape into the composition of a garden.

“The views from the top of the hill now merge with that of the larger site, including the lake and the surrounding vistas ... I think it is these gestures that make communal living and city living apparent and visible...so I think architecture has that ability to bring forth this sense of wonder,” he adds.

Another innovation at Park Regent By The Water is the cascading towers. “They cascade and at the same time cradle this artificial hill so you feel a certain intimacy, but at the same time, that sense of enclosure also defines the open space and frames that vista onto the lake,” Lee says, adding that the cascading towers add a certain rhythm to otherwise tall buildings.

“The other thing about the cascading height of the towers is that this frees up views, and by cascading we are able to create green terraces, so that's another innovative element,” he adds.

The other milestone at Park Regent By The Water is the incredible thinness of the towers because unlike conventional tower blocks where the core is located in the midsection and residential units are then wrapped around this core, here two units flank an open core.

“So what you have are units with double aspect where you get a vista from the living to the dining, so you have natural ventilation, and incredible light from both sides. It is like a bungalow in the sky. What's more when you design a core this way, the larger units now have their own private lift lobby.”



What is also immediately apparent about Lee's design of Park Regent By The Water is that sense of generosity — from the expansive views to the abundance of air and light in the units thanks to the thoughtful layout.

For Lee, this generosity comes from a really deep thinking and close reading of housing typologies and apartment layouts. “We've looked at what people have done before so that we can continuously innovate within this tradition of high-rise living,” he adds.

Lee says his generation of architects cares a great deal about the environment, and the culture of any city and in each of the places they work in, they are more attuned to these aspects than their predecessors.

“Our overriding concern is what architecture can contribute to the wider context. With Park Regent By The Water, it's certainly a model of high-rise living at its finest.”

THE SHOW GALLERY

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