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Kings of Design

The Invincible Miss Chew

Khuan Chew, design principle at KCA International Designers, gives us a behind the scenes look at some of her iconic Dubai and international projects.

Text: Pratyush Sarup, Freelance Writer; Photos: Supplied



Chew's flamboyant design at Dubai's iconic Burj Al Arab



A calming and peaceful design at Dubai Marina's luxury Le Reve residential tower

The world of interior design can be pretty fickle; something trendier is always around the corner. In this transient field, no one knows better how to hold court than Khuan Chew, design principal, KCA International Designers Ltd.

The Burj Al Arab is not only testament to Dubai's might, but also to leading interior designer Khuan Chew's vision. In turn, the iconic landmark, as well as another of her Dubai projects, Le Reve, gave Chew the kind of recognition designers would kill for. It also raised that scary question: how does one top that? "I only look forward, fearlessly," says Chew, "with great respect and love for the past." That twinkle in her eye tells me, this is indeed her way of life.

For someone who lives and breathes interiors, interior design wasn't part of her life plan, at least not initially. "I started life in the world of classical music. My mother, a fine pianist, wanted me to be a violinist and pursued a

career in music since childhood." Her parents, worried that she might break her arms if she was allowed to play outside limited her recreational activities to drawing and painting. "I think my love for art started from there and it helped that my father, an accountant, was also a frustrated artist!" From there, Chew saw design for what it really is - an art form.

A lot has changed since she designed the Burj Al Arab. "When we were designing the hotel, we had limited sources of fabrics, finishes and lighting. My team and I went all over the world - Brazil, India, all across Europe and America - to look for amazing sources," she recalls. "Now, they come to you. That way I think the last ten years have brought about a design revolution where digital imagery has made all things possible. In fact it has created an explosion of ideas and monumental new products in the market, but it is still quite tricky to know what is going to work. I tend to think we (designers) are experimenting - we are test-driving new



Above: A fabulous state room on Marco Polo, a luxury yacht

products – and this can be dangerous and costly sometimes. As you know, you can be the best designer, if there is such a thing really, but if you have a lousy contractor, well, things may not be that good,” she says, tempering that comment with hearty laughter.

Recently, Chew brought her distinct flair for contemporary luxury to the heart of Beijing with The Westin Beijing Chaoyang. Part of a large mixed-use development project, The Westin is a play on local culture with a twist. “Every space in this hotel has been designed to provide unique experiences for all guests, encouraging them to unwind and relax in different ways,” says Chew. Glossy granite floors and leather panelling offset the locally inspired cherry-wood lattice frames that dot the premises. Add to it the innovative application of local materials and textures and you have a perfect showcase for the region, and the aspiration of the country and its people – suitably appointed into a lavish



Bespoke lighting features at The Westin Beijing Chaoyang

environment! Bespoke lighting features, many of which were inspired by local arts and forms add drama to the place and help you experience life there in a soft, romantic glow.

“On land, a self-sufficient project can be an ‘ideal’ situation, but when you are out on the high seas, exploring remote regions, being self-sufficient is a priority,” says Chew of Marco Polo, the 45m Transocean Explorer yacht for which she recently designed the interiors. And here too, a ‘unique’ experience was the guiding light. Entering into the lobby through the starboard side, you’ll be left spellbound by views through the dining and saloon areas, accentuated by the sea views through the large windows framed in beautiful Macassar ebony with contrasting walnut and limed oak. “The owner’s state room is equally dramatic with more Macassar ebony and lighter finish wardrobe doors with red and gold accents for a contrasting effect,” Chew says. The guest suites are a bit tamer with a more traditional beige look. The owner’s suite is on the

upper deck and the entire upper deck of the wheelhouse is the owner’s private area with day spaces for lounging and a private deck too!

One would assume her client’s deep pockets would accord Chew the freedom to realise her designs the way she wants, I ask if she has met her ideal client yet. She looks at me, quizzically; “Even I am not my ideal client. We are human, the idea of an ideal, is well, not human”. What about her clients in the Middle East? “Of course, the design slants are culturally different but generally speaking, my clients have similar characteristics. They all want it fast – like yesterday. They like changing their minds, they want the best but don’t want to pay for it! Jokes aside, most of my clients can afford the best!”

Little wonder then, the Middle East has embraced Chew with open arms. As well as at the Burj and Le Reve design lovers can experience Chew’s inimitable approach to luxury at the Madinat Jumeirah complex or



Above: Opulent dining under a sea of glass bubbles at Jumeirah Royal Suite Residence

Jumeirah Royal Suite residences. This year spells bigger things and new directions for Chew. “I have the good fortune to be involved in designing the headquarters of the Federation of Equestrian International in Lausanne.” In terms of aesthetics, this project will be very different for Chew – stark compared to her other projects Chew worked closely with local architects and designers, following sustainable guidelines for the finishes and products. “I feel that we are in a profession where we can influence our clients to be more aware of what we are doing to our planet Earth, and we should encourage thinking and action in this respect.”

As we come to the end of our meeting, she is already on London time – she has an important presentation to make. “I am very excited. In fact I cannot wait... just to see their expression! It’s as if I have gone shopping for someone. You know, it’s a big honour for someone to pay you big bucks and to design buildings for them. You simply cannot let them down.” ■