



**Prime district homes
back in limelight**
CITY & COUNTRY

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**Robert Cheng's
design strategy**
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BUSINESS & INVESTMENT WEEKLY

THE WEEK OF FEBRUARY 29 — MARCH 6, 2016

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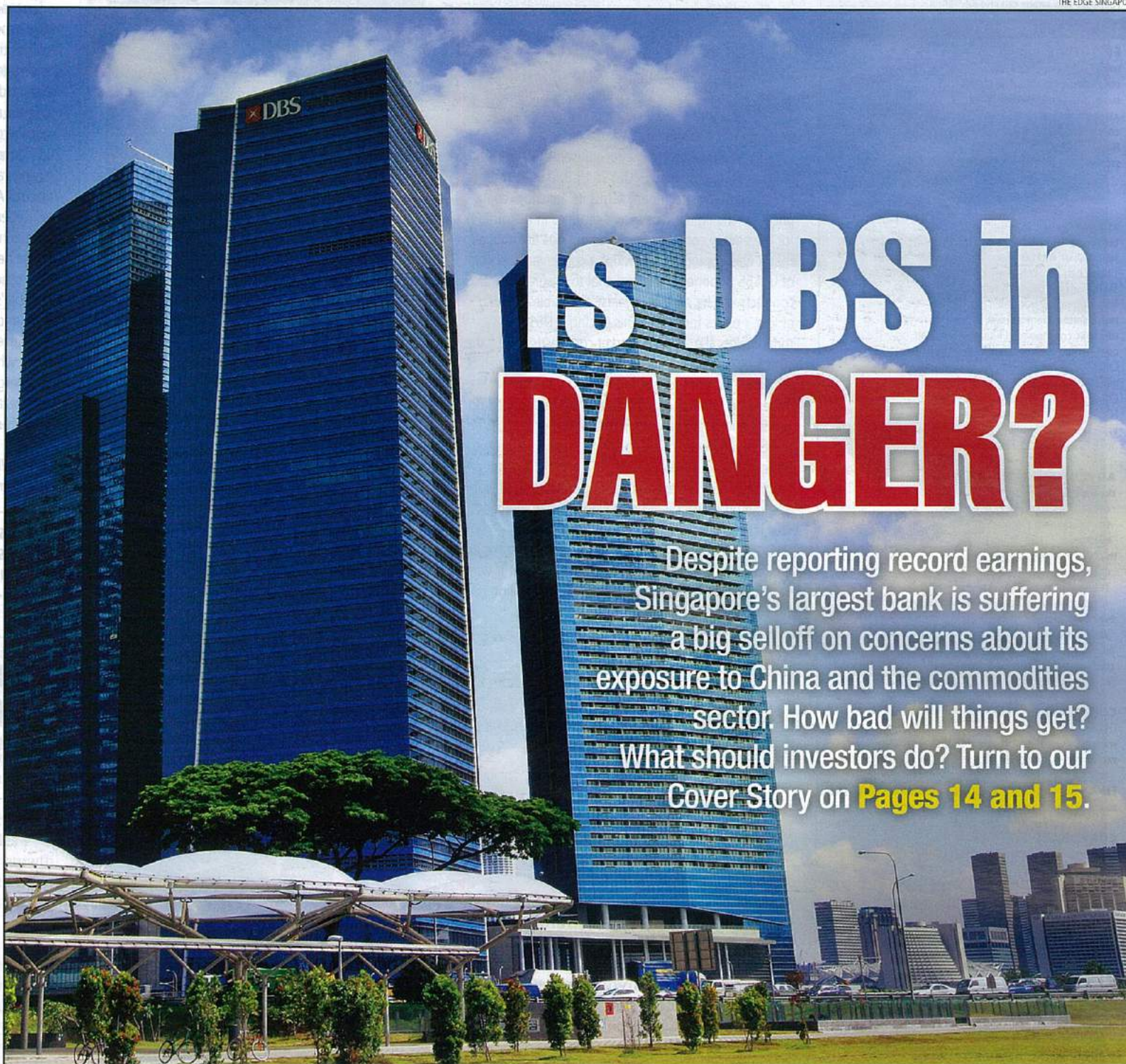
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Is DBS in DANGER?

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Cult made-to-order shoe label Saint Crispin's comes to local shores

Design elements

Having worked with renowned architects Calvin Tsao and Jean Nouvel, Robert Cheng is set to make his mark with Brewin Design Office

Cheng: The idea is not to be a design celebrity but for people to come to us because they know what we do well



SAMUEL ISAAC CHUA/THE EDGE SINGAPORE

Design elements

Having worked with renowned architects Calvin Tsao and Jean Nouvel, Robert Cheng is set to make his mark with Brewin Design Office

| BY AMY TAN |

At Chef's Table at Capella Singapore, diners can savour epicurean fare prepared à la minute in the comforts of a home-styled kitchen. Unveiled last December, the 14-seat space was conceived to allow guests to interact with the chef and get involved in the culinary process as well. This design is the brainchild of Robert Cheng, founder of Brewin Design Office. "The whole concept of having a private kitchen where guests can be a part of the food preparation and cooking process with a top chef is an unprecedented idea," he says. For this project, Cheng worked in close collaboration with his client and childhood friend Evan Kwee, executive director of Capella Hotel Group Asia.

While guests have the flexibility of customising the menu at Chef's Table, they probably do not know that each piece of furniture there was painstakingly sourced from around the world. The chairs weaved with green, white and gold rattan, for instance, were customised by a fabricator in New York City. The same colours were then translated to the building materials used, including brass, bronze, green marble and white tile.

"The entire material selection process and choice of colours were derived from Kwee's decision to use a British Racing

Green-coloured La Cornue stove for the private kitchen," he says. For him, working with clients such as Kwee are the most rewarding because they work in tandem with his design and appreciate his efforts in sourcing the right materials for projects.

Cheng founded Brewin Design Office in 2013 when he returned to Singapore after two decades of living and working in cities such as New York, Paris, London and Rome. The Singapore-based architecture and interior design firm was set up with the intention of allowing Cheng to execute the ideas and influences he gained through his diverse experiences in these cities.

"Running a design studio was my stand not to compromise on my vision. It was to be a highly personal and undiluted expression of the world I lived in during my time abroad, reconfigured into physical environments I design today," he states.

Collaborating with artisans and clients

Working with specialist fabricators in school introduced him to ideas surrounding cross-disciplinary collaborations, experimental fabrication techniques and refined detailing. Cheng received his Bachelor of Architecture from the Rhode Island School of Design, and Master of Architecture in Urban Design from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. During his time at RISD,

he was exposed to artisans and media that informed his craftsman-like approach towards design.

Throughout his career, Cheng has been toying with the endless possibilities for customisation, an element that has played a pivotal role in his design philosophy. One of his earlier designs was for Japanese-inspired steak house Fat Cow, located at Camden Medical Centre.

The restaurant's space is structured within a matrix of timber cubes in varying sizes. Over the bar, the ceiling is completely covered with a grid-like installation that can be used as a display shelf. Cheng explains that the ceiling structure serves as a shade over the building pipes, and delineates the bar, dining room and lounge. The private dining rooms feature movable partition screens that hang from a ceiling track, creating larger or smaller spaces for private parties.

According to him, bringing his design for Fat Cow to fruition was possible because he worked with the right fabricator. In this case, it was Kingsmen Creatives. He observes: "It was one of the first [projects] I had done, and Kingsmen was a great contractor. I told them I wanted to do these elaborate grids but I didn't want them to be clunky... Eventually, we created this place with two humongous ceilings and I treated those grids like sculptures within the space."

For Cheng, collaborating with fabrica-

tors and artists around the world gives him the support he needs to continue making bold design decisions. "We have seen only the tip of the iceberg when thinking about the possibilities and potentials of working with like-minded foreign fabricators and suppliers. I would not be uncomfortable to imagine that our projects eventually could be a kit-of-parts, tying together a string of smaller projects from our partnerships with various builders and suppliers, especially in reference to building interior spaces and pieces," he muses.

The ability to realise grand visions through customisation and having a great eye for detail are some of the key reasons that clients approach Cheng. One such client wanted her apartment at Jean Nouvel's Le Nouvel Ardmore to be turned into a vacation home, so that she would always be in a holiday mood.

He decided to harness the unobstructed view of the condominium and brought in a rare blue stone from Brazil for its flooring to create a seamless transition between the interiors and the expansive sky. He chose a serene palette influenced by a coastal nature to evoke a feeling of lightness throughout the apartment.

"We built an entire design scheme around a story and it was drawn from looking at seaside coastal rock formations," he says. True to this theme, the bathrooms



One of Cheng's earlier designs was for Japanese-inspired steak house Fat Cow

are a rock excavation showcase featuring vivid stone grains and natural striations, with different stones in each bathroom. Meanwhile, the ensemble of loose furniture pieces, antiques and custom hand-blown glass fixtures has also been carefully selected to complement the apartment's coastal theme.

In the past few years, Brewin Design Office has amassed a wide variety of projects that allow Cheng to continue his approach of shaping spaces using innovative details and novel materials. He has designed very high-end sales galleries and apartments as well as private residences. He says, "Each of these is exquisite and customised, none of which replicate the former, with our execution of each detail or furniture piece to be unmistakably about the context that a project is born from."

To be sure, Cheng sees no boundaries between architecture, interior design and product design. Instead, he believes all three disciplines inform each other and much effort is needed to design both the big and small elements of a project to conceive of a seamless whole.

The practice is currently working on the interior design of a new yoga school. While yoga is considered meditative for some and a workout for others, Cheng reckons that his design caters for both. He has partitioned the zones into small and intimate rooms, each with a selection of furniture pieces and arrangements that would suit the various levels of privacy required. "We have also been given the opportuni-



Cheng applied traditional Japanese principles of interior design to Hana Residence's showflat

ty to furnish the rooms with rare and old furniture pieces as though they were residential living spaces, with the studios being able to open up to them," he says.

Great mentors

Cheng says he has his father to thank for grooming him into the architect that he is today. His father, Edmund Cheng, is Wing Tai Asia's deputy chairman and deputy managing director. Born in Hong Kong, he came to Singapore when he was 27 to be trained as an architect. "My father was a practising architect who became a

property developer. He is both an artist and a designer behind being a developer, and has found many ways to express his identity and integrity in the projects he is responsible for," says Cheng.

He points out that the Japanese word "Shibui", which describes a balance of stillness between simplicity and complexity, encapsulates his father's personality and character best. He says: "I grew up watching him design our home and I became an architect because of him. Each time I embark on a project, he is my strongest critic and ally. Therefore, much of my sense for

aesthetics has been greatly influenced by his mentorship."

Prior to setting up his own practice, Cheng worked at Machado and Silvetti Associates in Boston; Tsao & McKown Architects in New York; and Atelier Jean Nouvel in Paris. Cheng also counts Calvin Tsao of Tsao & McKown Architects as one of his close friends and advisers.

"Although we meet only once a year in Manhattan, following his projects and choices has continued to shape my development and maturity as a designer... The most permanent influence I gained at [Tsao & McKown Architects] was exposure to the history of interior design styles and their relationship to cultures and geography. It was getting to know a world of interiors by understanding the reasons behind aesthetics."

Cheng has applied this design influence on Pontiac Land's Hana Residence, where he designed the development's four-bedroom sales gallery to evoke traditional Japanese principles of interior design, construction and aesthetics. The living room features a wall reminiscent of the Kyoto Imperial Palace. This mirrors the patterned screen façade of Hana's façade. Elsewhere, the geometries and proportions in the timber shelves are reflected through the home while traditional Japanese patterns, tapestries and handpicked antique pieces are interpreted with a contemporary approach to create subtle historical references.

Cheng's flexibility in coming up with different design schemes can be attributed to the time he spent at Atelier Jean Nouvel. It was there that he worked closely with French architect Jean Nouvel on 14 competitions and projects, each with a completely different design approach. He says: "All the projects had a novel and bold concept, with Nouvel's authorship, which is both whimsical and original. There was nothing rhetorical or too serious about his work, which is what I found most refreshing."

Clients such as Capella's Kwee have also aided Cheng in his creative process. "There is nothing more gratifying than a client who challenges a concept and has a mature sense of design and aesthetics," he says.

As such clients are rare, Cheng is considering applying his creativity to his own properties. Following in his father's footsteps, Cheng, along with his younger brother Bill, has set up a property development company called Brewin Properties. The property development company is currently developing a 400-unit residential project to be launched in Jakarta this year.

Cheng and his brother have an affinity for the name Brewin, which is derived from Brewin Path, a street in Hong Kong where Cheng's grandfather Cheng Yik Hung brought up his children. Yik Hung started a garment manufacturing company in Hong Kong in the 1950s. This company would eventually become Wing Tai Holdings.

Like his grandfather and father, who have made a name for themselves in the property development and lifestyle segments, Cheng hopes to make a name for himself in the world of architecture and design. He says: "The idea is not to be a design celebrity but for people to come to us because they know what we do well. We have gone to great lengths to find appropriate international suppliers and fabricators in the making of things."

Cheng is also exploring the possibility of starting a specialised factory with its own pool of fabricators in specific trades. This will help facilitate the design and build process. He says: "My design is a response to the people I find who can build what I want and the clients who can essentially endorse the kind of stuff we design."



Cheng's design for a client who wanted her Le Nouvel Ardmore apartment to be turned into a vacation home