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A GRACIOUS, SECRETIVE OLD DAME

There's a precious refuge from the harsh world down a discreet lane in historic Malacca, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

The exquisite roof garden.

"LET'S not spoil this," I beg my colleague, switching off the electricity supply to the supposedly idiot-proof pod-coffee machine. She lifts the lid to locate our fallen espresso pod. I search for something to fish the pod out. We push buttons and poke the pod, but it doesn't budge. Then, I pull the carafe out and, like magic, we see the pod sitting there at the base of the machine. What a relief. Crisis averted, we let it do its job and I take the opportunity to appreciate the surroundings of our home for a night, 45 Lekiu in the heart of Malacca, a Unesco World Heritage site.

It occurs to me that the owners of this 1941 pre-war art deco building want to keep this place a secret and may not be keen on many visitors. For one, the facade is so nondescript that if you don't look for it, you're bound to miss the place. Indeed, later when I meet David Chang Yuk Long, the co-owner of 45 Lekiu, he confirms this somewhat, saying: "Actually, at first, I didn't want others to come here. It was so precious to us. Then, I realised that we (Chang and his business partner, Soon Lum) should allow others to experience it as well."

MARRIAGE OF MODERN AND ANTIQUE

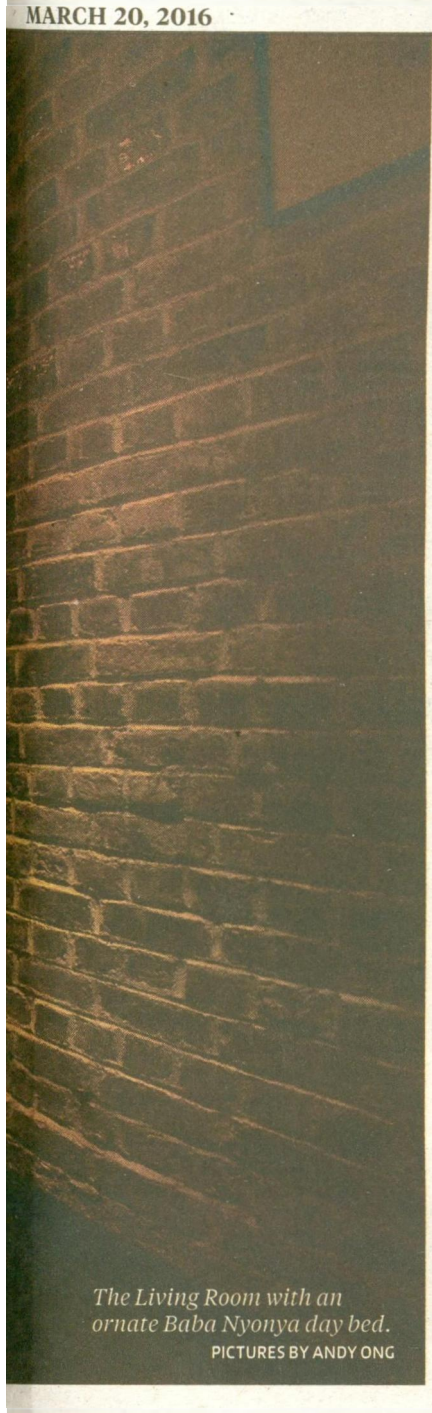
During his photoshoot, Chang, who's also a fashion stylist, attempts to describe 45 Lekiu. Truthfully, it's not easy. It's not a boutique hotel as you need to book the entire property. Also, there's no reception, coffee house or banqueting hall. It's not

David Chang is fascinated with making old things work in new settings.

describe it," admits Chang. The closest they came to was what's stated on their website: "45 Lekiu is putting a modern spin to the concept of guesthouses by offering a luxurious accommodation."

A perfect example of this marriage of the modern and antique is that next to that modern and supposedly idiot-proof coffee machine is a quaint little jewellery box. Sourced from a local antique dealer, it houses packets of sugar, 3-in-1 coffee and teabags.

It's this ability, and perhaps challenge, to see how to make something old work in the modern world that fascinates this 44-year-old bachelor. Having once run a



The Living Room with an ornate Baba Nyonya day bed.
PICTURES BY ANDY ONG

friendships with many of his guests.

Upon his return to Malaysia about a decade ago, Chang accepted the position of fashion editor for a local magazine. In time, he and Soon decided that they wanted to realise their dream of owning and running a hotel. Chang and Soon chanced upon this property in Malacca before the city gained Unesco status in July 2008. Chang only knows the recent history of this trapezoid-shaped property, which he says is typical of a Baba Nyonya home which houses many generations under one roof.

BEFORE AND AFTER

When they bought the place, it was so dilapidated that many of the wooden floorboards were ridden with termites. It's hard to fully appreciate the enormity of the project Chang and Soon undertook until the stylist shares a set of "before" photos.

The entrance was no more than a wooden door with collapsible iron gates.

Today, these gates have been replaced with a front door that's affixed with a high-tech security device. Walk through them and you're in the cool foyer-cum-kitchenette. There's a set of large doors, which Chang explains were previously the doors from a ballroom of a clan house in Ipoh that was torn down. This leads to the living room where the centrepiece is a beautiful, classical and ornate Baba Nyonya day bed.

"While we have this antique piece right in the middle of the lounge, the other furniture here, like the chairs and paintings, are all modern," elaborates Chang.

The art work is by local artists and may be bought by guests.

Quaint little jewellery box next to the modern coffee machine.

Then comes the courtyard. Where there was once a room with a zinc roof, today it's a stunning courtyard with a pool shrouded by flowering bougainvillea. Like his visitors, this is by far Chang's favourite place, where he spends much of his time lazing about the pool and reconnecting with himself.

Getting to the upper floors, however, can be a challenge for people like Chang, who have a mild phobia of climbing steps without stair risers (the near-vertical element in a set of stairs forming the space between one step and the next). Keep your eyes trained on the beautiful chandelier above and all should be well.

Survive that climb on the narrow steps and the reward is a landing that houses a beautifully decorated walkway and bedroom. There's a nook before the louvred doors leading to the bedroom where there are three different lighting fixtures that epitomise a cross between Western and Eastern decor — an ornate wall-mounted one, a mid-century table lamp and an ultra-modern candle holder which Chang calls a "Spin Table Candelabra" by Tom Dixon.

A curious bit about this property is that in many parts of the original brick work has been laid bare. "We chipped away the cement and that was actually the most difficult part of the refurbishment," explains Chang. Adjusting his shirt sleeves (revealing tattoos on both arms), he adds that the exposed brick helps to create a romantic space as it reveals the beauty of something that's been hidden for so long.

HARSH REALITIES

While the magic of 45 Lekiu inspires awe, the reality is that it's a hard place to maintain.

It has to be cleaned daily for the dust particles in this old structure settles very fast on the furniture. The other challenge is mosquitoes. In fact, Chang tells of fussier guests who demand that the entire space be sprayed with insecticide before making a booking. Demanding guests aside, Chang and Soon are so protective of their property that they have turned down guests whom they feel will may damage their property.

And that's the thing about 45 Lekiu — in the end, you find that you're so honoured to be part of this secretthat you, too, have become guarded about whom you'd like to share it with. Even when you know that savouring an espresso here will be a welcome refuge from the hustle and bustle of Jonker Street on days so hot and humid that wearing sunglasses does little to diminish the sun's glare.

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(Left) The Garden and Pool area before renovations. The area today.

(Left) Landing before the renovations. The landing area today which leads to the bedrooms.

PICTURES BY ANDY ONG