

# GOTHAM

NOVEMBER 2014

## HAUTE PROPERTY Portfolio



"If there is one place to push your chips in, it's New York," says Singapore-based mega-architect Soo K. Chan, who has done just that with the game-changing Soori High Line building (16 private pools!) under way in West Chelsea. But the buy-in was steep: His firm is architect, interior designer, landscaper, and a principal investor. "At a certain point," he explains, "you just have to say, 'I'll do it myself.' I started out in New York; I got my license here. But nobody," he laughs, "ever asked me to design anything."

When last seen in these parts, circa 1990, Chan was a student at the Yale School of Architecture, interning in the city and knocking on doors to spread some love for a chair he'd designed. "I was just calling anybody who worked for a magazine," he remembers. "People were very nice even if my chair, maybe, wasn't really the best chair."

He's doing better with the chairs these days (among much else, Chan now creates furniture for Italian design darling Poliform), and his career—on its 25-year-loop from New York to New York—has reached something like nova proportions. Chan's SCDA Architects (Soo Chan Design Associates) has built nearly 200 buildings worldwide, from highrises to museums to embassies, including his own hyper-luxury resort in Bali. And pools. Lots of private pools. Design-conscious New Yorkers, if they can put Soori

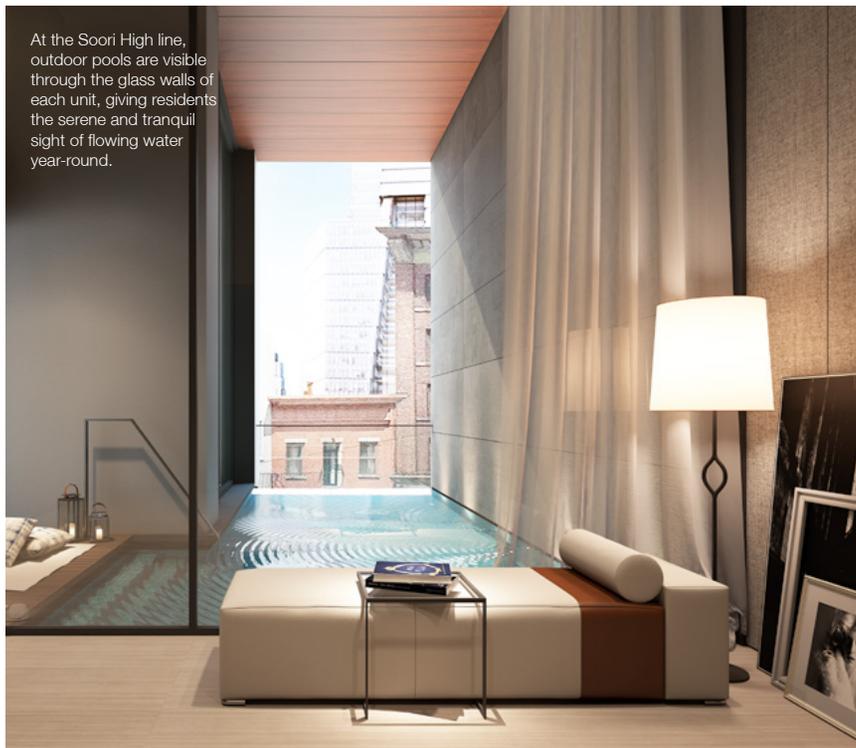
High Line's much-clucked-over swimmin' holes out of their minds for a moment, will have plenty of other reasons to thank Chan for the 11-story structure, slated to open at 522 West 29th Street in 2016. It is, for starters, an elegant addition to the High Line building boom, notable even in a neighborhood featuring projects by fellow starchitects Jean Nouvel, Robert A.M. Stern, Zaha Hadid, and Norman Foster.s.

Soori High Line—following much to-ing and fro-ing with New York building authorities—will realize Chan's dream of literally "blurring inside and out." Its curtain-glass façade, portioned by formal, wafer-thin, wood-clad vertical mullions, is punctuated by a series of open spaces for pools and surrounding terraces. ("The codes here don't actually allow for that," he notes. "You have to negotiate for how much you can dissolve the façade.") Inside and out, the building has an organic, understated geometry and sense of airy proportion that typifies Chan's neo-Modernist, Mies-meets-the tropics aesthetic. (A second Chan building, down the street at 515 West 29th, will be showier, what with its wavy-glass top floors grafted onto the existing brick building and massive, rotating-exhibition "art wall" abutting the High Line. It is scheduled to open in 2015.)

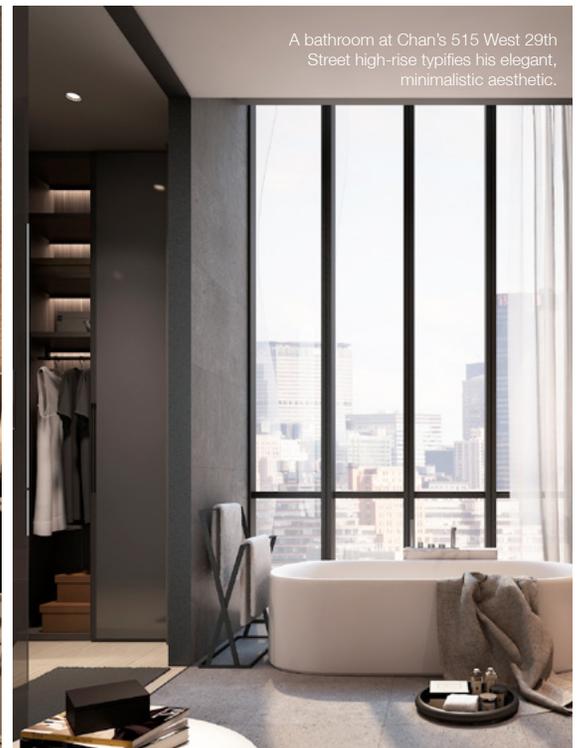
## DIVING IN

THE CITY'S LATEST STARCHITECT, SOO CHAN, SEES THE IN-HOME POOL AS THE LATEST CONDO MUST-HAVE.

BY RICHARD NALLEY



At the Soori High line, outdoor pools are visible through the glass walls of each unit, giving residents the serene and tranquil sight of flowing water year-round.



A bathroom at Chan's 515 West 29th Street high-rise typifies his elegant, minimalistic aesthetic.

After a roughly 10-hour day, he retires to a home he designed, where he samples from his cellar of French Burgundies.

“Ideally, I like to stay within my own world,” Mr. Chan said, adding that he plans to keep a unit at Soori High Line for himself. Naturally, it’s one with a pool.

Nevertheless, Mr. Chan is no romantic, investing in nearly all of his commissions. Although it’s somewhat unique for an architect to also play the role of real estate prospector, by putting more than his reputation on the line, Mr. Chan has become an appealing business partner to developers.

For instance, to satisfy investors at Soori High Line he cut the number of pools from 27 to 16 to keep costs in line.

“We had to generate an idea that was commercially viable because the investment is fairly large,” Mr. Chan explained. “This project was not about trying to show what I could do as an architect. This was more about being realistic and trying to create a building that will stand the test of time.”

Ultimately, Mr. Chan is an architect with the instincts of a developer, which explains his seemingly insatiable appetite for new projects—some two dozen around the world, one of which is just across the street from Soori High Line.

Developer Joeseeph Beninati, co-founder of the Bauhouse Group, told the Observer that he has commissioned Mr. Chan to design his High Line condo tower at 515 West 29th Street.

The 135-foot building will feature 12 condo units, with prices ranging from \$2 to \$25 million, and gallery retail space on the ground floor. The project recently broke ground, and when completed next fall,

it will be the only Manhattan development to feature High Line views on two sides of the structure—the rail line cuts around the building, making an abrupt westward turn off of Tenth Avenue at West 29th Street.

And while there are no pools at this project, each residence will feature a dumbwaiter connected to a shared chef’s kitchen on a lower floor so that dinner parties can be easily catered.

“My career started with an internship in New York, and I have wanted to build here ever since,” said Mr. Chan, who studied classical architecture at Yale. “New York is quite insular and not easy to penetrate, but once we got some experience with Soori High Line it was much easier to work on other projects.”

“I think this building represents everything that is brilliant about Soo,” Mr. Beninati said of the sculpted glass tower. “When I commissioned Soo with the project, he was so passionate about the location that he asked to become a minority investor.”

“We were so impressed that he had not only the passion to design the project, but also the confidence to put his own capital into it. I’ve never had a relationship with an architect like this.” He added that he is relatively unconcerned by potential competition when demand for luxury housing is still so strong.

“I’ve added up the number of luxury units on the High Line, and there are only a couple of hundred,” he said. “There have been tens of thousands of pages devoted to the architecture on the High Line, but there are just a few dozen units available for the whole world to buy.”

Mr. Chan explained that he was willing to design another building so close to his own Soori project

because of the unparalleled inventiveness the High Line inspires in him.

“The High Line is a great place to enjoy the parade of buildings. It is the perfect place for an architect to build and innovate,” he said.

Mr. Chan’s third New York project isn’t anywhere near Chelsea. He has been commissioned by Euro Properties, a developer with offices in Beijing, Hong Kong, Singapore and Tokyo, to design a mixed-use building, currently in the planning stages, on a 5,025-square-foot lot at 118 East 59th Street, between Park and Lexington avenues. The firm also owns the neighboring property at 116 East 59th Street.

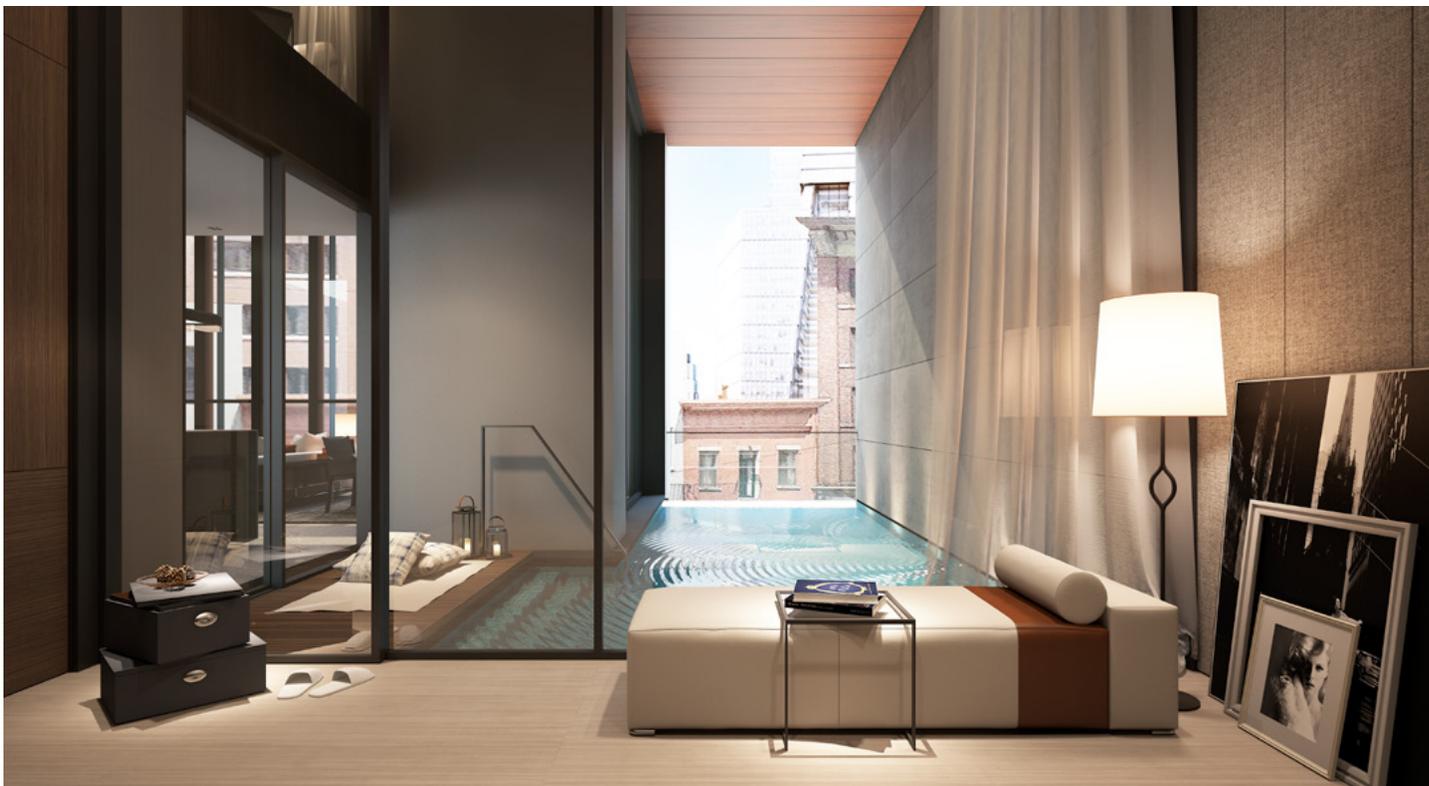
And most recently, he signed a contract to design a new building on Vandam Street in Tribeca, although he declined to provide any details, as he was unsure how quickly the project would proceed.

To keep up with his project load, Mr. Chan is adding permanent staff to his Madison Avenue office, which until now had been staffed by temporary workers flown in from Singapore.

When asked whether he preferred working in New York or Asia, Mr. Chan said that both afford unique freedoms.

“The major difference between working in New York versus Asia is the context,” he said.

“In Asia, depending on where you work, you tend to have a fresh start because there are a lot of new metropolises being developed, especially in China. When you don’t have context you are free to create your vision. But it is equally interesting to work in a city like New York where you have history and context to work and innovate within.”



“At the very high end,” Mr. Chan says, “Luxury is universal.”