

# Blurring boundaries

Interior designer Peter Tay uses reflective surfaces to merge interior and exterior spaces at Park Regent By The Water, Desa ParkCity's latest development

Peter Tay listens intently to his clients and then uses a distinct design language to interpret what they want. The result is a happy clientele, among them stars and celebrities, who head for his eponymous Singapore-based studio whenever they need an interior designer.

"I talk to clients and find out what they like or collect, and understand their personality. It could be someone who is just interested in artwork or wine. Or someone who has been to Kyoto and wants to have Japaneseness within his space... that kind of thinking and liking," Tay, 48, says.

"For me, this bouncing back and forth is very important — we need to do it. I give ideas during my presentation, but most clients know what they want as they travel a lot. I hear them and make changes because their comments are important."

Listening and understanding require patience as well. "There is no right or wrong in design. The advantage is I've done projects, so I can advise clients on how to execute [things] in a way that is well planned. What's important is that we're geared towards the same goal, so in the end, what I design is a space they like and enjoy."

He likens his role to that of a movie director. "I create the scene for the space, volume and context so there is almost a story. So, when you walk into a home, you understand, this is the owner, and this is the way he likes his space to be."

Tay is designing the interior of two show units for Park Regent By The Water, a freehold development in Desa ParkCity, Kuala Lumpur, which will be launched in this quarter. The joint venture by ParkCity Group and CapitaLand spans 5.6 acres and has two tower blocks housing 505 units that range from 872 to 4,887 sq ft in size and are pegged from an average of RM1,100 psf.

He is also responsible for the communal spaces, such as the porte cochere, the lift lobby, corridors to the units and the residents' club.

The graduate from London's Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) says the architecture of the building already creates the volume of its space. The challenge, for him, is to use a hand-to-hand design approach and complementary materials that enhance that spatial parameter.

The interaction between space and architecture in this premium condominium has added meaning for him because Chris Lee, its architect, is an AA alumnus. Lee is co-founder and principal of London-based Serie Architects, whose projects include the Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai, Oasis Terraces in Singapore and the National University of Singapore's School of Design and Environment.

Talking about his first impressions of Desa ParkCity, built on a barren quarry mine, Tay says the 473-acre township is "very beautiful in itself, very well manicured. It's not just about architectural design. It's about landscaping, terrain and communal spaces. You see this fantastic space that you don't find elsewhere in KL and you feel an intrinsic value in it."

Instinctively, he envisions functional furniture laid out in a kind of family playground where the children can play as parents sit and catch up with friends and grandparents enjoy a stroll. "I feel there is life in this project as the landscaped spaces are brought into the design."

On how he got on board, Tay says: "CapitaLand



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asked me to pitch for the job, so I submitted my design and was lucky to be selected." It marks two firsts for him: He has never worked with the Singapore real estate group, nor done a show flat in Kuala Lumpur.

"I thought it would be a good start in KL because CapitaLand is very well known in Singapore. As it has cojoined to work with an esteemed developer in KL, I had no doubt Park Regent would be a high-end project."

Being on the same page as the developer is also crucial to doing a good job, he thinks. "When I talk to them and understand their needs, I'll be most happy to do the project if we're looking in the same direction. Then we can work as a team to achieve the same goal of luxury living."

Peter Tay Studio was set up in 2003 and its founder's portfolio includes showrooms and boutiques for Manolo Blahnik, Richard Mille and Armani Casa; Louis Poulsen's flagship store in Singapore; Salon by Surrender boutiques in Shanghai and Singapore; and Meta Restaurant, Singapore.

Tay, who was named Designer of the Year 2014 at the President's Design Award — the highest design accolade in Singapore — sums up his design signature in one word: reflection. "Almost all my work has the idea of reflection — this duality of space, so there is no clear demarcation between the interior and exterior."

He creates that duality by using mirrors, high-gloss ceilings and treated steel that reflect the volume of the living space below. And when you look up, he explains, the volume becomes like an art space.

Floor-to-ceiling glass connects the indoor areas and full-height windows frame the external view, turning it into a piece of artwork while bringing the natural landscape inside. Sunlight filters in from a balcony that merges with the living room, and concealed lighting on panels add a subtle touch of light to the interior.

"All my designs are about spatial quality and light, the mystical effect that draws you into the space so you linger a bit longer. It makes people want to stay home more," says Tay, who sees interior designers as artists who craft a space and then enhance it, unlike decorators, who merely buy things and place them here and there.

In 2014, he put up an installation titled *Reflection(s)*



at the *Time-Space-Existence* exhibition at the Venice Biennale. "I love the way layers of vertically aligned glass create duality between the exterior and internal spaces, which results in multiple reflections whose boundaries are blurred," he said on his website.

Materials and colours play a crucial part in capturing the character of a home and its inhabitants too, says Tay, who uses a lot of white and black and loves green. "For this project, I proposed the materials to be used in the living room and toilet. Even if a space is bare, just one material can define it and make you say, 'Wow, this is very nice'. I love marble. Hermes Grey Marble has strong veins and is almost a piece of art by itself."

Unit size is immaterial when it comes to creating a space that clients feel belongs to them and where they want to be in. "I think it's important to bring this quality to them by respecting the architecture and the landscape."

But Park Regent's bigger units allow for interesting permutations and better utilisation of living areas, such as a study or cosy corner within a bedroom.

You can have homes where multigenerational families gather during the weekend, he adds. The

smaller units are ideal for those with young children, given the schools and many facilities nearby.

He is particularly proud when clients tell him they have returned from a top-notch hotel somewhere but their own abode is still "the best hotel".

If reflection echoes Tay's design language, then luxury is the lingua franca of this "celebrity designer" whose clients include Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi and Taiwanese-American mandopop star Wang Leehom, as well as Singapore actress Zoe Tay, singer-songwriter Stefanie Sun and hairstylist David Gan. He designed Wang's apartment last year and flew out to work on his studio two weeks ago.

"The celebrity tag is nothing. What's important is that people come to me because they know I can do a good project. I have the heart and soul to do it and I'm very sincere about my work."

At home, his own favourite spot is the living room, where white walls and white marble floor create "a very clean space for me to enjoy quietness and simplicity when I come in from the outside world. Of course, I have beautiful pieces of furniture".

He hardly has time to lounge around though, working seven days a week from 7am to 11pm. Then, he goes for a half-hour jog to "sweat it out". Recharged, he returns to the office and works till 2am. Four to five hours of sleep suffices for him before he starts another day.

"If you ask me if I am tired, of course. I'm 100% tired. But because my love for design is so strong, it doesn't matter. I can just go back to it. If there is no passion, I will definitely burn out. Physically, I'm very strong. Even when I go overseas, I take the mid-night flight and sleep on the plane," says Tay, who flew into Beijing and met with Zhang at 3am — after she had finished filming — to discuss the design for her home before taking the next flight back.

Packing the most into his day could be Tay's way of not wasting his second lease on life. In 2006, a car crash left him in a coma for days. He woke up on the day his first child was born, and after five months of operations to reconstruct his face and jaw, he was back in his studio.

Feeling blessed and thankful, Tay takes on pro bono assignments to help others. He has designed churches in Cambodia and is working on a centre for dementia patients in Singapore. He gets a hand from wife Rebecca, also an AA graduate and a master planner, who has put her career on hold to care for their sons Gabriel, 13, and Lucas, seven.

Tay also teaches at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts because "I want the younger generation to excel and push design thinking to the next level in Singapore".

He has no time for hobbies but enjoys travelling. "It opens your eyes and you understand the world." And wherever he goes, he finds inspiration for design.

"I could be going to a toy shop or Chinatown or stopping at St Martins [School of Art, London] for a fashion show. I see how everything weaves together, and I absorb and learn. I love Shanghai and Hong Kong, where the old and new combine and start to grow. The symbiosis is beautiful."

Beauty is at the heart of design, and Tay, who sums up his style as classic, modern and luxe, hopes that when clients step into his show units at Park Regent, they will "freeze for a moment, and then stay a little longer. Then you know you have succeeded. I want them to remember, 'Hey, this is something new'. When clients are happy with what I do, that's the happiness I get."

The joy of jobs well done will be reflected in his second book, scheduled for release next year. "*Reflections* is all about my work, my thinking and what I went through in the last 15 years."

His first book, a self-titled monograph, was published by Sanctuary Niseko (Japan) in 2013. Proceeds from its sale went to Abilities Beyond Limitations and Expectations, which helps the physically challenged community in Singapore.

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