

FOCUS / Interior Design

# OLD SCHOOL

*Boutique hotels are devilishly difficult to pull off, something hotelier Loh Lik Peng is all too aware of having built a career on creating unusual, quirky spaces. For Wanderlust, his third property in Singapore, the former lawyer has ventured gamely into the Little India quarter to unveil a four-storey playpen that is part Alice in Wonderland and part Matrix set.*

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Like its siblings, the Wanderlust's DNA starts with an off-the-beaten-track location. While the majority of new Singaporean hotels open in areas dense with tourists or high-net traffic, Loh's ongoing gamble is that hipster travellers prefer grungier seedier neighbourhoods. (His first property Hotel 1929 stands proudly in the epicentre of Chinatown's red light district.)

"I love Little India's streetscape," Loh says. "The area sorely needed an interesting hotel. I think my hotels give more adventurous visitors a chance to experience Singapore's different districts as well as to appreciate smaller properties with individual character. Speaking as a frequent traveller, I find large chain hotels quite anonymous and that are often bland and filled with boring people."

To that end, Loh recruited a mixed bag of local graphic designers and a doyen architectural firm and gave them each a floor of the former dilapidated Hong Lim School to furnish, his only requirement being that the result be "fun and crazy".

Built in the early 20th century, the building offers a distinctive period façade, plenty of natural light and a central void core that spills light into every room. Once the structure was reinforced, the design teams from

:phunk studios, Asylum, fFurious and DP Architects moved in.

The hotel opened earlier this year to a flurry of attention. Curious locals stopped to gawk at a raw concrete lobby filled with supermarket trolleys, barber chairs and neon signs; while upstairs, guests fiddled with switches that changed the ambient lighting through a spectrum of colours, and settled into admittedly uncomfortable high-backed sofas shaped like giant type-writers.

Loh is entirely aware that not everyone will take to Wanderlust. "It depends on what you're looking for. I like boutique hotels; I'm prepared to be out of the way a little, and I'm also prepared to do without some services and have a smaller room. But what they must have is bags and bags of character.

"I approached these firms because I liked their graphic work," he adds, "and I knew they normally did not do interior design. I wanted creative people, but I also wanted them to come into the project with fresh eyes. This project gave creative people the licence to go a little crazy. It was risky, but a lot of fun too. You have to take people out of their comfort zones sometimes." [wanderlusthotel.com](http://wanderlusthotel.com) ■





(LEFT)  
Located in a bustling cultural enclave where Indian immigrants once settled, the four-storey and 29-room building was originally an old school built in the 1920s.

(ABOVE)  
Boutique hotelier Loh Lik Peng.

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**fFurious**

*Created: Third floor  
Theme: Creature Comfort  
Project principal: Little Ong*

Multi-disciplinary and decidedly non-conformist (the name gives you a hint), fFurious focusses on print design, interactive and motion graphics, and illustration. Says Ong, "Our belief that creativity should not be limited by the medium has allowed us to extend our creative reach to other areas." It's an approach that explains their recent work with the Esplanade Theatres in developing marketing collaterals; and building an interactive installation

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**DP Architects**

*Created: Second floor  
Theme: Is It Just Black and White?  
Project principal: Chua Soo Hoon*

Founded in 1967, DP is one of Singapore's biggest and most respected architectural outfits. With over 600 architects, landscape architects, interior designers, graphic designers and illustrators spread across 12 international offices, it is the odd duckling in the Wanderlust coterie of bijoux boutique firms; though Chua is quick to point out that hotel design is one of the firm's strengths, having worked on the Fullerton Bay Hotel and Resorts

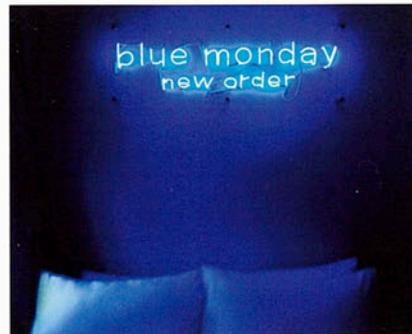


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**:phunk studio**

*Created: First floor  
Theme: Eccentricity  
Project principals: William Chan and Jackson Tan*

With just four principals, :phunk has that rare luxury of choice. "We are a multidisciplinary art and design collective," says Chan. "We pretty much do everything that interest us." Which explains how this 16-year old firm has, in the last few months, launched a new channel for HBO and teamed up with Casio on a limited edition G-Shock watch



G



**Asylum Creative**

*Created: Ground floor lobby and Cocotte restaurant  
Theme: Industrial glam  
Project principals: Chris Lee, creative director; and Cara Ang, design director*

First launched in 1999, Asylum specialises in branding, graphics, interior and online design. Though barely 11 years old, the nine-member team has already worked with such blue chip clients as Fred Perry and Levis. Wanderlust was their first boutique hotel project. "We were given a blank canvas to express our creativity, which is rare," says Lee, adding that the industrial feel of the lobby



of graphic and video imagery along the Singapore River for the Singapore River Festival. Wanderlust was the firm's first hotel project and the immediate challenge was to figure out interior spaces. "Our grasp of material options and usage, and spatial and structural possibilities was limited, which meant that we had to gain the knowledge fast. And that meant asking a lot of questions and absorbing everything like a sponge."

M1 Singapore Fringe Festival website; and a music video for pop band, TypeWriter.

*Dream client:* Someone very much like Loh Lik Peng who came to us with a respect for what we do and with a belief that we could do something amazing for him.

*ffurious.com*

*Next big project:* An interactive projection installation piece for the Malay Heritage Centre; the

World Sentosa. Wanderlust, Chua adds, was "a fun-oriented project, where we could experiment with non-typical hotel design concepts. Inspired by origami and my childhood pop up story books, we were able to generate new hotel typologies such as re-interpreting the capsule idea and loft-like hotel rooms."

*Next big project:* The second phase of Resorts World Sentosa in Singapore.

*Dream client:* Someone who will allow me to have free expression of design and who is willing to test out non-typical concepts, building forms.  
*dpa.com.sg*



while hot-housing an experimental laboratory with the Lasalle College of the Arts. For Wanderlust, the immediate challenge was working with "things like wash basins, floor tiles and curtains which were quite unusual for us as was working with architects, engineers and contractors to transform our idea into fun and functional spaces. Like all projects that involved other collaborators, we needed to make sensible compromises. It wasn't easy but it was a fun learning process."



*Next big project:* A joint exhibition with Japanese artist Keiichi Tanaami.

*Dream client:* Ourselves. We like the idea of producing our own work without having to answer to anybody.  
*phunkstudio.com*



is inspired by Little India's "crazy mix of shops and warehouses that range from hardware stores, provision shops selling spices, coffee shops with neon signs to shops that collect old computers and piles of used metal."

*Next big project:* Designing the interiors and branding for Iggy's, one of Singapore's best known restaurants; multibrand skincare store, Escentials; and branding a development in Abu Dhabi.

*Dream client:* Vitra, Apple, Comme Des Garcons, Aesop, Coke, Guggenheim museum and Nike.  
*theasylum.com.sg*

