



ALBERT CHAYNE EDGE SINGAPORE  
 The team at RT+Q, with co-founder T K Quek and son Jonathan (seated, second and third from left) and co-founder Tan (right side of screen)

# RT+Q's maverick designs

From private houses to niche luxury projects and high-rise condominiums, the Singapore-based boutique architectural firm is set to change the skyline

| BY CECILIA CHOW & CHARLENE CHIN |

Popularised in China by young people celebrating their singlehood, Singles' Day, which falls on Nov 11, has become a significant occasion for others too. E-commerce giant Alibaba Group Holding has turned it into a global shopping phenomenon: it chalked up \$42.28 billion in record sales over a 24-hour period this year. It was an equally memorable day for architect Rene Tan, director and co-founder of Singapore-based architectural firm RT+Q, as it marked the completion of the firm's 111th private house in Singapore — House with Circles — which Tan describes as “an exploration of geometry between circular and rectilinear spaces”.

Several other houses designed by RT+Q had also been completed around the same time in November: Perforated House, House with a Loggia and Brick House. “Every house, every project is an opportunity to create something different,” says Tan. “As long as RT+Q's core values such as proportion, scale and craft are preserved.” He likens it to composition of music “for piano, then for violin and then for orchestra”.

Besides private houses, RT+Q's portfolio extends to conservation shophouses, towering condominiums, office blocks, a smart bus stop and even a tombstone for a client's late mother.

### Boutique, luxury projects

Founded in 2003 by Tan and Quek Tse Kwang or TK, RT+Q made a name for itself in the design of private houses, but it recently leapt to the top end of the condo segment when it

was appointed design architect for Petit Jervis. The 55-unit boutique development is the first under the Petit Collectibles series of luxury projects featuring apartments with smaller sizes by luxury developer Simon Cheong, chairman and CEO of SC Global Developments.

“We like to support local architects,” said Cheong in a recent interview with *EdgeProp Singapore*, during which he unveiled the new collection.

Another developer for which RT+Q has designed some head-turning developments is Bursa Malaysia-listed YTL Corp, controlled by the Yeoh family, who are ranked by *Forbes* as among the top 50 richest in Malaysia.

In Penang, RT+Q designed the 115-unit, low-rise luxury apartments Shorefront, developed by YTL and completed at the beginning of 2018. Shorefront faces the sea and occupies a coveted site adjacent to the historic Eastern & Oriental Hotel, which was the setting for the prologue scene in the hit movie *Crazy Rich Asians*.

As Shorefront is in Georgetown, which was awarded Unesco Heritage status in 2008, building structures could not exceed 18m in height, recounts Tan.

RT+Q designed Shorefront as three low-rise blocks arranged in an oblique pattern so that every unit will have a view of the sea. To ensure privacy, units are designed with alternating frontage, with adjacent units facing opposite directions.

For additional privacy, fronting each block is a water feature. Lush landscaping for the private courtyards of the units on the ground floor provide further privacy.



ALBERT CHAYNE EDGE SINGAPORE  
 Tan: Never think like an architect — the more you think like one, the more a building will look like a building

When Shorefront was launched in Penang in February 2015, close to 60% of the units were snapped up on the first weekend. The majority of the buyers were from Penang, including those working in Singapore and elsewhere. The project is fully sold.

### Gentrifying a neighbourhood

Located just a 15-minute drive from Kuala Lumpur City Centre is Sentul, the site of the former railway yard for Keretapi Tanah Melayu Bhd (KTMB). The 294-acre plot is divided into

Sentul East and Sentul West, and is the biggest master-planned, freehold project in Malaysia undertaken by a private developer.

Sentul has a history that dates back to 1905, when it was a railway town housing thousands of Indian railway workers. YTL purchased the site in the late 1990s after the railway depot ceased operating in 1996. The developer unveiled its Masterplan for Sentul in 2002, which involved a mixed-use development of residential, retail and commercial spaces. In the first phase, condos developed in Sentul East included The Saffron, The Maple and The Tamarind.

When RT+Q's Tan first visited Sentul East a decade ago, it had “a rather nondescript urbanism”, he recounts.

RT+Q designed three commercial projects for YTL in Sentul East, consisting of a mix of retail and office space, namely d6, d7 and the upcoming d8. The first condo project that RT+Q was asked to design was the 400-unit The Capers, which was completed in 2015.

The Capers comprises two 36-storey towers and two five-storey townhouse blocks. The towers are aluminium-clad and stand out against the Sentul skyline.

Even though it is a mainstream development, The Capers' striking architecture has gentrified the East Sentul area. More young families and professionals have moved in since the project was completed in 2015. In 2016, The Capers clinched the International Architecture Awards, organised by The Chicago Athenaeum: Museum of Architecture and Design.

After designing The Capers, RT+Q followed up with The Fennel. Completed in 2017, The



House with Circles marked the completion of RT+Q's 111th private house in Singapore



Shorefront, a 115-unit luxury condo in Penang, is located next to the Eastern & Oriental Hotel, and was completed at the beginning of the year



The 916-unit The Fennel, also located in Sentul East, was completed last year



The 400-unit The Capers in Sentul East, was designed by RT+Q and instrumental in gentrifying the neighbourhood

Fennel is a 916-unit development with four 43-storey blocks.

**'Inspiration can come from anywhere'**  
 The site of The Capers was just wasteland a decade ago. When Tan looked around the site, he saw *lalang* (wild grass) blowing in the wind. That became the inspiration for the design of The Capers.

The inspiration for The Fennel came when Tan was driving around one day. Rather than looking at the skyline, he was looking at the road markings. "The painted zigzag lines were the inspiration for the towers," he says.

Tan attributes RT + Q's ability to create such structures in Sentul East to having "a fearless client [YTL] who's up for experimentation". "YTL is a forward-thinking and risk-taking

client," he notes. "All architects want such a client. Kian [Yeoh Seok Kian, managing director of YTL Corp and executive director of YTL Land & Development Bhd] is very hands-on and he would attend all site meetings, walk the site with us and give us his input. It inspired the team because we knew we were working towards something positive."

YTL's Yeoh in turn comments: "Rene Tan's designs for our developments have changed the skyline of Sentul by injecting new energy to the streetscape. The Capers and The Fennel with their signature towers are now iconic landmarks of Sentul."

**'Architecture that touches the city'**  
 Yeoh adds that RT + Q's designs were in line with YTL's urban renewal masterplan for Sen-

tul, which was "to transform the 294-acre precinct into a vibrant destination of choice to live, work and play in Kuala Lumpur".

RT + Q also designed YTL's luxury apartment project U-Thant Place, a 10-storey private condo block with 3,000 sq ft apartments in Kuala Lumpur. The project was completed earlier this year. "RT + Q has a good understanding of the vision of YTL Land & Development as a boutique developer focused on

best practices and setting new benchmarks on designs of timeless elegance," says YTL Land & Development's Yeoh.

Besides endorsement from his clients, what Tan appreciates is the colloquial references to his projects. "Every time I'm in a taxi, I'm always intrigued to hear how the driver refers to The Capers and The Fennel, because that's when you know the architecture has touched the city," he says. They have been referred to by locals there as "the *bengkok* (crooked in Malay) building", "architect *mabuk*" (the drunk architect), or *keris*, a double-edged dagger.

What keeps RT + Q's architects going? Tan shares a picture of his favourite cartoon: a drawing of Adolf Loos staring at a manhole cover for design inspiration for a building. Loos, an Austrian architect who was a pioneer of modern architecture, believed that the design of structures should be functional. "Inspiration for architecture can really come from anywhere," Tan says.

He constantly reminds the team at RT + Q to "never think like an architect — the more you think like one, the more a building will look like a building", he says. "Instead, look for inspiration at road markings or manhole covers — even *lalang* — and you will get some ideas here and there."



U-Thant Place, a 10-storey, luxury private condominium in Kuala Lumpur



House with a Loggia, one of the houses designed by RT+Q, was completed recently